**Women’s Participation and Wellbeing in Weekly Food Markets: Gendered Insights from Dar es Salaam’s Urban Peripheries, Tanzania**

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**Abstract**

Weekly Food Markets (WFMs) are an increasingly important feature of urban food systems in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the underserved peripheries of rapidly growing cities. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, WFMs serve as critical access points for affordable and diverse foods. Despite their importance, the gendered dynamics within these markets remain underexplored. This study investigates women’s participation and well-being in WFMs, focusing on how socio-cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and structural barriers shape their engagement and economic outcomes. Using a mixed-methods approach—including a cross-sectional survey of 381 vendors and 506 buyers across 31 WFMs, complemented by focus group discussions and key informant interviews—the study applies the Social Relations Approach (SRA) to analyze gendered access to resources, decision-making power, and autonomy within market settings.Findings indicate that women's participation in WFMs is uneven: while gender-balanced in sourcing and selling, transport and leadership roles remain male-dominated due to physical demands, care responsibilities, and structural barriers. Although WFMs provide income and bargaining power gains—especially for single mothers and widows—these are undermined by poor infrastructure, financial exclusion, and unpaid care work. Supportive policy interventions are essential. Key recommendations include investing in WFM infrastructure, expanding financial inclusion, challenging gendered norms, promoting women’s leadership, and reducing unpaid care burdens. Addressing these barriers can transform WFMs into more equitable spaces, enhancing both urban food security and gender justice.

1. **Introduction**

Food markets play a pivotal role in ensuring urban households have access to affordable, diverse, fresh, and physically available nutritious foods. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), particularly in low-income urban settings, many residents rely more heavily on local markets and small retail shops than on supermarkets to meet their food needs (FAO, 2020; Davies et al., 2022). However, in urban peripheries, the availability of permanent food markets and informal retail outlets remains limited. This gap has contributed to the rise and evolution of Weekly Food Markets (WFMs) as an alternative mode of food provisioning. These periodic markets, held on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, typically consist of small-scale vendors selling directly to consumers in authorized public spaces. The vendors operate on a regular schedule—often once a week—and are permitted by local authorities, usually in exchange for a nominal fee (Hiebert et al., 2017). Despite their growing significance in the urban food system, WFMs remain largely understudied. While research on WFMs is gradually expanding, much of the focus has been on the range of products available, with limited attention to vendor characteristics—particularly from a gender perspective.

Existing literature on urban food vending underscores the prominent role of women in food markets. Female traders are known to dominate food vending activities across SSA cities (Davies et al., 2022; Giroux et al., 2021). However, these women often encounter systemic barriers such as restricted access to capital, limited control over market spaces, and inadequate infrastructure. In addition, socio-cultural constraints, including entrenched gender norms and community attitudes, further shape women’s participation and impact their economic opportunities and well-being outcomes (Kapinga et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2022).

While recent studies have begun to examine how social norms and gender roles mediate women’s productive and reproductive roles in food markets (de Kanter et al., 2024), little is known about how these dynamics play out in emerging typologies such as WFMs—especially in the urban peripheries. Most existing research on women’s engagement in food vending focuses on either permanent formal markets or the broader informal food economy (Cook et al., 2024; Peimani and Kamalipour, 2022). Yet WFMs occupy a unique position: although informal in nature, they are officially recognized and governed by municipal by-laws. Further, the spatial and temporal structure of WFMs, where vendors only trade once a week in a given location, requires vendors to maintain high levels of mobility across municipalities to sustain their livelihoods. This raises critical questions about whether women—due to mobility constraints, caregiving responsibilities, or structural inequalities—face particular disadvantages in these systems. Understanding these gendered dynamics is essential to informing policies that enhance women's participation, economic empowerment, and well-being in urban food systems.

This study therefore aims to: (i) explore the forms of women’s participation in WFMs and examine the socio-cultural and institutional factors that shape their engagement; (ii) assess the economic and well-being outcomes of women’s participation in WFMs, with a focus on income, economic security, and personal autonomy; (iii) and identify policy-relevant pathways for enhancing women’s participation in WFMs, emphasizing income stability, economic security, and autonomy. In doing so, the paper contributes to the growing body of research on gender and urban food markets by focusing on WFMs—an emerging yet underexplored market structure in urban peripheries. Unlike previous studies that emphasize women’s engagement in either permanent formal markets or the wider informal sector, this paper centres on WFMs as a distinctive, municipally regulated yet flexible market model. Through an examination of women’s participation, the socio-cultural and institutional factors shaping their engagement, and the resulting economic and well-being outcomes, the paper offers new insights into how market design and governance intersect with gender. Finally, the findings aim to inform more inclusive policy frameworks that support women's income security, autonomy, and broader empowerment within evolving food retail environments.

1. **Materials and Methods**
   1. ***Conceptual Framework***

We adopt the Social Relations Approach (SRA) to gender analysis, developed by Kabeer (1994) in collaboration with policymakers, scholars, and activists from a socialist feminist tradition. The SRA offers a comprehensive framework for exploring gendered inequalities in access to resources, division of responsibilities, and the distribution of power. This framework is particularly important as it is suited to contexts that aim to generate critical insights that can inform gender-transformative policies and promote women’s empowerment. It is built on five interlinked concepts: development as increased human well-being, social relations, institutional analysis, institutional gender policies, and the identification of immediate, underlying, and structural causes of inequality (Kabeer, 1994; March et al., 1999).

The SRA suits this study for three reasons. *First*, its focus on human well-being aligns with our aim to assess women’s participation in WFMs and related outcomes in Dar es Salaam’s peripheral areas, where market trading is a key livelihood strategy. *Second*, its emphasis on social relations guides the analysis of how gender roles shape men’s and women’s participation in semi-formal markets. *Third*, its institutional lens enables examination of how formal regulations, informal rules, and socio-cultural norms—often intertwined—affect women’s opportunities, constraints, and power.

For the purpose of this paper, four of these concepts—development as well-being, social relations, institutional analysis, and institutional gender policies—are applied to investigate women’s participation in WFMs in Dar es Salaam and how such participation relates to both economic and human well-being outcomes. The SRA's emphasis on the institutional and relational dimensions of gender makes it particularly useful for understanding the complex dynamics of informal market environments. Figure 1 illustrates the above conceptual framing, by showing how women’s involvement in WFMs fits into overlapping social, institutional, and policy settings. Social relationships, including norms and networks, work together with institutional structures and gender-based policies to influence participation in activities like vending and leadership. These interactions affect economic results, such as income, food security, and business profits, as well as human well-being, which includes personal freedom and agency. This model offers a clear way to understand the study’s findings and places women’s market participation in a larger social and institutional context.

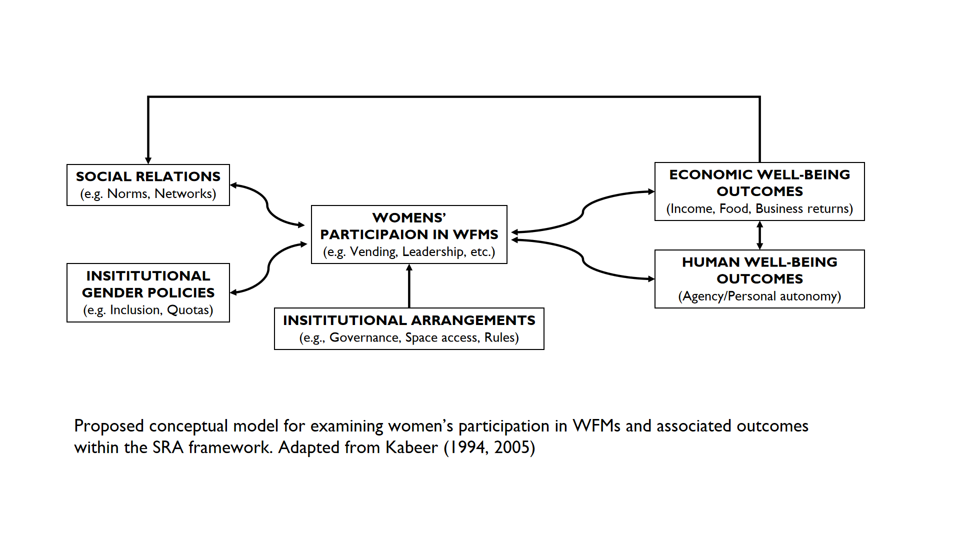
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Figure 1 show the conceptual framework adapted from Kabeer (1994, 2005).

* 1. Study area

We use the case of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's commercial capital and one of Africa's most rapidly urbanizing metropolises. The city spans 1,393 km² across five municipalities - Kinondoni, Ubungo, Kigamboni, Ilala, and Temeke - housing approximately 5.3 million residents (NBS, 2022). Dar es Salaam presents an ideal case study due to two interrelated factors: its explosive peri-urban growth characterized by informal settlements and inadequate infrastructure (Lupala, 2021), where 37% of the city's population now resides according to 2022 census data; and its representative nature as a prototype for urbanization patterns seen across fast-growing sub-Saharan African cities. These characteristics make the city particularly relevant for investigating informal food markets and their gendered dimensions.

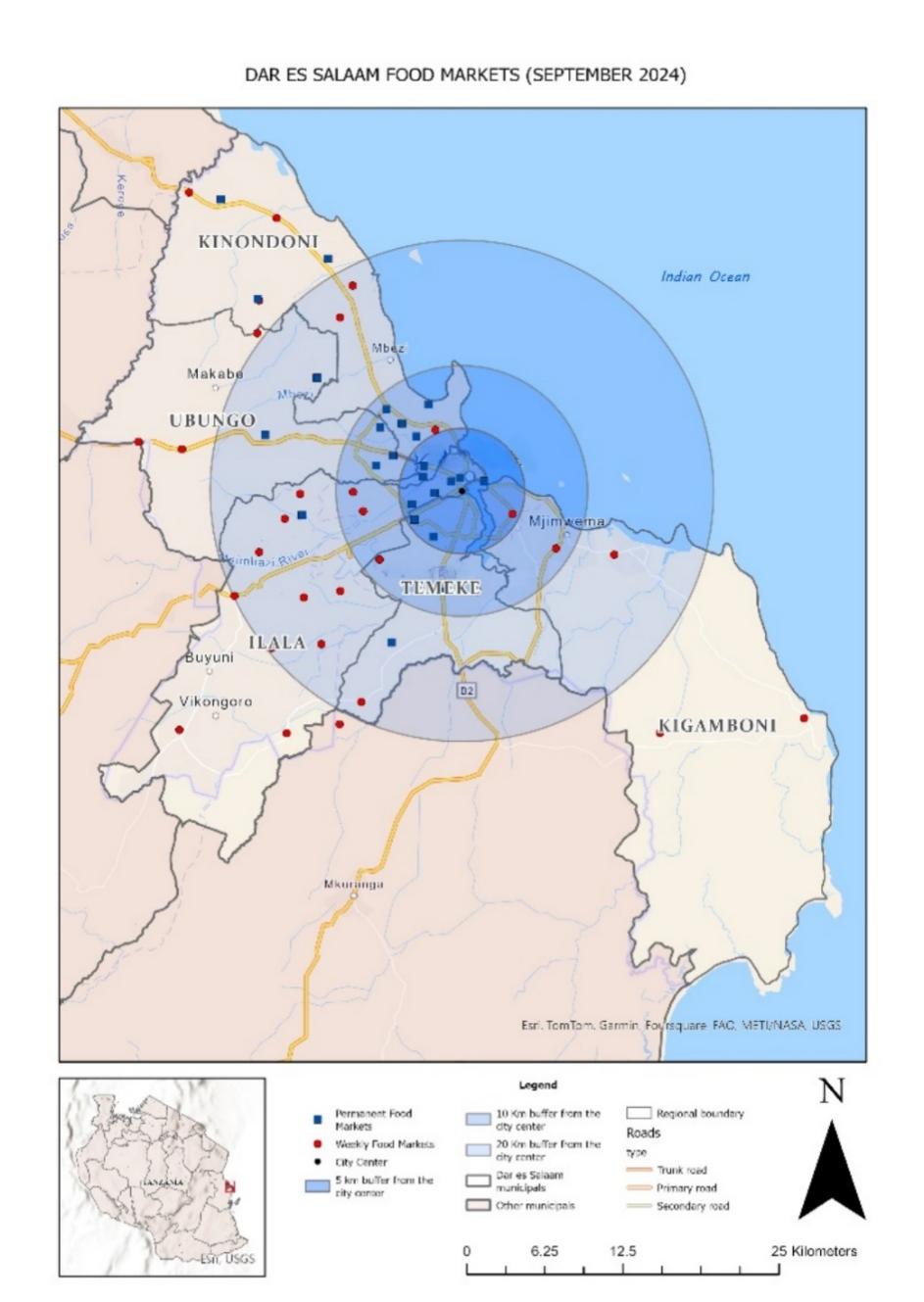


Figure 1: Study area (WFMs in five municipalities of Dar es Salaam).

As Dar es Salaam undergoes rapid urban expansion, accompanied by rising demand for accessible food retail infrastructure, city authorities have responded by permitting food traders to operate on a weekly basis in designated open spaces located near residential areas in peripheral wards. This policy shift has led to the emergence of approximately 31 WFMs across the city's five municipalities. These markets operate on specific days of the week, varying by municipality, and serve as critical nodes for food access and informal trade in the city’s urban peripheries.

* 1. Study design and data sources

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative approaches—Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The quantitative component provided measurable patterns of participation, and the extent of male and female involvement in selling in WFMs. The qualitative data offered contextual insights into gender dynamics, socio-cultural norms, institutional factors, and participation outcomes.

The study used a mixed sampling approach for the quantitative survey, combining probability and non-probability techniques. All 31 WFMs in Dar es Salaam’s five municipalities were purposively selected, and sample size was determined using recommendations from Memon et al. (2020), Green (1991), and Cochran (1977), given the informal nature of WFMs and the absence of a known sampling frame for vendors and buyers, while also considering time and budget constraints. In total, 381 vendors and 506 buyers were surveyed. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling identified diverse participants, resulting in five FGDs—one per municipality—and 15 KIIs with market leaders, local government officials, and other WFM stakeholders. FGDs included both male and female participants (Table 1). The research team followed a semi-structured guide (see Annex 1), covering themes such as participation, access to market spaces, decision-making, and well-being outcomes. KIIs were conducted with WFM leaders, municipal officers in urban planning, trade, and business departments, as well as relevant national-level officials. These interviews provided institutional insights into the governance and planning of WFMs, and the extent of gender inclusion in market processes.

Table 1. WFMs FGDs composition across the five municipalities

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Municipality** | **Name of WFM** | **Number of Participants** | **FGD Date** |
| 1 | Ilala | Tabata-Kimanga | 5 (3 male, 3 female) | March 12, 2025 |
| 2 | Kigamboni | Kigamboni-Tungi | 6 (3 male, 3 female) | March 13, 2025 |
| 3 | Kinondoni | Kunduchi | 7 (3 male, 4 female) | March 14, 2025 |
| 4 | Ubungo | Kibamba | 7 (3 male, 4 female) | March 19, 2025 |
| 5 | Temeke | Mgeninani | 8 (4 male, 4 female) | May 9, 2025 |

To ensure consistency, a single study team facilitated all FGDs, minimizing interviewer bias and maintaining uniformity in moderating techniques across groups. This approach enhances data quality and comparability, especially in studies with a limited number of focus groups (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020).

* 1. Analytical Techniques

This study used a descriptive analytical approach to explore women's participation in WFMs in Dar es Salaam, and examine the social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence their involvement, along with the economic and well-being outcomes. The analysis focused on the participants' own accounts to accurately capture their experiences in the market environment.

Transcripts from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were examined thematically. The research team focused at market roles, access to resources based on gender, decision-making processes, and structural barriers, among other aspects. Instead of using formal coding, the interpretation emphasized narrative depth to keep the context accurate and to preserve the voices of the participants. Data were organized according to the study’s goals, highlighting how gender norms, caregiving responsibilities, mobility issues, and market infrastructure affect women's participation and benefits. Direct quotes and detailed descriptions illustrated the strategies women use to face challenges, support their livelihoods, and improve their economic and social well-being.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed to look at vendor characteristics, the types of food sold, and gender-based patterns of engagement. Combining qualitative stories with quantitative findings deepened the understanding of participation patterns. It highlighted both practical realities and social influences on women’s economic power. This method helped create clear and useful conclusions for policy.

1. **Results** 
   1. Structure and Daily Operations of Weekly Food Markets (WFMs)

Results from our FGDs and survey show that the WFMs in Dar es Salaam are managed by vendors and partially regulated by the municipalities. They operate on a rotating schedule across the city’s five districts, which each location hosting the market once a week thereby creating a flexible system that is still overseen by the municipality.

Daily operations follow four main stages. In the morning, vendors gather goods from wholesale markets like Kariakoo, Ilala, Mabibo, and Temeke, as well as from small-scale urban farmers. These items are taken to the WFMs, set up for display, and actively sold starting around 10:00 am. Trading continues into the evening. Vegetable vendors often work until 11:00 pm. At night, any unsold goods are packed up for transport to the next day’s market. Vendor associations work together with municipal authorities to provide leadership and coordination.

Survey data show that vendors usually work in about four markets in different municipalities (Figure 2). Both men and women take part in four to five WFM activities, but women's involvement peaks at four markets. Overall, female vendors are more often engaged in multiple markets, which suggests they are more likely to diversify their activities compared to men. This pattern highlights the mobility and flexibility needed to support their livelihoods.

Figure 2. Number of WFMs that the Vendor participates

In terms of the share of food vendors, by gender across municipalities, female vendors constitute the majority across all municipalities, ranging from 51% in Ilala to 63% in Ubungo, while male vendors account for 37% to 49% (Figure 3). These indicate that food vending in Dar es Salaam’s WFMs is predominantly a female-dominated activity.

Figure 2 Percentage of vendors by gender across municipalities

* 1. Women’s’ motivations to participate in WFMs

Findings from the FGDs indicate that women’s participation in WFMs is often motivated by the necessity to meet social and family responsibilities. Many female vendors—particularly single mothers, widows, and married women carrying the main financial burden—view market work as a vital means of providing food, education, and other basic needs for their households. At Tabata-Kimanga market, one vendor explained that market work allows her to secure daily income despite starting each day with very little:

I’m thankful because I earn money to eat. If I had stayed at home, it would be different. Sometimes I leave home with just fare money, but when I get here, I make enough for food and tomorrow’s fare too.

Women also highlighted that WFMs offer relative stability and better income opportunities compared to other small-scale retail outlets, along with easier conditions of entry. In Kigamboni market, one vendor contrasted WFMs with kiosks and neighborhood shops, pointing out how regular customers often demand goods on credit, reducing profits:

…those who have opened kiosks or shops in the neighbourhoods, their customers are the same ones who live there every day. And those regular customers often like to take goods on credit. Once you start offering credit in these small businesses, it drags you down and reduces your profits unlike in the WFMs where you meet new customers weekly.

Market leaders similarly emphasized that WFMs are inclusive spaces, welcoming all types of traders due to low entry barriers and the absence of gender-based restrictions. This environment, combined with a steady flow of weekly buyers, makes them particularly attractive to women. At Mgeninani market, one vendor described how these conditions supported her gradual progress in business:

I’ve been in business for about 20 years. I began selling tomatoes, potatoes, onions, and okra... It’s not that I had a big starting capital; I began with little, slowly by slowly, and I thank God I’ve reached where I am.

Overall, these results show that WFMs provide women with a relatively secure and regulated space where small initial investments can grow into sustainable livelihoods. At the same time, their participation is still shaped by gender norms, such as expectations to return home early to meet domestic responsibilities.

* 1. Women’s Participation in WFMs activities

### Sourcing goods for sale at WFMs

Women’s participation in sourcing goods across WFMs is active and diverse, reflecting both individual initiative and engagement with permanent markets such as Kariakoo, Ilala, and Mabibo, as well as small-scale urban farms. Most women source directly to ensure quality, purchase manageable quantities, and maintain connections with urban farmers for better prices. At Mgeninani market, vendors highlighted women’s direct involvement and collaboration in transporting goods:

Here, women themselves go to the market to source the goods. When sourcing goods to bring here, they contribute and load onto motorbikes (Toyo), which transport the goods to the periodic weekly market.

Women sourcing from small-scale urban farms also face logistical challenges, such as long hours spent collecting and loading goods, coordinating multiple sourcing points, and balancing these activities with household responsibilities. Vendors across WFMs confirmed that sourcing is generally carried out individually at one’s own pace, and both men and women participate actively in the process.

### Women’s participation in transporting goods within WFMs

Our results show that women play a significant and complex role in transporting goods across WFMs. Their involvement mainly focuses on organizational and financial duties, rather than the physically demanding tasks of carrying or guarding goods. Women are often the ones who make sure that produce is packed, accounted for, and paid for before it is handed over to porters, trolley pushers, or transport units (*Vitengo*). This organizational role is crucial. It ensures that goods are properly labeled, directed to the right destinations, and prepared for movement between markets. As one vendor at Tabata-Kimanga market explained:

In the evening, after business is done, we pack our goods. Another person, like this gentleman and our leaders, organize the goods into sections. Once I’ve packed my load, I put it on a trolley, pay 500 shillings, and they deliver it to the storage area. There, the goods are collected, and a truck (Fuso) is hired to take them to another market scheduled for the next day—like Bunju or Tungi. Everyone knows where their goods are supposed to go.

This shows how the system is set up and collaborative, with women’s organizational efforts ensuring that trade can continue across different market locations.

However, the tasks that involve heavy lifting, guarding goods overnight, and managing transport units are mainly done by men. This division is often explained by physical strength and social expectations about women’s movement and behavior. Respondents noted that it is unusual for women to stay overnight at storage sites or supervise goods for long periods. This situation conflicts with household duties and community views on what is acceptable. As one male vendor stated:

Transport units (*Vitengo)* are male-owned or dominated because men have experience that many women lack. Managing 'Vitengo' involves tough duties like staying overnight to guard goods. Many women cannot handle that. It involves long nights and heavy responsibility. It’s the nature of the job. Women can’t sleep outside or be away all-night guarding goods. It’s physically demanding. … True, it may be tradition. But if a woman feels confident enough to manage these units, no one will stop her. Opportunities are open.

This demonstrates that while there are no official barriers, social expectations about women’s roles as caregivers and the dangers of them being out at night discourage them from taking on these roles. Overall, these accounts indicate that women are crucial to the transport systems in weekly food markets, yet their roles are defined by a gendered division of labor that separates “coordination and organization” from “physical and supervisory” tasks. Women support the system through packaging, payment, and management roles, while men handle jobs considered more visible or demanding, such as carrying heavy goods, supervising units, and maintaining security overnight. These divisions persist due to practical considerations and strong social norms that continue to influence what is seen as “women’s work” and “men’s work.”

### Women’s participation in selling goods at WFMs

While typical literature on food vending suggests it is a female-dominated field, our results show that within WFMs, participation is much more balanced between genders. However, this balance exists alongside ongoing gendered expectations. At the study sites, both men and women sell various items. The choices about what to sell often relate to capital, capability, and personal interest, rather than strict gender roles. Vendors repeatedly framed vending as an adaptive livelihood: traders switch goods according to demand and where “the money is,” and many reported that ability and the size of start-up capital determine entry and product choice. Participants in our FGDs also noted a conflict between women who saw men's entry in food vending as an “encroachment” of traditionally female spaces and those who argue on equal treatment based on individual ability. However, respondents view these differences as practical patterns rooted in history, not as legal barriers. One female vendor from Tabata-Kimanga market stated:

Here, the work doesn’t differentiate between men and women. It depends on your own strength. Some may start with fruits and then switch to vegetables, or vice versa. It’s all about where the money is.

Our results also reveal that historical trends and cultural associations continue to influence market participation. Several respondents noted that men were the first to engage in hawking and retail in these areas, while women joined later, often focusing on food items that relate to household knowledge and cooking. These historical pathways, along with community norms concerning respectability, mobility, and the perceived “toughness” of certain trades, help explain why some products remain symbolically gendered even where men and women trade side-by-side. In their descriptions, vendors detailed how practical constraints—including the capital to hire transport or helpers, the physical demands of evening loading, and domestic responsibilities—interact with social expectations to channel actors into different roles. Therefore, while many participants assert that “business is business,” their narratives at the same time demonstrate how gendered histories, perceptions of suitability, and pragmatic considerations shape market roles. As one elder vendor at Mgeninani described while recounting the history and its consequences:

When these markets started, those selling vegetables and second-hand clothes were men. They began with hawking and later transitioned to weekly markets. They started first, and women came in later. But when women found selling second-hand clothing (mitumba) tough and full of challenges, some switched from clothes to food items. They found it more familiar since they’re used to kitchen-related items. Now, any woman coming in prefers to focus on the food business.

### Women’s participation in leadership at WFMs

Our results indicate that leadership within WFMs remains largely male-dominated, with women’s presence in these spaces limited, uneven, and often confined to committees or supportive roles rather than central positions of authority. The persistence of male-dominated systems (*mfumo dume)* continues to influence perceptions of leadership as inherently a male domain, reinforced by broader socio-cultural norms that view men as “natural” leaders both in the household and community. Many women expressed mixed feelings about leadership in these markets. They noted the time pressures from their dual roles in the workplace and at home as factors that limit their ability to take part in leadership activities. Insights from the FGDs show that even when women are represented, they often face procedural barriers such as membership requirements or rules about years of service that disproportionately exclude them, since many women enter trading later and without formal registration. The combination of these structural and cultural barriers often leaves women unaware of election processes or dates. In some cases, they are completely left out of important decision-making. As one woman vendor in Kigamboni-Tungi market opined:

When you talk of leadership—you know, I’m already a leader in my home. But here, in formal leadership, even if I wanted to be, you know, since the time of Adam and Eve, women have been seen as helpers. They say a woman cannot lead us. But thankfully, now we have a woman president and even a woman speaker of parliament. However, truthfully, during elections even here at the market, I haven’t seen them (men) include women like us. Also, another thing is that sometimes we women may not even vote for another woman—we tend to put ourselves down.

At the same time, our results show different experiences that indicate a slow opening of leadership spaces, though in a limited way. In some markets, men insisted that women are neither formally excluded nor discriminated against, noting that women serve as chairpersons, secretaries, and committee members. Yet even in these cases, women's representation remains low and often relies on support from male colleagues. This situation shows that gender expectations are still strong and that women may be hesitant to pursue leadership positions. Many vendors—both men and women—attributed women’s absence from leadership to being “too busy,” underscoring how the intersecting demands of domestic labor and trading duties limit their time and energy for public office. Yet even in these cases, women's representation remains low and often relies on support from male colleagues. This situation shows that gender expectations are still strong and that women may be hesitant to pursue leadership positions. A male vendor at Tabata-Kimanga market captured this duality, acknowledging the presence of women leaders while also hinting at their limitations:

In leadership here, women are actively involved. Elections are held and women are not discriminated against. We have women chairpersons and secretaries. If a man misbehaves, a woman leader can direct and correct him. Currently we have three women leaders and six men. So it’s not exactly 50/50… like I said before, women tend to avoid hardship. The few who are leaders were encouraged to step forward.

### Overall socio-cultural and institutional factors shaping women’s engagement in WFMs

Our results show that women's involvement in WFM) is influenced by a mix of social expectations, household duties, and changing gender roles. Marital status plays a significant role in shaping women’s ability to participate in market activities. Unmarried women usually have more freedom, allowing them to manage their time and earnings without having to consider household chores. Married women often have to discuss their plans with their spouses and family members to maintain their market work while managing long hours and domestic duties. Vendors shared that delays in returning home or late-night market closures can lead to tension, making it necessary to negotiate and build trust within the household. One married female vendor from Kunduchi market explained:

I live in Tegeta—from Nyuki WFM to home, I get there by 9 PM. Then my husband wonders, ‘Why are you arriving at this hour?’ One day he came to the auction and saw how long it takes to wrap up, and how we walked slowly to Tegeta. He got tired and never asked again. For me, that was a challenge. Now I close by 10 or 11 PM, by midnight I’m home. But I balance—within the week, I make time to clean—it’s just a routine.

This narrative illustrates that married women must manage both economic and relational responsibilities, while unmarried women may be relatively unconstrained, highlighting the differentiated impact of marital status on participation.

Further, childcare and family responsibilities significantly influence women’s involvement in the market, especially for those with young children. Vendors shared practical strategies like bringing children to the market, placing them in shaded areas, or carrying them on their backs while they work. Single mothers mentioned feeling especially vulnerable since being absent from the market can reduce household income, allowing little room for mistakes. Women also talked about negotiating with their spouses regarding market hours and tasks, indicating that their participation relies on support from home. A female vendor from Tabata-Kimanga market summarized this challenge:

If I don’t have a helper at home, I can’t come to the market—I have to stay with the children, especially when I have a young child. For example, I currently have a one-year-old, and on those days, I don’t come at all or I have to bring my child here to the market, not often—only when it’s really necessary.

This reveals that childcare responsibilities are not merely logistical obstacles but intersect with broader socio-cultural norms that assign women primary responsibility for domestic care, constraining their mobility and active engagement in economic activities.

Our results further show that gender norms are gradually shifting. Encouragingly, men increasingly participate in tasks traditionally viewed as women’s work, such as cooking, laundry, and childcare, while women engage in economic activities historically dominated by men. However, persistent conservative views remain, particularly among younger men, who see domestic tasks as voluntary or acts of love rather than obligations. This creates a nuanced environment in which women exercise agency where norms are flexible while remaining constrained by entrenched expectations. An elderly male vendor from Mgeninani reflected:

Nowadays customs have loosened… the man washes his wife’s clothes, washes the child’s clothes… I enter the kitchen to cook, because when I cook, it doesn’t mean my manhood will leave, I’m helping my wife.

This demonstrates the ongoing negotiation of gendered responsibilities within households and markets, highlighting adaptive strategies women employ to sustain engagement in WFMs despite socio-cultural constraints.

* 1. Economic and overall wellbeing outcomes of women’s participation in WFMs

Outcomes of WFMs participation on women’s income

Our results show that women’s participation in WFMs has caused significant improvements in both immediate income and long-term financial ability. Women vendors pointed out that their earnings help them cover daily household expenses like food, transportation, and their children’s education. Additionally, the weekly and rotational market system introduces them to new buyers and builds customer loyalty, which leads to more stable sales. While some women begin with minimal capital, they often gradually expand their businesses, reflecting the potential for incremental growth. Women vendors noted that income is not solely for personal use; it supports household contributions, alleviates dependence on spouses, and allows them to participate in financial decision-making at home. A female vendor at Mgeninani captured this:

I’ve been in business for about 20 years… It’s not that I had a big starting capital; I began with little, slowly by slowly, and I thank God I’ve reached where I am.

Vendors pointed out benefits beyond earnings. They mentioned reduced exposure to credit risks when compared with permanent markets, the ability to buy in bulk, and the flexibility to diversify sales depending on market demand. Even male vendors recognized that women’s income improves household well-being. This shows social acknowledgment of women’s economic contributions. These insights highlight how WFMs function as active spaces for income generation, financial growth, and gradual empowerment.

Economic security outcomes of women participation in WFMs

Results show that women’s participation in WFMs significantly contributes to economic security. It helps protect against financial instability and allows women to invest in long-term assets like housing, land, and their children's education. Vendors consistently reported that market income supports daily needs and long-term plans, as this income helps them cope with changes in household resources or partner earnings. A female widow at Kigamboni reflected:

I thank God I’ve done business for a very long time. Given my age, I’ve been in business for years. I started with drying sardines in the sun, then selling vegetables in a basin, and I sold at Ilala for nine years. I once did business here in the market and earned up to one million shillings in a month.

Insights from the FDGs further suggest that the steady accumulation of capital not only improves financial independence but also gives women resilience against unexpected household challenges. Single mothers and widows particularly benefit, as they use their earnings to support themselves and their children. Further, women vendors navigate socio-cultural and institutional restrictions, such as childcare responsibilities, household negotiations, and gender-based expectations around financial roles as they leverage WFMs to gain economic stability. These observations show that WFMs provide both immediate security and long-term financial control, helping women strengthen their independence and resilience in households and communities.

Personal autonomy outcomes of women participation in WFMs

Results show that participation in WFMs has contributed to women’s autonomy and agency, giving them greater control over household decisions and personal priorities. Income generated through market activities has allowed women to independently manage food, education, and other household expenditures, while also enabling cooperative financial arrangements with spouses. Married women described negotiating responsibilities, jointly planning household expenses, and ensuring that market income complements rather than competes with partner contributions. Single women and widows highlighted increased freedom to allocate resources according to their priorities without requiring approval. A female vendor at Kibamba market explained:

"I thank God that I now have big capital. I order onions, tomatoes, carrots—anything I want, I order because I have the money in my pocket. I eat good food at home, and I can change meals whenever I want. I thank God for that.

Beyond resource control, participation in WFMs is seen to strengthen women’s confidence in making decisions, managing business risks, and negotiating social spaces traditionally dominated by men. Insights from other vendors indicate that autonomy extends into household negotiation, child welfare, and participation in communal decision-making, reflecting the broader empowerment that market involvement affords.

Overall wellbeing outcomes of women participation in WFMs

Participation in WFMs positively impacts women’s overall wellbeing, encompassing economic, social, and psychological dimensions. Women vendors reported acquiring housing, land, and savings, supporting both immediate household needs and long-term family security. A female widow at Kigamboni articulated this vividly:

The benefits I’ve gained from this market include buying a plot of land and building two rooms, which I expanded to five. I’ve even built another house worth 25 million TZS. I also have some money in the bank which I want to use to open another business. This business has profits, but it also has challenges. I’ve also managed to educate and raise my children well.

In addition, social networks formed through WFMs create mutual support systems, enabling vendors to cope with illness, bereavement, or temporary absence while fostering community solidarity. Participation also helps youth employment and community development. Markets act as economic spaces that keep young people from getting involved in risky or unlawful activities. Women's stories show that WFMs provide not just financial stability but also dignity, resilience, and stronger relationships within households and communities. This highlights the many ways these markets support women's overall wellbeing.

* 1. Challenges faced by women traders in WFMs

### Transportation and market access challenges

Our results show that transportation of goods within the WFMs operations is one of the biggest challenges for women in WFMs. It affects costs, timing, and the quality of deliveries. Women reported spending too much of their income on transport, only to face unreliable services that damaged their goods or held up deliveries. Seasonal changes make things worse: during the rainy season, roads become poor, and goods often spoil before reaching the markets. In the dry season, transport is more reliable, but prices stay high because of fuel costs. Some women mentioned that careless handling of perishables, like tomatoes and leafy vegetables, often led to immediate losses. In addition, they highlighted the disrespectful treatment they receive from transporters. When they complain about damages, they are often met with harsh responses, worsening the gender power imbalance. As one female food vendor in Kigamboni market notes:

If you have tomatoes and they sit for too long, they spoil. Or in the vehicle, the load is thrown carelessly—you’re brought squashed tomatoes. And when you complain to the transporters, they speak to you harshly and you’re not compensated.

These problems show how poor transport services not only cut into women's earnings but also subject them to indignities in their economic interactions.

### Environmental and sanitation challenges

Sanitation and environmental management were often mentioned as obstacles that undermine both the safety and dignity of women’s trading spaces. WFMs were reported to lack functioning toilets and running water, forcing women to use unsafe or unhygienic options, which increases the risk of illness. Traders explained that they have asked the government several times to improve these facilities, but there has been little response. Besides sanitation issues, irregular waste collection means garbage often piles up for weeks, creating an unpleasant environment that drives away customers and threatens traders’ health. In addition, during heavy rains, flooding disrupts some markets, making it impossible to trade or store goods safely. Illustratively, a female vendor in Kigamboni market noted:

We’ve been requesting the government to build toilets in these areas—even temporary ones. Currently, there are no toilets, leading to increased environmental pollution.

These environmental challenges add to women's burdens since they are expected to maintain cleanliness at home and work, leading to more stress in poorly managed and unsafe spaces.

### Market space and infrastructure instability

Insecurity around trading spaces is also a notable concern for women. Respondents explained that without legal protection, they can be evicted on short notice, creating uncertainty in their livelihoods. The constant threat of displacement discourages them from investing in their businesses or developing stable customer bases. Some women shared experiences of being moved suddenly from one site to another without clear reasons, reflecting how municipal authorities do not fully recognize their economic contributions. At Kibamba market, a female vendor pointed out:

We don’t have a permanent space where we can settle and work consistently. At any moment, we can be asked to leave. There’s no guarantee that when we wake up in the morning, we will find our spot available.

This uncertainty affects women disproportionately, as they already juggle domestic responsibilities and cannot easily relocate or rebuild their business networks. The instability of their spaces also makes it difficult to plan for the future, reducing their confidence in the systems meant to support urban markets.

### Social protection and financial access challenges

Another important issue arising from results of this study is the lack of formal social protection for women in WFMs. Their work is informal, leaving them without health insurance, pension plans, or other safety nets. This makes them highly vulnerable during crises. Many women described how they could not afford medical care or household expenses when they got sick, as their businesses rely entirely on their daily presence. In addition, women face barriers at financial institutions, which view them as risky clients due to their mobility given the nature of the markets they are involved in, low capital, and lack of collateral. Traders highlighted how this makes it nearly impossible to access credit, invest in equipment, or grow their operations. A female vendor at Kunduchi shared that:

We aren’t formal workers—we don’t have NSSF. If you fall ill, you’re just stuck—and that’s a real challenge too.

This dual exclusion—from both social protection systems and formal financial services—keeps women’s businesses small, insecure, and perpetually vulnerable to shocks.

### Marital, family, and gender-based challenges

Results show that women's participation in WFMs is further limited by societal expectations that tie them to domestic roles. Many respondents explained that without help at home, they cannot attend the market because childcare and household duties fall entirely on them. This expectation restricts their ability to work consistent hours or grow their businesses. Beyond household responsibilities, women reported facing gender discrimination and harassment in the markets. Some mentioned that male traders see them as less serious or capable, while older women in particular feel overlooked by market leaders who prioritize younger vendors. One female vendor at Tabata-Kimanga explained:

If I don’t have a helper at home, I can’t come to the market—I have to stay home with the children, especially when I have a young child.

These dynamics show how gender norms and age issues limit women’s mobility, voice, and opportunities in WFMs.

### Safety and market environment related challenges

Our results show that most WFMs are located along busy roadsides, which creates persistent safety concerns for vendors. Women traders noted that they often work in hazardous conditions, exposed to the risk of traffic accidents and the stress of constantly being alert to danger. While some try to position their stalls in relatively safer spots, they acknowledged that risks are difficult to avoid. In addition to safety, women highlighted the negative perceptions surrounding WFMs, noting that customers often associate goods sold in semi-formal spaces—such as roadside open areas with rudimentary stalls or produce displayed directly on the ground—as inferior to those offered in permanent markets. This stigma forces many to reduce their prices, despite facing the same or higher input costs as formal traders, which reduces their earnings. At Tabata Kimanga, a male vendor explainedAt Tabata Kimanga, to mitigate risks, a male vendor explained:

That’s why we arranged our stalls on the upper side of the road (after the roadside open drainage channel). So even if a car loses control, it’s never reached this far. People can still jump out of the way easily.

Such arrangements help reduce immediate risks, but overall vendors still navigate unsafe environments and limited customer trust in the quality of their goods.

1. **Discussion**

This study examined women’s involvement in WFMs. It focused on their motivations for entering these spaces, the ways they engage in various market activities, and the social and institutional factors that influence their daily practices. The findings revealed three key areas: the different ways women participate in WFMs and the cultural and institutional factors that affect their involvement; the economic and well-being results of their engagement, especially regarding income generation, financial security, and personal independence; and how women negotiate challenges tied to gender norms and social views while seeking income opportunities. In this section, these aspects are discussed within the broader debates on gender, markets, and livelihoods in urban food systems.

4.1 Women’s Motivations to Participate in WFMs

Our FGDs showed that women participate in Weekly Food Markets (WFMs) mainly to fulfill household and family responsibilities. This aligns with UN Women (2021), highlighting that women's involvement in the informal sector comes from limited chances in the formal economy. Single mothers, widows, and married women who bear the financial burden depend on market work for a daily income to pay for food, education, and basic needs. Similar observations in Ethiopia (Engidaw et al., 2024; Simachew et al., 2024) and Zimbabwe (Takaza & Chitereka, 2022) point to poverty, unemployment, and economic need as major factors. However, vending also serves as a practical livelihood option that helps women build resilience and diversify over time.

Beyond necessity, WFMs provide predictable income, with weekly customers reducing reliance on credit. This aspect deserves more attention in the literature, but evidence from Benassai-Dalmau et al. (2025, preprint) indicates that better market access improves vendor outcomes. Low entry barriers and little starting capital further promote participation, consistent with findings from Ghana (Engidaw et al., 2023). However, our findings suggest that WFMs are seen as both economically helpful and socially limiting. While they offer women accessible spaces to earn daily income and grow small businesses, deep-rooted gender norms and caregiving duties restrict how much women can take full advantage of these opportunities. This duality reflects broader gender dynamics in informal economies, where economic decisions are made alongside ongoing domestic expectations. As Mundy et al. (2023) demonstrate in Tanzania's value chains, caregiving roles influence how women negotiate their economic positions, reinforcing similar restrictions within WFMs. Overall, these findings emphasize the need to improve infrastructure, and municipal support, while also increasing access to microfinance and small capital schemes to shift women's participation from necessity-driven to opportunity-driven engagement.

4.2 Women’s Participation in WFMs

Women’s participation in WFMs is varied by activity and influenced by ongoing gender constraints and opportunities. In sourcing, they obtain goods from permanent markets and urban farmers to ensure quality and affordability. They often work alone, but sometimes they collaborate in ways that lower costs and risks. Studies show a strong presence of women in food vending across sub-Saharan African cities (Davies et al., 2022; Giroux et al., 2021) and their increasing involvement in the informal markets of developing economies (Ograh et al., 2025). Our findings suggest that WFMs offer women accessible spaces to control the quality of goods and to participate in both individual and group sourcing. However, logistical challenges and household responsibilities limit their level of participation. This highlights how women’s economic agency in informal markets is often balanced against domestic duties, reflecting the gender dynamics in urban food trade.

In the transport of goods to and between WFMs, women’s role is comparatively low, as both physical demands and financial constraints limit their direct involvement. The handling of heavy loads and transfer of goods from one market to another is a male-dominated activity, reflecting wider gender norms. Literature documents that women's mobility is limited by domestic responsibilities (Me-Nsope & Larkins, 2016), unequal access to transport resources (Masamha et al., 2018), and and institutional structures that put men at an advantage (Pyburn et al., 2023). These labor divisions go beyond physical strength and reinforce cultural expectations about women’s domestic roles. Participation is reshaped into less visible but crucial organizational tasks that support trade without challenging existing norms. Addressing these inequalities requires interventions that extend beyond technical training and confront the cultural barriers limiting women’s roles in market logistics.

Our findings show that selling in WFMs is largely gender-neutral. Individual capital and product choice matter more than gender. Historically, food vending has been linked to women (Levin et al., 1999), and they remain prominent in vegetables, fruits, beans, and fish (Davies et al., 2022), though men also play an active role. Women’s participation is still limited by domestic duties (de Kanter et al., 2024), yet they continue to dominate traditional markets (Cook et al., 2024). These findings suggest that even though vending has been culturally seen as women’s work, actual participation is more complex, with both men and women involved in various product lines. Women’s participation in selling is driven more by capacity, capital, and business interests, though social and cultural expectations still affect their engagement. For example, women might avoid physically demanding jobs like evening loading or focus on goods tied to “kitchen work,” while men often take on high-risk or physically intense tasks. These patterns show that while WFMs offer opportunities for economic independence, structural and cultural norms still influence participation. This highlights the need for policies and actions that acknowledge women’s independence, lower barriers to fair access to high-revenue or high-risk product areas, and challenge ongoing stereotypes about “men’s work” versus “women’s work” in market economies.

Results have shown that despite the large number of women traders, leadership positions are still mostly held by men. Structural barriers, limited time, and self-image limit women’s participation in decision-making roles. Davies et al., 2022, for example, in a study using the Zambian context, shows that women seldom hold executive positions, even though they make up the majority of sellers. Similar patterns appear in cooperatives in low- and middle-income countries, where traditional gender roles and lower education levels restrict leadership chances (Pyburn et al., 2023). These findings show that women's limited involvement in WFM leadership results from overlapping structural, procedural, and social barriers. Leadership remains male-dominated, shaped by norms that see authority and decision-making as male tasks, further reinforced by expectations related to women’s domestic responsibilities. Procedural issues, like membership rules and minimum required experience, also limit women’s access. Additionally, views on readiness and the focus on trading and household tasks over leadership roles add to these challenges. These factors underline the importance of tackling both social norms and structural barriers, highlighting the need for mentorship, skill-building, and procedural changes to create gender-inclusive leadership.

## 4.3 Socio-Cultural and Institutional Factors Shaping Women’s Engagement

Overall, results show that women’s participation in WFM activities is strongly influenced by their marital status and caregiving responsibilities. Unmarried women report greater flexibility. In contrast, married women must negotiate household support and trust with their spouses to maintain their engagement. However, joint decision-making is seen to help ensure continued participation. This is consistent with Azcona et al. (2019), who show that unmarried women have higher labor force participation, and Quisumbing et al. (2023), who emphasize the trade-offs between market work and caregiving. Childbearing and childcare, especially for young children, significantly limit women’s market activity (FAO, 2023). Some women take their children to markets to balance these demands, while others depend on household helpers. As such, most women within the food retail space are compelled to juggle the needs for income generation and caregiving (AGRA, 2020). These findings confirm that unpaid care work reduces the intensity and consistency of women’s market participation, and highlight the need for policies that transform gender roles by easing care burdens through childcare options, training, and awareness initiatives.

Changing gender norms are also affecting participation patterns. Focus group discussions reveal a gradual shift in traditional roles, with men increasingly taking on tasks once reserved for women, and vice versa, though tensions still exist. Aberman et al. (2022) note that women’s preference for informal food-based work reflects lasting gender norms. However, rapid urbanization has increased women’s involvement in informal food markets (AGRA, 2020; Levin et al., 1999). These dynamics emphasize the need for policies that break down structural barriers and expand training to support women’s ongoing participation in urban food markets.

## 4.4 Economic and Overall Wellbeing Outcomes of Women’s Participation

The findings show that WFMs give women a steady income and chances to build capital, in turn, strengthening household food security, education, and healthcare. These results support earlier studies that traditional markets make significant economic and social contributions (Cook et al., 2024) and that street food vending serves as a critical income source for poor urban women (Mahopo et al., 2022). Our study, aligning with Atoo et al. (2011), reveals that earnings from these markets can sometimes significantly surpass minimum wages. This primarily benefits single mothers and widows who invest their earnings in long-term household needs. While these results confirm that WFMs are essential for inclusive growth, they also highlight ongoing challenges such as limited access to credit, insecure trading spaces, and insufficient financial training. Improving infrastructure and targeted support could reduce transaction costs and boost profitability.

Aside from economic security, WFMs help women gain independence and improve their well-being. The income provides greater bargaining power, fosters joint decision-making, and supports independence for single women and widows. While Cook et al. (2024) view markets as places for upward mobility for the urban poor, our findings reveal overlooked autonomy outcomes for single women, indicating a need for further research. Participation in WFMs also helps in accumulating assets, improving housing, and building social connections. This is in line with Addo et al. (2024), who documented the social, economic, and nutritional benefits of women's roles in food systems. However, strong socio-cultural norms and limited resource access still hinder women's full participation, as noted by Xheneti (2019) and Magesa et al. (2017). Overall, these dynamics show that WFMs serve as both income sources and empowerment platforms. Their rotational and trust-based structure fosters stable customer relationships, gradual growth, and collective resilience.

4.5 Structural and Social Constraints to Women’s engagement in WFMs

Insights from our findings show that women’s participation in WFMs is constrained by a range of structural and social barriers that affect both economic gains and reinforce gender inequalities. These include environmental conditions, infrastructure, social protection issues, and household dynamics.

Environmental and sanitation conditions are ongoing challenges. In all studied markets, vendors voiced their frustration with poor cleanliness and inadequate municipal services, impacting both health and business operations. Similar conditions exist throughout SSA, where markets frequently lack clean water, sanitary facilities, and waste management, putting traders at risk of health issues (Cook et al., 2024; Davies et al., 2022; Chilanga & Riley, 2022). These environmental problems often overlap with the insecurity of trading spaces. Roadside locations not only put vendors at risk but also limit their chances for stable businesses and long-term planning. This underscores the need for municipalities to include WFMs in urban planning and provide safe, accessible, and well-equipped spaces.

In addition to infrastructure, the lack of social protection and financial access further weakens women’s resilience. Without formal recognition, traders cannot receive basic protections and are vulnerable to shocks. Challenges in accessing credit add to these vulnerabilities (Addo et al., 2024; Peprah et al., 2019). Inclusive protection schemes, simpler administrative processes, and accessible financial services are therefore essential for women's ongoing participation. Further, market engagement is influenced by household dynamics. Domestic responsibilities and expectations for women to be primary caregivers limit their flexibility and time for trading, especially regarding childcare. As Quisumbing et al. (2023) point out, women frequently face trade-offs between household responsibilities and market activities. These underscores the need for measures that transform gender roles by redistributing care work and challenging restrictive social norms.

1. **Conclusions**

This paper set out to examine women’s participation in WFMs and understand the socio-cultural and institutional factors that shape their engagement as well as the economic and well-being outcomes of such participation.

The study found that participation varied across different functions of WFMs. Sourcing and selling were relatively balanced in terms of gender, with engagement in these areas being driven more by factors like capital, product choice, and business capacity than on gender. However, transport logistics and leadership roles in WFMs remain mostly male-dominated due to physical demands, mobility issues, and time constraints related to caregiving, along with financial barriers, procedural rules, and established norms. Further, findings showed that participation in WFMs contributes to increases in income, capital growth, and improved household bargaining power, especially for single mothers and widows. However, these benefits were affected by unpaid care duties, poor environmental conditions, inadequate sanitation, unsafe roadside trading areas, weak municipal services, limited credit access, and a lack of social safety nets. However, leadership roles in these markets are still male-dominated, suggesting that the spatial and time demands on women in markets can worsen existing inequalities, even though markets offer easier entry points for trade.

The findings suggest several policy areas for improvement. First, it’s important to improve infrastructure and municipal support. Poor sanitation, insecure locations, and inadequate services adversely affect productivity and well-being. Local authorities should invest in clean water, waste management, and safe trading spaces, while preserving the periodic nature of these markets. They should also include WFMs in urban development plans to improve safety and sustainability. Second, increasing financial inclusion is crucial, as many women participate out of necessity. Offering inclusive microfinance, small capital programs, and financial literacy courses could shift focus from survival to opportunity. Third, breaking down cultural and structural barriers is vital to giving access to high-revenue and physically demanding product areas. Policies should address stereotypes about “men’s work” and “women’s work” while supporting training and initiatives that promote women’s independence and economic roles. Fourth, fostering gender-inclusive leadership is essential. Despite being present in numbers, women are still underrepresented due to social norms, procedural rules, and views of unreadiness. Municipal governments and associations should adopt gender-equitable governance, simplify entry requirements, and support mentorship and skills development. Finally, reducing the unpaid care work burden, such as through promoting shared domestic responsibility, could improve women’s market involvement.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of strengthening women’s income security and wellbeing by making WFMs more inclusive spaces of empowerment, thereby contributing to fairer and more resilient urban food systems.

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