

# African Urban Food Systems through a Gender Lens

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**Attention to gender roles and relations is critical to understanding urban food systems, and how people experience and navigate those systems. Drawing on the findings of the Consuming Urban Poverty (CUP) project in three African secondary cities, this article makes the case for greater gender awareness in urban food governance.**

Urbanisation of African societies and economies is changing the ways food is distributed, traded, accessed and consumed. Urbanisation also changes social norms that are seen in household forms, gendered labour and employment patterns, and social relations of reciprocity and exchange – including those through which people secure access to food.

Adopting a combination of survey, interview and mapping-based methods, the CUP project examined the food systems of Kisumu in Kenya, Kitwe in Zambia, and Epworth in Zimbabwe. CUP findings show multiple ways in which gender shapes people's engagement in urban food systems. They also show how urban food system governance can act to undermine food security and reproduce gender and other forms of inequality.

## Female-headed households

One key finding was that sex of the household head is by no means a straightforward predictor of household food insecurity. Although in aggregate there was an association between female-headedness and household-level food insecurity, a few female-headed households were among the most food secure. These households had women in professional occupations or other formal employment.



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Some were multi-generational, with an older female relative taking care of domestic and care labour while a middle-generation woman worked outside the home.

Conversely, there were examples of nuclear households, i.e. with male and female adult members along with children, who were among the most hungry and destitute. Other female-headed households, such as those of widows with child or adult dependants, were extremely food insecure. Sex of the household head intersects with life-course events, household form and size, and employment status to shape household food strategies and food security. In some cases, it seems, female headedness may be an asset.

### Women “buy wisely”

In all three settings, across household types or socio-economic status, women still bear primary responsibility for family food procurement and preparation. Women and men pointed to the importance of women’s knowledge, experience and social networks in stretching tight household budgets and mitigating food poverty – describing women as knowing how to “buy wisely” or understanding “the secrets of the kitchen”.

Women are not only the primary purchasers of food, but also engage in non-market forms of food access and exchange. These include borrowing and lending food among neighbours, membership in women’s savings clubs, and maintaining relationships with relatives in rural and urban areas. Social relations are important in market-based food sourcing, too – notably the extension of credit by informal food vendors or proprietors of local retail outlets who are known to the purchaser. Although these practices are not exclusively female, women play important roles in sustaining the social infrastructure of urban food systems.

### Gendered geographies of food systems

CUP retail and household surveys identified a diversity of food retail outlets, across a spectrum from doorstep food stalls to commercial supermarket chains. Drawing on multiple retail forms was one strategy employed to access more diverse and less expensive food. Yet the poorest households were unable to take advantage of this variety. For some, the transport required was unaffordable. Having to budget day-to-day, and being unable to afford standard supermarket package sizes of food staples, made many households reliant on local and informal vendors. Beyond financial restrictions, women’s responsibility for child care and domestic labour limited the time they could allocate to accessing cheaper or more nutritious food sources.

Women are important actors as formal and informal vendors in these urban food systems. Added to financial and time poverty were regulatory and spatial constraints on such activity. Elite official visions perceive certain forms of informal food vending as detracting from the idealised modern city, and municipal governments sometimes place restrictions or prohibitions on what for many women – and men – are essential income-generating strategies.



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### Gender-aware urban food policy

CUP findings have a number of policy implications.

- The spatial location of food markets and other sources, along with transport systems, are key to urban food system functioning, with the potential to support or undermine household, community, and city-scale food security.
- Urban food production, processing, and selling provide livelihood and employment opportunities, but require enabling infrastructure and policies.
- Urban food system governance that fails to support diverse, formal and informal food retail effectively discriminates against women and the urban poor, and risks damaging the very means by which households and communities are sustained.

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#### Further reading

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