

## The Economic Force of Food Safety – Women Leading the Way

### Food Safety and Food Security – Inextricably Linked

According to the FAO, it is estimated that [between 702 and 828 million people were affected by hunger in 2021](#) and 670 million people will still be undernourished by 2030 – 8 percent of the world population – the same percentage as in 2015 when the 2030 Agenda was originally launched. To bridge the gap between current realities [a food insecure world] and desired outcomes [a world free of hunger], food safety is critical. While food safety relates to the conditions and practices that ensure food quality to prevent contamination and food-borne illnesses (USDA)<sup>1</sup>, food security refers to having, at all times, both physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet dietary needs for active and healthy life<sup>2</sup>. In recognizing the direct linkage between food safety and food security, the role of women within this nexus is vital, particularly when we consider the fact that the [gender gap in food insecurity widened in 2021](#), with nearly 32 percent of women in the world being moderately or severely food insecure compared to about 28 percent of men.

### Women in Agrifood Systems



Mrs. Nafissatou Diop, Founder of Senfruit Technology Processing, presenting the “Ditax” de-pulper as well as the award she won from the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Photo Credit: Marieme Niang.

Creating sustainable and resilient local food systems requires an inclusive approach that considers the important economic and varied contribution that women and men play in traditional market systems and supply chains. [Agrifood systems are a major employer of women](#) – 66 percent of women’s employment in Sub-Saharan Africa compared to 60 percent of men, and in Southern Asia, 71 percent of women’s employment versus 47 percent of men. Despite the prevalence of women, their access to resources required in agrifood systems such as land, inputs, services, finance, training and digital technology continues to trail behind men’s.

In addition, social norms and constructed gender roles can further constrain women’s participation in agrifood systems due to limited mobility and autonomy over decision-making processes. Women are often spatially restricted which impacts their options for non-domestic work, market activities, as well as their access to and control over assets and income. Currently, women

comprise 41 percent of all workers in the off-farm segment of agrifood systems globally, and 60 percent of workers in the off-farm segment in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, women are involved in processing activities at higher rates than men, particularly [in West Africa where the processing sector is dominated by women](#) (unskilled and labor-intensive work). Another noteworthy observation is that very few women are involved in the more profitable activities of transporting, processing, or wholesale trading. Women account for only 35 percent of all wholesale workers and 15 percent of transport workers in agrifood systems (even fewer in low- and middle-income countries).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> USDA. 2011. “What Does Food Safety Mean?” Knowledge Article. [Link](#).

<sup>2</sup> FAO. 2008. “An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security.” [Link](#).

<sup>3</sup> FAO. 2023. *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome. [Link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Costa, V., Piedrahita, N., Mane, E., Davis, B., Slavchevska, V. & Gurbuzer, Y. L. (forthcoming). *Women’s employment in agrifood systems*. Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*, 2023. Rome, FAO.

Despite these challenges, Ms. Nafissatou Diop, an agrifood engineer and entrepreneur working at the Senegalese Food Technology Institute, and business owner of Senfruits Processing Technology, invented a “de-pulping” machine. Through this technological innovation, Nafissatou and Senfruit have implemented an efficient processing method while maintaining a high standard of product integrity and safety. For her invention, Nafissatou received a prize from the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and Senfruit now produces Detarium Senegalese, locally known as “ditax,” in industrial quantities.

In 2022, [FAO conducted a study](#) of food retailers in six countries which revealed that a large share of food retailers in Sub-Saharan Africa are women – varying between 57 percent in Kenya and Tanzania up to 75 percent in Senegal. In addition, the study revealed that women are involved in the less-profitable commodities such as fruits and vegetables, where men dominate in processed foods and beverages, as well as animal products – those with higher returns. Interestingly, women account for a larger share of fish retailers in five out of the six Sub-Saharan African countries in the study. Nonetheless, because women retailers tend to sell lower volumes of food products than male retailers, they make less profit. In five out of the seven countries in the study, men’s profits were more than twice as high as women’s profits.

## Addressing Gender Inequities

To address these inequities, [Feed the Future Business Drivers for Food Safety \(BD4FS\)](#), funded by USAID and implemented by [Food Enterprise Solutions \(FES\)](#), partners with growing food businesses (GFBs) to co-design and co-develop effective strategies to accelerate the adoption of food safety technologies and practices. BD4FS works alongside local food safety experts to provide context-specific technical assistance and trainings that prepare GFBs to implement Food Safety Prerequisite Programs (PRPs) including measures such as employee hygiene, pest control, and proper storage.

To date, 7,000 GFBs have participated in BD4FS activities, and BD4FS has led 202 food safety trainings. As a result, BD4FS has trained 7,508 individuals – 5,618 (75 percent) women and 1,951 (26 percent) youth. [Investing in women’s economic empowerment](#) paves the way towards gender equality, poverty eradication, inclusive economic growth and is critical to not only women, but society at large. In fact, over the past decade, [women’s participation and autonomy within agrifood systems](#) has had a positive impact on agricultural production, food security, diets, and child nutrition.<sup>5</sup> BD4FS recognizes this pivotal role:

- 82 percent of BD4FS GFBs are women-owned
- 48 percent of GFB employees are women
- 61 percent of women in GFBs have higher level education
  - 34 percent have secondary level education
- 12 percent of GFBs are owned by female youth

In our sample, inclusive of Senegal, Ethiopia, and Nepal, women play key power roles in food safety as owners/operators, managers, and technical staff within GFBs. Having high levels of education, training, and autonomy, women are driving forces in local food systems and have the capacity to transform, inspire, and pave the way for other businesses to improve their food safety management practices. To this end, BD4FS will continue to work with GFBs in Feed the Future countries to help promote a culture of food safety that is inclusive, locally led, and sustainable.

**Learn more about FES and BD4FS activities at <https://www.foodsolutions.global/> and follow us at:**



<sup>5</sup> FAO. 2023. *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5343en>



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