



Breaking Gender Barriers in Food Retail: Pathways to Sustainable and Healthy Food Systems in Cameroon

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Key messages:

- Strengthen food governance by integrating gender statistics into planning and decision-making to address the gender-specific and structural challenges faced by men and women food retailers in the Cameroon informal economy.
- Design and fund women-specific interventions in the informal food retail sector to enhance women's access to finance, training and market infrastructure for business growth.
- Strengthen food-handling and hygiene training for both women and men in food retail to improve food safety and protect public health.

Introduction

In developing countries, the informal food retail sector is strategic for improving access to food, particularly for poor urban individuals and households (Skinner, 2016). Women dominate the informal food retail sector in Africa and constitute the majority of food vendors in open markets in many poor rural and urban communities in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the ILO (2023), close to 90% of African women dominate the non-agricultural informal economy. In Cameroon, 68.3% of women work as independent entrepreneurs in the informal sector, compared to 48.2% of men, according to the Cameroon National Institute of Statistics [NIS] (NIS, 2022). As key players in informal food retail systems, women retailers often have direct relationships with local farmers, markets, and food suppliers, enabling them to source a diverse range of food products. With growing rates of urbanisation (i.e., 57.6% urban population in 2020 compared to 27.3% in 1976) (UN-DESA, 2018), the informal food retail sector continues to play a critical role in urban and peri-urban food systems, enhancing access to a diversified diet for medium and low-income households in Cameroon.

However, literature highlights gendered inequalities in the informal food retail sector. Women are most likely to face challenges in accessing productive resources, limited capital, and exclusion from formal financial systems (Gitau et al., 2025). These challenges often limit women food retailers' capacity to expand their enterprises and undermine their participation in formal economic growth initiatives. Gender disparities in access to productive resources, capital, and financial inclusion warrant targeted policy actions that expand women's access to economic opportunities and productive resources. In most cases, gender-specific challenges faced by men and women in the informal sector are rarely captured in national statistics that inform economic policies for the informal sector. The third Employment and Informal Sector Survey (EESI3) by the Cameroon National Institute of Statistics (NIS, 2022) provides sex-disaggregated statistics on promoters of informal production units, workers, income, and occupational disparities. However, the report offers limited gendered analysis of the structural and gender-based challenges faced by men and women in the informal food retail sector.

This policy brief addresses this gap by analysing, from a gender perspective, the structural and gender-based challenges faced by women and men informal food retailers in Cameroon, to identify sustainable pathways to address gender-specific challenges and promote a sustainable health food retail system in Cameroon. The analysis and findings were based on a

Gender-based constraints are challenges that men or women face as a result of their gender (UNICEF, 2017). Such constraints can arise from social construction of gender roles as well as gender inequalities in access to resources and benefits. For example, women may face challenges related to financial access due to gender inequalities in property rights and in access to collateral.

sample of 367 food retailers (237 women, 64.6%, and 130 men, 34.4%). Data was collected in 2024 from open markets in Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon, and Kumba, the largest commercial town in the English-speaking part of Cameroon.

Key Findings

- Women food retailers dominate peri-urban and urban markets, trading fruits, vegetables, ready-to-eat foods, and eggs, ensuring local nutrition diversity.
- Women food retailers perform both productive and reproductive nutrition-related roles by enhancing access to diversified diets for medium- and low-income households and also serving as primary food providers in their own households.
- Women food retailers face limitations in accessing formal credit institutions that men do not. They mostly rely on personal savings, family loans, spousal support, tontines, and cooperatives as alternative sources of financial access.
- Challenges such as price fluctuations, transportation difficulties, and unreliable supply chains from wholesalers or farms, as well as limited storage and food-handling infrastructure, were reported by both men and women informal food retailers.
- Limited income and financial autonomy make reinvestment and business scaling more difficult for women food retailers than men.
- Gender norms, particularly for married women, restrict mobility and engagement with suppliers due to the burden of unpaid care-related responsibilities. This limits product sourcing and business growth, underscoring the need for supportive policies on transport and flexible access to the supply chain.

Figure 1 illustrates the contributions and challenges of women and men as economic agents in Cameroon's informal food retail sector.

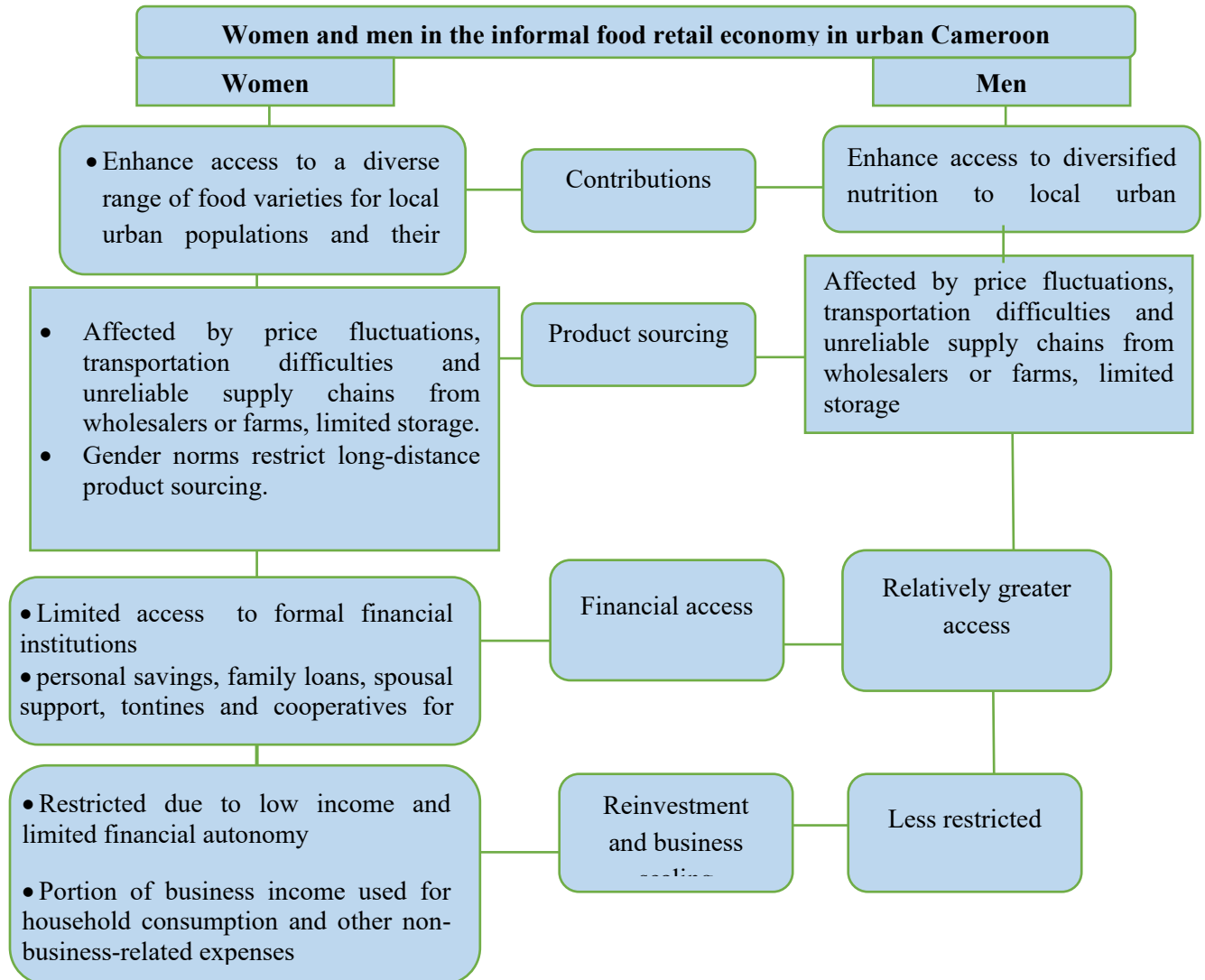
Policy Recommendations

Mainstream gender in urban informal food governance systems, by:

- Generating gender-disaggregated data, at the national level, on the structural and gender-based challenges faced by women and men food retailers in the informal sector, in relation to access to productive resources, capital, and financial inclusion.
- Systematically integrating this data into policy interventions targeting (i) the informal food governance sector, and (ii) women informal food retailers as a specific group.
- Designing interventions that reduce gender disparities and constraints, enabling women and men, informal food retailers to access resources, expand businesses, and strengthen urban food systems.

Integrate women food retailers as key stakeholders in the informal economy by designing and implementing women-specific interventions that improve women’s access to finances and create opportunities for business scaling.

Provide training on hygienic food handling for both women and men food retailers to ensure proper handling of food suppliers, strengthen food safety standards, and protect public health.



Conclusion

This policy brief highlights the structural and gender-based challenges shaping the participation of women and men in Cameroon's informal food retail economy. While women dominate the sector and play key roles in household and urban food security, they face

systemic exclusion from urban food policy processes. Both men and women face challenges such as price fluctuations, poor transportation networks, and limited storage and supply infrastructure.

However, women food retailers experience additional constraints, including limited access to finance, restricted mobility, and increased household responsibilities, which reduce their capacity for reinvestment and business growth. These constraints limit opportunities for business scaling and affect the economic agency of women food retailers.

This study contributes to understanding how gender dynamics shape informal food economics and identifies pathways toward a more inclusive and sustainable food retail system. Policy makers should integrate gender statistics (in addition to sex-disaggregated data) into urban food governance policy and practice, prioritise targeted financing schemes for women vendors, and strengthen women's participation in decision-making platforms.

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Mission

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