

## **Gendered Barriers Faced by Food SMEs in Providing Low-Income Consumers with Safe, Affordable, and Nutritious Foods in Nairobi**

### **AUTHORS:**

Gitau K.R., Wekesa B.M., Ninsiima R., Chelang'a N.C., Harawa P.P., Shashi N.I., Mugisha B.E.M., & Korir E.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

1. Raphael K. Gitau is a Senior Lecturer at Egerton University's Department of Agricultural Economics, Kenya.
2. Bright Wekesa is a PhD candidate at Egerton University's Department of Agricultural Economics, Kenya, and the Research Manager at Brics Insights Consultancy Limited
3. Philip Philemon Harawa is a Lecturer at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Malawi, and a PhD candidate at Egerton University's Department of Agricultural Economics.
4. Njile Isack Shashi is a research Scientist at Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology and a PhD candidate at Egerton University's Department of Agricultural Economics.
5. Naomi Chebii Chelang'a is a PhD candidate at Egerton University's Department of Agricultural Economics, Kenya.
6. Racheal Ninsiima is a lecturer at Kyambogo University and a PhD candidate at Egerton University's Department of Agricultural Economics, Kenya.
7. Emily Korir is a Senior Lecturer at Egerton University's Department of Agricultural Economics, Kenya.
8. Euzobia Baine Mugisha is the Director of the Gender instate at Makerere University, Uganda.

### **KEY MESSAGES**

1. Urban food markets are vital to Nairobi's food system, providing affordable food and self-employment opportunities, especially for low-income households.
2. Women traders face multiple gendered barriers, including unsafe and unhygienic working environments, inadequate sanitation and water facilities, and the absence of lactation and childcare spaces, factors that undermine their dignity, health, and productivity.
3. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, market governance and policy implementation remain largely gender-blind, resulting in arbitrary rule enforcement, insecurity of tenure, and exclusion of women from decision-making structures.

4. Improving gender-responsive market infrastructure and governance, through safe sanitation, lighting, water access, and child-friendly facilities for breastfeeding mothers, is essential to enhance women's economic empowerment and overall food system safety.
5. Coordinated action among national and county governments, market committees, and trader associations is needed to institutionalize gender-sensitive standards, finance inclusive infrastructure, and strengthen women's participation and protection in market operations.

## **THE CONTEXT/BACKGROUND**

Urban food markets such as Toi and Githurai are central to Nairobi's food system and livelihoods, especially for low-income households. Like other food markets, these markets are essential settings in the provision of nutritious and affordable food to millions and serve as a key source of self-employment. They provide affordable food to millions and serve as avenues for self-employment and income generation. Traders in these markets often face gendered barriers such as gender insensitive water and sanitation measures, lack of secure stalls, unsafe working environments, especially for women, limited access to finance, biased market policy enforcement practices, and exclusion from leadership of young vendors by experienced ones.

Although Kenya's Constitution (2010) guarantees equality and non-discrimination, and Nairobi City County has enacted trade and inspectorate legislation, implementation has often been gender blind. This results in unsafe working conditions, arbitrary enforcement, and barriers to women's economic empowerment. Strengthening gender-responsive governance and policies in Toi and Githurai markets is therefore critical to enhance trader livelihoods, ensure fair enforcement, and improve food safety for consumers. This policy brief, drawn from a study under the Policy Analysis for Sustainable and Healthy Foods in African Retail Markets (PASHFARM) project, specifically synthesizes the gendered barriers faced by vendors in the choice, sourcing, and provision of safe, affordable, and nutritious food to low-income households in Toi and Githurai markets in Nairobi.

## **THE PROBLEM**

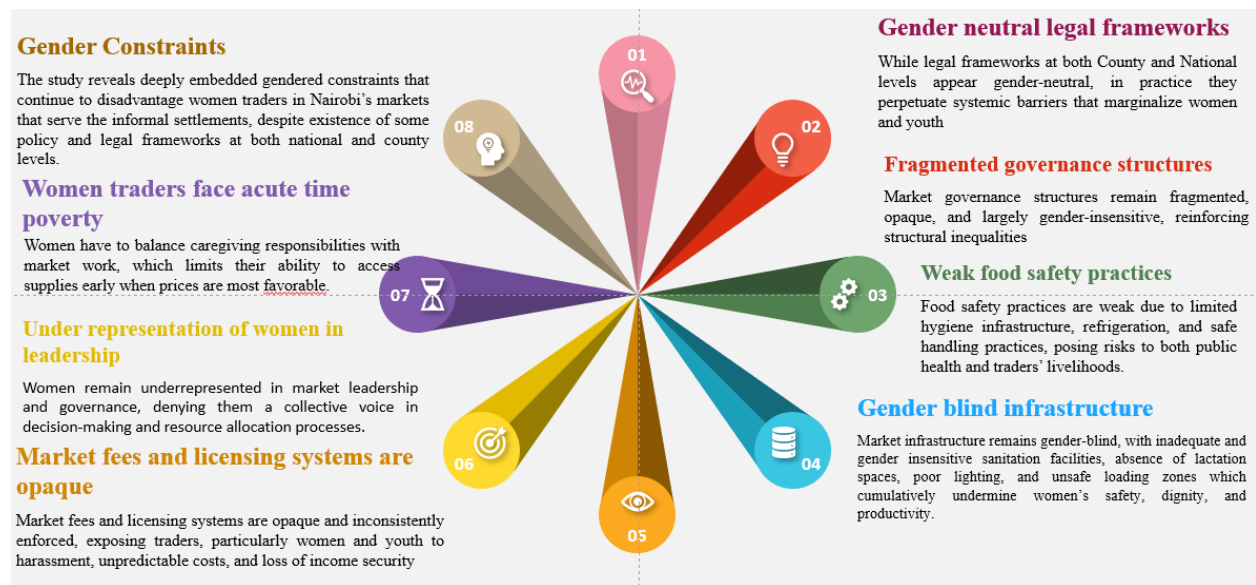
Although women constitute most vendors in Nairobi's SME food markets, their participation in governance and decision-making continues to take place under highly constrained circumstances. Traders in Githurai market, estimated at nearly 10,000, for instance, are reported to have access to only about 10 toilets. Women are further disadvantaged by the requirement to pay per use, a practice that erodes already slim profit margins.

Women and youth traders also experience biased enforcement of market rules. Fee collection processes are frequently arbitrary, accompanied by rough handling, confiscation of goods, and public humiliation during inspections and enforcement of city trade regulations. Stall tenure insecurity compounds these challenges, as stall allocation processes remain opaque and often exclude women and younger traders from accessing prime market spaces.

Financial exclusion further limits women’s competitiveness. While many rely on small-scale table banking groups (chamas) to mobilize resources, they face significant barriers to accessing scalable, affordable credit products that require little or no collateral. At the same time, food safety concerns remain common. Limited access to clean water, inadequate, safe, and functional storage facilities, and insufficient knowledge of safe handling and nutrition compromise not only consumer health but also the income security of traders themselves.

Together, these structural and systemic barriers highlight the disconnect between women’s dominance in vending and their marginalization in the governance and sustainability of informal markets.

## KEY FINDINGS



Addressing these challenges requires inclusive, transparent, and gender-responsive governance and infrastructure reforms to promote safety, equity, and economic empowerment in informal markets.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS**

### **For the National Government (Ministry of Gender, Ministry of Trade, NGEK):**

- Issue National Gender-Responsive Market Guidelines to set minimum standards for sanitation (with specific gender sensitive requirements for dignity and hygiene), provision of lactation spaces, stall allocation quotas, and GBV-sensitive enforcement.
- The National Government, in collaboration with the County, should establish affordable, community-managed childcare facilities within or near major markets and integrate family-friendly infrastructure such as lactation spaces and rest areas.
- Tie infrastructure to licensing: Amend national trade licensing regulations to make sanitation, lighting, and water access mandatory for licensing/renewal of market operations.
- Finance mechanisms: Establish a Market Infrastructure Fund – Women’s Window (co-financed by national + donors) to support Nairobi’s priority markets (starting with Toi reconstruction and Githurai upgrades).
- Strengthen GBV pathways: Require health posts in urban markets to provide confidential GBV referral services.

### **For Nairobi City County Government (Gender & Trade Departments, Inspectorate):**

- Digital Vendor Registry: Roll out mobile-enabled vendor registration and e-payment to curb bribery and improve transparency.
- Quota for women’s representation: Mandate at least 40% women's seats in market management committees, coupled with participatory budgeting.
- Gender-sensitive inspectorate training: Embed GBV awareness, humane enforcement, and transparent confiscation procedures in inspectorate SOPs, with mandatory certification.
- Emergency sanitation & lighting program: Install subsidized portable toilets and solar lighting in Toi and Githurai as short-term measures.
- Market Gender Charter: Develop county-level guidance mandating lactation spaces, subsidized sanitary facilities, and grievance redress desks in all major markets.

### **For Market Committees and Traders’ Associations (Toi & Githurai):**

- Adopt Market Safety Charters prohibiting harassment, with grievance desks and hotlines for complaint handling.

- Link women's groups to MFIs for low-collateral credit and business training.
- Nutrition and food safety campaigns with periodic vendor training and consumer sensitization.

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