



Enhancing Gender-Responsive Governance in Uganda's Urban Food Markets: Policy Options from St. Balikuddembe (Owino) and Kalerwe

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Key messages

- Women drive Kampala's urban food vending economy, yet they remain excluded from market leadership and decision-making; promote gender-inclusive governance to ensure their representation and access to better infrastructure.
- Despite their central role, women vendors face humiliating enforcement practices and heavy unpaid care responsibilities that limit their time and capacity to grow their businesses.
- Strengthen transparent, accountable, and gender-responsive market governance to reduce fragmented oversight, opaque fees, and weak service delivery that weaken vendor livelihoods and food safety.



Photo from St. Balikuddembe (Owino) market

- Implement gender-responsive governance reforms, invest in market infrastructure, facilitate women’s financial inclusion, and apply gender-sensitive approaches to food safety through vendor training and improved market hygiene.
- Coordinated action by national government, Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), district authorities, and market leaders is essential for equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Introduction

Urban food markets in Kampala and Wakiso are critical for food access, employment, and women’s enterprise. Women drive food vending but operate under conditions marked by poor sanitation, insecure stall tenure, fragmented governance, and uneven enforcement. These gaps limit their earnings, compromise their safety, and constrain their economic empowerment. Uganda’s Constitution (1995) and several laws and policies, including the National Gender Policy (2007), Markets Act (Cap. 94), Public Health Act (Cap. 281), and Domestic Violence Act (2010), provide a framework for equality and safe workplaces. However, practical implementation in St. Balikuddembe (Owino) and Kalerwe remains gender-blind, with persistent gaps in gender specific infrastructure, grievance redress, and fee transparency.

This brief, developed under the Policy Analysis for Sustainable and Healthy Foods in African Retail Markets (PASHFARM) initiative, draws on evidence from St. Balikuddembe (Owino) and Kalerwe markets. Using a qualitative approach guided by Kabeer’s Social Relations Framework, it highlights gender-related constraints, vendor experiences, and opportunities for policy action to build more inclusive and equitable market governance.

Key Findings

- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Many stalls lack sufficient toilets, reliable water, childcare and lactation facilities, safe lighting, and secure loading points, undermining vendor dignity, business operations, and food safety.
- **Opaque Governance & Fees:** Mixed landlord–public control fosters informal levies, extortion risks, and unequal stall allocation, disproportionately disadvantaging women and youth.
- **Limited Access to Finance:** Vendors mainly rely on informal savings groups, with a few affordable credit options, restricting business growth and investment.
- **Food Safety Risks:** Poor storage, water access, and handling practices compromise consumer health and vendor income.
- **Fragmented Service Delivery:** Waste management and sanitation costs fall disproportionately on women vendors, especially those selling high-waste commodities.
- **Governance Contestations:** Power struggles and unclear governance in markets like Owino discourage investment and hinder improvements in infrastructure and services.

Policy Recommendations

Short-Term Measures

The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives should:

- Establish national operational guidelines for gender-responsive markets covering sanitation, water, lighting, childcare, stall allocation, and $\geq 40\%$ women's representation.
- Create a ring-fenced "Women's Window" in the Market Infrastructure Upgrade Fund for immediate improvements in the areas of sanitation blocks, safe loading bays, lighting.
- Introduce market charters to prohibit harassment and extortion; set up staffed grievance desks with transparent complaint logs.

The Kampala Capital City Authority should:

- Provide quick-win training on food safety, record-keeping, and stock turnover for vendors.

Medium-Term Measures

The ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development; the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives should:

- Amend the Markets Act (Cap.94) and subsidiary regulations to tie licensing/renewals to compliance with gender and safety standards.
- Roll out digital vendor registries, stall allocations, and e-payment systems with public dashboards for transparency.
- Formalize partnerships with MFIs to deliver low-collateral group credit for women traders, linked to savings groups, with business and inventory training.

The Kampala Capital City Authority should:

- Mandate at least 40% women's representation in market committees; integrate participatory budgeting for gender-priority infrastructure.
- Standardize waste and sanitation service contracts in landlord-controlled markets to prevent discriminatory charges.

Long-Term Strategies

The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development; the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives should:

- Develop a National Market Gender Policy with enforceable accountability mechanisms across ministries and local governments.
- Integrate disaster preparedness and resilience strategies to protect women-run enterprises from shocks (fires, floods, economic downturns).

The Kampala Capital City Authority should:

- Formalize the role of the Directorate of Gender, Community Services & Production in market oversight; codify inspection regimes and publish compliance reports per market.
- Institutionalize gender-sensitive enforcement practices, including GBV referral pathways, humane handling, and transparent goods custody systems.
- Establish sustainable food safety and nutrition programs (quarterly training, periodic audits, safe storage/cooling solutions).

Implementation Considerations

- **Coordination:** Multi-level alignment is needed between national government, KCCA, district authorities, and market leadership to avoid duplication and gaps.
- **Financing:** Dedicated budget lines and donor partnerships should sustain infrastructure and financial inclusion interventions.
- **Capacity Building:** Training for enforcement units, vendors, and market leaders is essential for gender-sensitive governance.
- **Accountability:** Transparent reporting mechanisms, participatory monitoring, and grievance redress systems will ensure policies translate into practice.

Conclusion

Urban food markets are vital to livelihoods, nutrition, and women's enterprise in Uganda. Yet, poor infrastructure, gender-blind governance, and inequitable decision-making constrain their potential. Evidence from St. Balikuddembe and Kalerwe shows how women vendors navigate systemic barriers that compromise both their wellbeing and consumers' food safety. Strengthening gender-responsive governance, upgrading infrastructure, expanding financial inclusion, and embedding accountability mechanisms can transform markets into inclusive spaces that promote economic opportunity, food safety, and equitable growth.

Policymakers must urgently implement these measures, to ensure that urban markets become safe, equitable, and economically empowering spaces for women and communities alike.

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Acknowledgements

This project was carried out with administrative and technical support from the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) under the Policy Analysis for Sustainable and Healthy Foods in African Retail Markets (PASHFARM) Project, with funding from the Gates Foundation (GF).



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