



# From Labor to Leadership: Investing in Women’s Economic Agency for improved food and nutrition security in Uganda

## Executive Summary

Despite being the primary drivers of Uganda’s agricultural sector, women and girls continue to face disproportionate levels of food insecurity and economic exclusion. As we commemorate International Women’s Day 2026 under the theme *“Scaling up Investment to Accelerate Access to Justice for all Women and Girls in Uganda”*, we call for deliberate action to uplift women in the agricultural sector from labor provision in production, where the majority is concentrated, to upper nodes of the value chains, which register higher returns on investment. By scaling investment in women’s engagement in the processing, value addition, and export nodes of key value chains, Uganda can unlock significant household food security outcomes and bridge the gender income gap.

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## 1. The Reality: Food Insecurity in Uganda

Despite the efforts made to boost the agro-industrialization program, 46% of Uganda’s population remains food insecure, with disparities across regions, income, and education status<sup>1</sup>. Food insecurity and malnutrition remain a crisis among Women with over 84,000 pregnant or breastfeeding women (PBW) being acutely malnourished and in need of urgent treatment by August 2025<sup>2</sup>. This is exacerbated by numerous injustices and systemic action gaps:

- **Engagement in the agricultural sector:** Only 31.1% of female-headed households engage in livestock production, 55.1% engage in crop production, 9.1% engage in aquaculture, and 3.1% access irrigation<sup>1</sup>.
- **Land tenure rights:** Only 30.4% of women own/have secure tenure rights over agricultural land, compared to 52% of men<sup>3</sup>
- **Informal employment:** Women's engagement in the informal sector increased from 85.6% in 2016 to 90.6% in 2019 to 91.2% in 2021<sup>3</sup>.
- **Gender-pay gap:** Men receive almost twice what women are paid in formal employment<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2024). Uganda National Population and Housing Census 2024. Final Report-Volume 1 (Main). Kampala, Uganda.

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC\\_Uganda\\_Acute\\_Food\\_Insecurity\\_Acute\\_Malnutrition\\_Apr2025\\_Feb2026\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Uganda_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Acute_Malnutrition_Apr2025_Feb2026_Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2025). National Priority Gender Equality Indicators: Illuminating the path towards gender equality in Uganda.

- **Access to finance:** Despite registering a higher proportion of households in the subsistence economy, the proportion of female-headed households that received Parish Development Model funds was 3 times less than that of male headed households<sup>1</sup>
- **Unemployment:** There are more female unemployed youths (20%) compared to male unemployed youths (14%).

The realization of food justice for all women and girls in Uganda necessitates rethinking investment strategies for women to move beyond subsistence support at the production level and into higher-value nodes like processing, quality control, and export, where opportunities for economic advancement are vastly unexploited. Below are the critical value chains within which strategic investments for women's engagement would not only greatly contribute to household food and income security but also foster the realization of Uganda's ambitions of moving the population from a subsistence to a money economy.

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## 2. Strategic value chains: Challenges & Opportunities for women

### A. Coffee: Reclaiming the 'Middle'

Uganda's coffee exports hit a record **US\$ 2.3 billion** in 2025<sup>4</sup>. However, a gendered disparity in benefits attained from the sector persists.

- **Challenge:** Women provide **58% of labor** during fieldwork and nearly all labor for post-harvest handling, adding roughly **72% of the profit** value<sup>5</sup>. However, men dominate the marketing and processing stages, controlling the majority of the income.
- **Opportunity:** Investing in **women-led coffee cooperatives** to manage processing mills and gain direct access to export markets can shift control of the **US\$ 2.3 billion** sector revenue back to female producers.

### B. Fish: Post-Harvest Resilience

- **Challenge:** 61% of people in small-scale fisheries (SSF) in Uganda are women. They dominate the **processing (52%) and trade (51%)** nodes of the SSF sub-sector<sup>6</sup>. However, they lose up to **30% of their product** due to the dominant utilization of traditional processing and storage methods, which facilitate contamination, yielding low market prices.
- **The Shift:** Scaled investment in solar-powered dryers, cold-chain infrastructure, as well as fish market digital platforms for women would reduce post-harvest losses. In addition, investment in innovative value addition initiatives, especially in the silver fish value chain

<sup>4</sup> Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA, 2025). Monthly Coffee Export Report - September 2025

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.farmafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/coffee-report-latest-26.09-v5-final-spread.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> FAO. 2023. The contribution of women in small-scale fisheries to healthy food systems and sustainable livelihoods in Uganda. Second edition. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7597en>

has demonstrated a **30% increase in fish consumption** and **double income** for female processors<sup>7</sup>.

### C. Dairy: Quality as a bargaining tool

- **Challenge:** Despite women dominating the processing and marketing nodes, they mostly operate in the informal sector of the dairy value chain. Formal institutions, particularly cooperatives in the dairy sub-sector, are dominated by men at 88%, with women's participation estimated at only 12%<sup>8</sup>. Given the high cost of cold storage systems and quality analyzers, women in the informal dairy sector are unable to earn premium returns due to poor quality milk and milk products.
- **The Solution:** Investing in women's cooperatives can ensure that women get better access to services, as well as premium returns from the dairy sector. Equipping women-led milk collecting Centres with digital analyzers and cold storage systems allows them to command higher prices based on butterfat content, increasing their bargaining power with large processors.

### D. Indigenous Food Crops (Matooke, Cassava, Beans)

- **Challenge:** Women dominate indigenous crop value chains in Uganda. Most indigenous crops, such as finger millet, amaranths, scarlet eggplant, African nightshade, and African eggplant, in Uganda make up a critical component of staple meals and food cultures in Uganda. However, these food security crops have mostly been sidelined in government priorities and private sector investment in favor of more lucrative cash crops. Productivity of indigenous food crops remains low, with high crop losses due to climate vagaries, limited access to improved varieties, inputs, and inadequate financing streams<sup>9</sup>. In addition, there has been limited support in expanding the market base of indigenous crops beyond local markets.
- **The Shift:** Deliberate investment to increase productivity and marketability of indigenous crops, leveraging on the already existing and vast domestic market base, opens new competitive nodes for advancing food security and economic development nationally.

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## 3. Comparative investment impact at different value chain nodes

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<sup>7</sup> <https://idrc-crdi.ca/en/research-in-action/enhancing-food-security-and-livelihoods-fishing-communities-uganda>

<sup>8</sup> <https://fsdnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Rapid-Gender-Assessment-of-the-Horticulture-and-Dairy-Value-Chains-in-Uganda.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://blog.cabi.org/2019/09/27/how-african-indigenous-vegetables-production-in-uganda-revealed-empowered-women-but-struggles-in-the-private-sector/>

Value Chain Node	Current State of Women's Engagement	Potential Impact of Scaled Investment
Production	High Labor, Low Ownership, Low Control of returns	Increased Yields & Land Tenure Security
Processing	Low Access to Technology, High Post harvest losses	Significant reduction in Post-Harvest Loss
Export/Trade	Marginalized/Invisible	Direct Income Control & Global Market Entry

## 4. Calls to Action

In commemoration of International Women's Day 2026, we call for;

1. **De-risk credit for women:** The Ministry of Finance and Bank of Uganda should establish a ring-fenced gender equity fund within the Agricultural Credit Facility (ACF) to provide low-interest loans for women-led cooperatives and agribusinesses.
2. **Post-harvest technology subsidies:** Establish a co-financing mechanism for community solar-drying hubs and cold-storage units specifically managed by women's groups in the fish and dairy corridors.
3. **Land law enforcement:** Strengthen the implementation of provisions in the Land Act Cap 227 that promote women's land rights, ensuring that women have the land security required to serve as collateral for scaling up their businesses.
4. **Indigenous crop investment:** Protect and fund farmer-managed seed systems (FMSS) to allow women to save and trade indigenous seeds, ensuring resilience against climate shocks and corporate control.