

Why the market woman

By Jacqueline Emodok

Today, Khadija Babirye Kizito is the programme manager of Pearl Development Initiative, thanks to the efforts of her mother, who was a food vendor in a market.

As a pupil at Nakivubo Blue Primary School, Babirye recalls how she used to help her mother carry cassava, beans and a charcoal stove to the market. At the market, Babirye's mother cooked *katogo* (mixture of beans and cassava) which she would sell to supplement her husband's income.

"I am the last born in a family of 10 children. My father used to work for the Uganda Railways Corporation in Kenya before he was transferred to Uganda. When he was transferred here, my mother started working in a market near the present-day Usafi Market in Kampala," she says.

Her story is the tip of the iceberg of many other stories of mothers earning a living in the markets. From the rural to the urban centres, the market woman stands out. In small, but significant ways,



Women make up the biggest percentage of market vendors in Uganda but the leadership positions are held by men

they impact almost every home.

"Every weekend, I go to the market to buy foodstuffs and encounter the market woman," Lynette Mugisa, an accountant, says.

"The market woman is a provider and a client. Besides

selling produce, she is also knowledgeable," Mercy Munduru, a lawyer at FIDA, says.

Munduru, who also practices farming, says she often gets practical lessons on what to plant during her encounters with the market

women.

For Rita Atukwasa, the executive director of the Institute for Social Transformation, the market woman contributes immensely to the country's Gross Domestic Product.

"They have purchasing

power and they pay taxes," she says.

Big markets

Charles Okuni, the chairperson of Nakawa market vendors, says of the 112,672 vendors in the market, the majority are women. They sell anything ranging from foodstuffs to vegetables, clothes, shoes and beddings.

According to Atukwase, women are synonymous with the market because it economically empowers them to look after themselves.

"In the past, you did not require a lot of capital to acquire a stall in the market until a few years ago. With about sh20,000, one could start off by selling tomatoes and earn an income," she says.

Daisy Nakato, who sells garlic, tomatoes, green pepper and silver fish (*mukene*) in Kalerwe, Kampala, says she started off with capital of sh250,000 which her husband gave her.

"He wanted me to be self-reliant and I did not hesitate," she says.

Nakato acquired her stall at sh120,000.

Her main challenge is lack of facilities to preserve perishables like tomatoes.

She says she makes a huge loss when they rot yet they are bought at a high price and sometimes on credit.

Atukwase says the market brings together women from all walks of life, including university graduates — they are all united for the purpose of earning a living.

Despite women making up a big percentage of vendors in Uganda's markets, Atukwase says they play a minimal role in the governance of the market.

"This is because few of the women see themselves as leaders; so most of them settle for the position of a deputy or mobilisers, while the top positions are taken up by influential men that do not even own stalls in the markets," she says.

Okuni, however, says Nakawa Market is unique in that women are equally involved in running its affairs. He says positions like chairperson, treasurer and secretary general are not restricted to men.

Research

According to a study titled *Research on market access and gender-based violence experienced by market women*, there is male dominance in markets. Family obligations

remains a hero in Africa

and male dominance account for 13% of the challenges faced by the market woman.

Okuni says the majority of market women that give birth do not have babysitters or anybody to help them with household chores.

This forces them to spend less time in the market as the burden of looking after their children, doing housework and looking for money lies on them solely.

The women also explained that the market authorities do not give pregnant women maternity leave. During this period, one is expected to pay all the market dues because failure to pay means that one may not be able to come back to work.

The research reveals that some husbands do not want their wives to spend a lot of time in the market and, therefore, dictate the reporting and departure time, while some men do not allow their partners to work. Other men fear that their spouses may get other men in the market.

In Cereleno and Gulu Main Market, some women lamented that the majority of them could only communicate in their local dialect, which reduces their

Their contribution to the country

Her contribution

Besides putting food on the table in different homes, the market woman is also a breadwinner in her home. Nakato, who earns sh100,000 daily and sh40,000 on a bad day, says she has managed to educate her three children and pay rent.

She pays sh30,000 monthly tax to Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). In Nakawa Market, a vendor pays a ground rent of sh15,000 for the shop and sh8,500 for open space, while in Gulu market one parts with sh10,000 monthly and about sh500-sh1,000 in Pader market.

Nonetheless, the contribution of market women cannot be quantified

because it is not captured although taxes are paid directly to KCCA and municipalities.

St. Bakikudembe (Owino) market has a high revenue potential estimated to generate an average annual income of sh2b.

Market woman's power

Thelma Awori, a former director of the African Bureau at United Nations Development Programme, says market women are powerful in Nigeria, Ghana and Liberia.

"During the 14-year civil war in Liberia, the market women took risks by carrying goods to other areas and buying food from other areas to feed their husbands and children," she

says.

The first female president of in Africa, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson (president of Liberia) is a granddaughter of a market woman.

In 1960 when Ghana was considered the fountainhead of national independence and Pan-Africanism, Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of the Convention People's Party, relied heavily on market women during the struggle.

This is documented in C.L.R James' book *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* where he notes that 'in the struggle for independence, one market woman was worth any dozen graduates'.



Liberia's president Sirleaf was a granddaughter of a market woman

customer base.

Harassment

If you happen to be a woman who regularly shops from a market, chances are high that you have been a victim of catcalls, insults or been groped by men. Market women go through these daily and other forms of gender-based violence in their homes. The study

established that more than half (57%) of the market women interviewed had been abused in the past year, with majority from Cereleno and Gulu main markets.

What needs to be done?

There is need to revise the Market Act. Uganda is still using the 1942 Market Act, which does not apply to the recent trends in the markets

today.

"There is also the issue of where they belong; the local governments claim them, the trade ministry claims them, agriculture also claims them – so they do not have a clear line to address their grievances," Atukwase says.

Okuni says market women also need to be able to access loans from banks, so that they can stop suffering under the

wrath of moneylenders.

Vendors in Ciforo village, Adjumani district rejected a recently constructed market, saying it is shoddy. Atukwase attributes this to the exclusion of the vendors in the planning processes leading up to the construction of markets.

"Government wants to bring things from above and just drop them on these women

without their input, instead of asking them what they would like their stalls to look like or how much they would be willing to pay for them," she observes.

The market women say they would like their workplaces to be near banks, nursery schools for their young children and clinics where they can easily seek medical help.