

# Learning Brief: Advancing women's economic empowerment in the food processing sectors in East and Southern Africa

Results and reflections from the Alliance for Inclusive and Nutritious Food Processing (AINFP)



*Fruit jam packing at The Day processing, in Ethiopia.*  
PHOTO: BOBBY NEPTUNE

## ► Overview

By examining the successes achieved, challenges faced, and lessons learned, the Alliance for Inclusive and Nutritious Food Processing (AINFP) partnership aims to share opportunities and recommendations for fostering women's economic empowerment in the food processing sector. These results and reflections come from AINFP's work with over 240 food processors in the program's target countries—Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia—from 2018-2024.

## ► Introduction

Women play a central role in food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, from production to processing, distribution, and preparation. Despite this, women's contributions often go unrecognized and unsupported, resulting in limited opportunities for them to fully participate and benefit economically from income-generating activities. According to a [report by the Food and Agriculture Organization](#), women make up around 60% of the off-farm food systems labor force in sub-Saharan Africa. However, women's employment tends to be less secure and lower paying; for instance, less than 20% of women engaged in off-farm activities hold formal employment with formal wages, compared to

their male counterparts who are more likely to hold such roles (at a rate of 40%). Furthermore, [women face additional constraints](#) in holding these positions and from accessing the resources they need to start and grow their businesses. Specifically, gender norms and biases limit women's access to finance, the availability and ability to access opportunities to develop business and technical skills, as well as access to technologies and other assets. To advance women's economic empowerment, stakeholders can build and demonstrate the business case for inclusion and address gaps preventing women from meaningfully participating in income-generating activities.

## ► AINFP's Approach to Women's Economic Empowerment in the Food Processing Sector

The [Alliance for Inclusive Nutritious Food Processing \(AINFP\)](#) is a partnership program between [USAID](#), [TechnoServe](#), and [Partners in Food Solutions \(PFS\)](#) that aims to create a more competitive food processing sector in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia. To promote women's economic empowerment, AINFP has implemented gender-responsive activities targeting two groups: a) women-owned or -led food processing companies and b) all food processing companies regardless of the gender of their leadership. In recognition of the unique challenges faced by women in this sector, AINFP has

prioritized and developed activities that are specifically tailored to women-owned or -led businesses, as informed by [gender assessments](#) conducted in 2021. This approach acknowledges that women face greater and different barriers compared to their male counterparts, therefore requiring additional attention and tailored interventions. Whereas, the activities targeting the food processing sector more widely aim to develop inclusivity in both the company and its supply chain. To support these efforts, AINFP received funding from the USAID office of gender equality and women's empowerment (GenDev) in 2022.

### AINFP's holistic support to promote inclusion and women's empowerment in the food processing sector

Addressing barriers women food processors face	Working with men and women food processors to create more inclusive supply chains
<b>Activities designed and targeted to women food processors</b>	<b>Activities designed to make supply chains more inclusive</b>
 Intentionally recruit more women food processors in the project to receive technical and managerial capacity strengthening	 Support food processors to develop inclusive business plans to procure raw materials from women smallholder farmers
 Women in Business Leadership Training to increase business skills	 Technical assistance to better reach women consumers, especially in base-of-the-pyramid markets
 Networking, coaching, and mentoring to enhance connectivity	 Technical assistance to identify and address areas for improvement in food processors' workplace policies, culture and practices.
 Access to finance activities to increase women's access to financial products	

## ► Results and Lessons Learned

Recent [research](#)—as articulated by the USAID-funded Market Systems Partnership Activity (MSP)—highlights the importance of strategic investment in four critical areas for promoting inclusion and enhancing the competitiveness of entrepreneurs, especially women, and the populations they serve. These areas include; talent and leadership, workplace culture, consumers and supply chain. In this learning brief, AINFP reflects on the results and lessons learned across these four critical areas for strategic investment.

### Impact in numbers: Women Food Systems Actors Reached by AINFP

- **115** women-owned or led food processors receiving comprehensive technical assistance (CTA) **(48% of total food processors)**
- **897** women adopting a new or improved food processing practice **(42.3% of total food processors)**
- **\$77,978,149** in sales by AINFP-supported food processors that are women-owned or jointly owned **(26% of total sales)**
- **1,140** jobs created that are held by women **(46% of total jobs)**
- **113,635** smallholder farmers (SHFs) that AINFP-supported food processors are procuring from are women **(42% of total SHFs)**
- **\$5,991,512** in finance (grants and loans) accessed by AINFP-supported food processors who are women-owned or jointly owned **(45% of total finance accessed)**

## ► Talent and leadership

[Evidence suggests](#) that mentoring, networking, and upskilling activities can foster enhanced talent, leadership, improved performance and profitability for women entrepreneurs. While reflecting on the gender assessments in 2021, AINFP identified that women-owned or -led food processors were less likely than their male counterparts to adopt promoted practices, such as developing new/improved products, adapting their sourcing or logistics, or implementing practices to enhance operational efficiencies. Additionally, women-owned or -led food processors noted needing additional support in enhancing their leadership and management skills to better run their businesses. As a result AINFP recognized the need to address these disparities, through:

**Enhancing women's business and leadership skills:** In 2023, AINFP introduced the Women in Business Leadership Program (WBLP) to enhance women's leadership and management skills, boost confidence and other soft skills, and foster a supportive network to empower women leaders in running successful and thriving businesses. The program was implemented through a combination of in-person and online approaches over 15 weeks, reaching a total of 72 women from 40 food processing companies across Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia. The WBLP yielded positive outcomes in improving participants' confidence levels, particularly in areas such as effective communication, stakeholder engagement,

expanding influence, and managing business performance. Notably, participants and facilitators expressed appreciation for the "Challenge Model" utilized in the program. This model encourages participants to articulate their business mission, develop a vision, and choose a specific challenge to focus on throughout the program. For instance, a dairy processor in Tanzania set the goal of reducing rejected milk during the collection process and increasing overall milk collection. By the end of the WBLP, the dairy processor decreased rejected milk from 200 liters per day to 50 liters and was able to increase their milk collection by 100 liters per day.



**Activity Zoom In - "She Shares" Sessions in the WBLP:** The program incorporated "She Shares" sessions for participants to have an opportunity to share personal challenges affecting their ability to be successful business leaders, network and learn from their peers in a safe and supportive environment. "She Shares" sessions included themes such as overcoming imposter syndrome, finding your leadership voice, managing stress, avoiding burnout, fostering self-love and self-care. Facilitators reflected on the "She Shares" sessions and noted that it helped participants in feeling that they weren't the only ones facing difficulties. This helped participants in feeling less isolated in their challenges, more connected to their fellow participants, and identify approaches others have used in overcoming their challenges.

**Promoting women-focused mentorship, coaching, and networking opportunities:** To foster the growth of technical, leadership, and management skills, AINFP supports women food processors through coaching, mentorship, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Under its mentorship program, AINFP leverages the expertise of PFS—a consortium of seven multinational food companies—to provide 1-1 mentorship support to 22 women-owned or -led food processors on leadership and management, business strategy development,

financial management, human resources, communication, and sales leadership. A food processor in Tanzania shared her experience with a PFS volunteer, stating, *"I feel motivated and encouraged just by talking with her. We have discussed the topic of female leadership, and my main takeaway is to embrace opportunities, different leadership approaches, and not be afraid to occupy spaces, especially as a young leader in our community."*

**Enhancing connectivity between food processors and other food systems actors:** Compared to their male counterparts, AINFP found that women-owned or -led food processors are more isolated and do not have a network of other food processors or entrepreneurs to learn from or model their success after. To address this, in 2023 AINFP co-hosted 10 networking events for women with industry stakeholders, engaging 416 women (512 individuals total) from the food processing sector. These events foster connections among women entrepreneurs and key actors in food systems, including financial service providers, government agencies, distributors, retailers, and producers. One food processor in Tanzania, noted “AINFP has created networking platforms, expanding my knowledge in the food processing sector, as well as facilitating linkages to raw materials”. To build the sustainability of these activities, AINFP strategically partners with sector associations, incubation centers, and other business development service providers. For example, in Zambia, AINFP collaborated with the Women's Entrepreneurship Access Center, ABSA Bank, the Development Bank of Zambia and Zanaco, as well as the Ministry of Small & Medium Enterprises Development to host networking events in 2023 that reached 223 women entrepreneurs.

**Upskilling and expanding employment opportunities for young women:** AINFP's gender assessments revealed that women are often perceived as less suitable for leadership roles and incapable of handling certain food processing tasks, such as heavy lifting. This in turn affects women's confidence in themselves to break into the sector, as well as their confidence that they will be successful. To provide opportunities for women to demonstrate their competence, build their skills, and gain confidence, AINFP works with local universities and vocational education and training (TVET) programs to identify recent women graduates of technical programs and facilitate the placement of these graduates with food processing companies. The interns provide technical and business support on matters such as food safety, strengthening and expanding marketing opportunities, developing promotional strategies, and optimizing online marketing. As of the end of 2023, 45 young women were placed in internship positions, of which 17 secured full-time employment following their internships.



#### Case Study – Women in Leadership: Kijata Enterprises

Winifred Kajuju, co-owner of Kijata Enterprises Ltd., a bakery in Meru, Kenya, identified leadership, product development, and business efficiencies as priority areas for growth for herself and her business. AINFP facilitated a peer-exchange with Beta Bakery in Tanzania, provided CTA and supported the registration of three new processed products, and supported Kijata to expand their distribution to new counties in Kenya, with the support of a sales and marketing intern. During the WBLP, Winifred set a goal to increase bread sales by 2,000 crates per month by July 2023, which she surpassed, selling 2,400 crates. Winifred recently reflected on the support from AINFP – *“It may be true that some people are more natural leaders than others, but to truly become impactful, one must take the journey to grow her skills and knowledge. Some of the necessary skills impacted on me during the program include being an effective communicator, delegating well, being willing and able to learn and adapt, as well as developing my both emotional and social intelligence.”*

### ► Workplace culture

A positive, inclusive workplace culture is one where employees feel safe and respected, are paid equitably, and are provided with the resources needed to be productive at work. AINFP implements the gender-responsive diagnostic tool—developed by TechnoServe's Global Gender Practice—with its food processing clients to investigate their adoption of gender-responsive business practices across four themes: organizational equity and inclusion, benefits and impact to women, business performance, and supply chain performance. By the end of 2023, AINFP had conducted these diagnostics with 67 food processing clients, 28 of which were women-owned or led. The results highlight that workplace culture is an under-addressed area of concern in the food processing sector. Only 20% of surveyed food processors reported integrating gender considerations in their recruitment and training practices: which is scored as whether the company removes gendered pronouns from job announcements, employs women at different levels of the organization, and trains staff on topics such as worker benefit policies. Additionally, only 40% scored highly on committing to worker safety, which considers whether a food processor has worker safety policies, sexual harassment policies, and gender-based violence-redressal mechanisms shared.

**Supporting more inclusive workplaces:** Following the gender diagnostics, AINFP works with interested food processing clients to develop gender-responsive business action plans to address the identified areas for improvement. As of the end of 2023, AINFP supported 67 food processing clients to develop action plans and was providing customized technical assistance (CTA) to implement the action plans. In 2024, AINFP will implement sector-wide trainings (SWTs) to raise awareness and build capacity in addressing the most common areas for improvement from the gender diagnostics.



Severina Paul, CEO of AA Nafaka Stores Ltd in Tanzania, with an employee - PHOTO: BOBBY NEPTUNE



**Zambia Food Processor's Gender-responsive Business Practices Diagnostic (GRBP) and Action Plan:**

After conducting a gender-responsive diagnostic in September 2023 with a food processor in Zambia, it was found that they scored low in several areas. Their commitment to worker safety scored 0%, recruiting and training women and men staff scored 67%, and monitoring benefits for women and men scored 0%. AINFP supported the food processor to develop an action plan and reach its intended objectives by November 2023.

Commercial Goal 1: Inclusive and Motivating Workplace		
Objective	Action/Process	2023 Achievement
Improve recruitment and training processes	Processing director and intern will develop inclusive recruitment policy/guidelines to promote gender equality	Developed a gender policy with principles and procedures on equality and non-discrimination, inclusive recruitment and retention, maternity leave, and gender-based violence redressal mechanisms
Develop occupational health and safety policies to ensure worker safety	Support client put in place Occupation, Health & Safety policies to ensure employees safety and well being. Project team to share policy templates for the client to adapt	

► **Consumers**

As noted in MSP's [Women-inclusive Return on Investment Framework](#), women are the majority of consumers globally, and therefore producing products that better fit their needs can enable greater market penetration and increase business profits.

**Fostering the development of women-centered products:**

Products that better cater to the needs of women consumers may include those that prioritize convenience, taking into account women's high time burdens; are affordable, considering their limited purchasing power; contribute to their nutritional requirements and those of their families, recognizing that women often have responsibility for their family's nutritional needs; and offer greater shelf stability, thereby reducing the time spent on procuring additional foods. Through CTA, a number of AINFP-supported food processors have developed new or improved products/packaging that may better meet

the needs of women consumers, including complementary feeding products, pasteurized dairy products, preserved fish and meat products, fortified flours and noodles, instant porridge flour and cereals, groundnut and legume flours/spreads. Specifically, AINFP has provided technical assistance to 14 food processors who produce complementary foods. This assistance has enabled the processors to formulate and enhance their existing products, resulting in improved product stability, longer shelf life, greater convenience, and increased accessibility for female consumers.



**Case Study – Considering the Nutritional Needs of Female Consumers: Yumi Milling**

Yumi Milling, a food processor in Zambia specializing in cereal blends, developed an instant fortified porridge to address challenges faced by female consumers in preparing traditional porridge, which requires lengthy cooking, is labor intensive, and exposes women and children to smoke from the long cooking process. By developing instant porridge they resolved those challenges for female consumers, making it easier for mothers to prepare a nutritious meal for their children.

Additionally, access to affordable, nutritious foods is an important factor that affects the purchasing and consumption of nutritious foods, particularly for women, who have high time burdens and/or mobility restrictions. AINFP implemented several activities that enable improved food availability and accessibility. As of the end of 2023, AINFP-supported food processors have sold over \$264,870,000 in value-added products. Nearly ten percent, or \$26,060,000, of this was sold to new markets, and 76% of the total volume sold was sold to base-of-the-pyramid markets, therefore enabling increased availability and access to these food products.



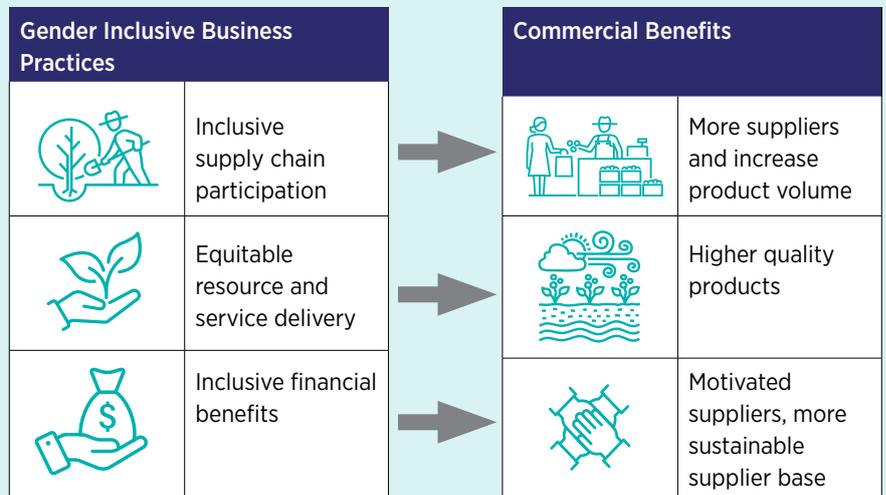
Sorting of chilies for processing sauces at Kwithu Kitchen in Malawi - PHOTO: AINFP TEAM

## ► Supply chains

Food processors can create and/or improve economic opportunities for women within their supply chains by adopting inclusive and gender-responsive sourcing strategies. Three of the four themes in AINFP's gender diagnostic prompts food processors to examine their sourcing and business strategies on whether or not they are inclusive to women food systems actors. Following the gender diagnostics, AINFP encourages food processors to adapt their sourcing strategies to be more gender-responsive. Critical to this process is supporting food processors in seeing the business case for making their supply chains more inclusive and highlighting the commercial benefits.

### Making the Business Case for Women's Economic Empowerment

#### Gender Responsive Business Practices in Supply Chains



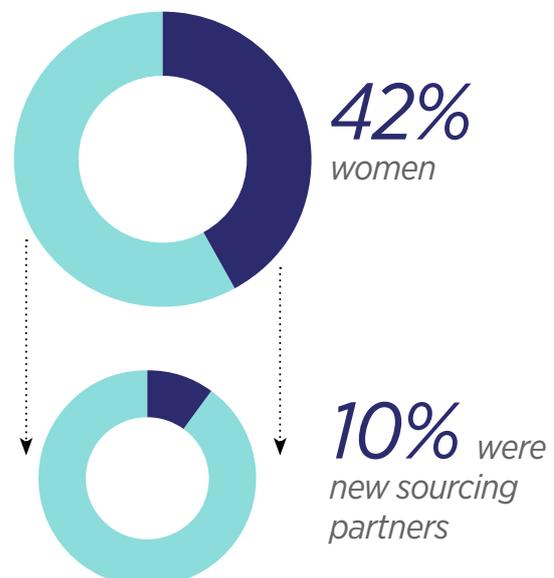
**Fostering meaningful participation and growth of women in supply chains:** Through CTA to AINFP-food processors, 16 food processors have implemented gender-responsive action plans to make their sourcing more inclusive and to better reach, benefit, and empower more women in their supply chains. AINFP supports food processors to adapt their aggregation models to source from SHFs, incorporate training to SHFs in their supply chain to increase their productivity, and by linking SHFs with seed producers or multiplication centers. These activities help to address accessibility barriers women SHFs have in accessing inputs and markets, as well as access to information and training. As of the end of 2023, AINFP-supported food processors had sourced from 174,171 SHFs

(42% women), of which 10% were new sourcing partners. [AA Nafaka Store Supply](#) in Tanzania—which produces products like fortified flour and sunflower oil—received CTA from AINFP on inclusive business planning. AA NAFKA sources 65% of their raw materials from women SHFs, up from 26% before AINFP's engagement. A recent [60 Decibels survey](#) with a sample of SHFs (40% women) who supply to AA Nafaka found that 95% have seen a significant or slight increase in their incomes since selling their rice and maize to AA Nafaka. One woman SHF noted: *"I use seeds of improved quality and cultivate on more land, all because of the increased profits I am making by selling to AA Nafaka."*



Justina Opit, Managing Director, Omega Foods in Zambia - PHOTO: BOBBY NEPTUNE

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## ► Moving Forward

In addition to the reflections and recommendations provided above, AINFP has identified key priorities for enhancing women's economic empowerment for future food processing and food systems programs to consider:

**Be intentional about gender-responsive activities from the beginning:** Implementers should conduct analyses to understand the unique needs of women entrepreneurs, compared to their male counterparts, and adapt the program activities accordingly. Additionally, implementers should not shy away from designing and implementing stand-alone activities that solely target female program participants. AINFP has found that this specialized attention through tailored activities is necessary to overcome the unique challenges faced by women and take advantage of opportunities, in addition to the regular program activities that reach all program participants.

**Scale-up training leadership programs for women food processors:** AINFP found that the WBLP was immensely successful in increasing women's confidence, leadership and management skills, and in addressing real-time challenges and goals within their businesses. Notably, an overwhelming 98% of participants expressed immense satisfaction with the workshops. When implementing such programs, implementers may consider incorporating certain sessions that participants have identified as highly relevant, including "She Shares," session—which encourage participants to share challenges they have faced as entrepreneurs—and challenge projects, which prompt participants to pick a challenge in their business and set a goal they aim to accomplish by the end of the leadership program.

**Foster increased connectivity amongst women entrepreneurs:** AINFP recommends that future projects develop coalitions and co-facilitate networking events to increase connectivity amongst women entrepreneurs in the food processing industry. Networking can support women to share their experiences in the food processing sector, connect with other women whom they can go to for advice, and connect with sector associations, incubation centers, and other business development service providers, for technical and management support, as well as in accessing productive resources, such as financial services.

**Counter gender norms and biases:** Gender norms and biases have a detrimental impact on women's belief in their abilities to succeed in the food processing sector, and they also influence how others perceive their potential for success. Projects may consider implementing activities that counter these norms and biases, such as awareness campaigns within communities. Additionally, projects may consider working with universities and technical and TVET programs to actively discuss and dispel norms and biases in the food processing sector, thereby producing a more informed workforce of women and men entrepreneurs. Furthermore, these institutions can modify their curriculum to better address gender-related barriers faced in the sector, such as enhancing managerial skills and boosting confidence among women entrepreneurs.



Yoghurt packing at Melkam Endale in Ethiopia - PHOTO: BOBBY NEPTUNE

**Develop strong program processes that prioritize gender inclusion with each private sector partner/client:** AINFP has observed that conducting gender responsive business diagnostics with each food processor at the onset of the partnership yields valuable insights into women's empowerment and inclusion challenges, opportunities, and priorities. This proactive approach eliminates the need to advocate for private sector partners' buy-in later on. By conducting the gender diagnostic and discussing areas for improvement with the client, a shared vision is established, one that they take ownership of.

**Promote gender-responsive policies and practices:** The results from the gender diagnostics highlight the importance of dignified and protected working conditions. Developing off-farm employment opportunities that are attractive to women requires an overhaul to these workplaces so that women feel safe at work and are protected against sexual harassment, and supported by equal pay, maternal leave policies, and career advancement opportunities. Future programming that aims to increase entrepreneurship in off-farm opportunities, particularly in food processing, should support businesses in evaluating and improving their workplace policies and culture. Additionally, it's important to acknowledge that the return on investment for these activities may not be immediately apparent to partners, who may prioritize activities that improve production efficiencies. Therefore, it is recommended that programs pay special attention to monitoring and evaluating these activities and potentially producing case studies to contribute to this knowledge base.

Peanuts packing and sealing at Delish & Nutri, in Kenya - PHOTO: BOBBY NEPTUNE



**For more information:**

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