

Improving the position of women in the shea sector

Inception report

*Gender assessment on root causes and working conditions for
CBI*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The shea sector holds strong potential for rural economic development in Benin. It offers income-generating opportunities for women at scale, relies on locally available natural resources, and has a growing global demand for both raw butter and end products. For many rural households, especially in northern Benin, shea is not just a product but a seasonal buffer and an entry point into trade. Yet the sector remains underdeveloped and under-leveraged, particularly when it comes to supporting women to move beyond low-margin and informal roles.

This gender analysis is part of the inception phase of a broader programme that aims to identify and optimise sustainable and inclusive business models in Benin's shea sector. The programme aims to improve women's socio-economic position in the sector by addressing the systemic barriers that continue to limit their access to resources, benefits, and decision-making spaces. working conditions, income, decision-making power, access to resources, and representation.

While women are central to the sector – especially in nut collection and artisanal processing – their contributions are not reflected in their level of income, agency, or leadership. Many continue to work informally, in physically demanding conditions, with limited visibility in the parts of the chain where value is created. As the sector becomes more commercialised, their position risks being further weakened without targeted action.

This analysis sets out to deepen our understanding of the root causes behind women's weak economic position in the shea sector. Building on earlier research and expert interviews, the analysis follows a structured approach across five domains: access and control over resources, roles and responsibilities, decision-making power, norms and beliefs combined with seven indicators that inform on decent work. Particular attention is paid to the specific challenges faced by women-led MSMEs in the sector, as well as the informal women's groups that drive the early stages of the value chain.

Findings from this analysis will inform the selection of business models with the highest potential to improve both commercial viability and gender outcomes, and shape the design of coaching and training activities for participating MSMEs. It will also feed into a system-level analysis that looks beyond the firm level, identifying what is needed from service providers, sector institutions, and public actors to create a more enabling environment for women's economic participation and leadership.

2. METHODOLOGY

This gender analysis draws on a combination of established gender mainstreaming concepts and internationally recognised labour standards.

We structured our findings using five interconnected building blocks: beliefs and perceptions, access and control over resources, decision-making power, roles and responsibilities, and needs and priorities. These blocks help uncover the structural, social, and economic barriers that shape women's participation and position in the shea sector.

To deepen the analysis, we applied a second lens: seven indicators of decent work, adapted from ILO (2013). These indicators offer a more detailed understanding of the quality and security of women's work, and include:

1. **Employment opportunities and security of work:** e.g. training, opportunities for growth, fear of unemployment
2. **Adequate earnings and productive work:** e.g. minimum wage and benefits
3. **Decent working time:** e.g. working hours, days off and termination of contract
4. **Fair treatment:** e.g. equal treatment and opportunities between men and women
5. **Safe work environment and facilities:** e.g. safe working conditions, health standards, hygiene, privacy
6. **Social security:**
7. **Social dialogue and employers' and workers' representation:** e.g. a trustee or complaint box

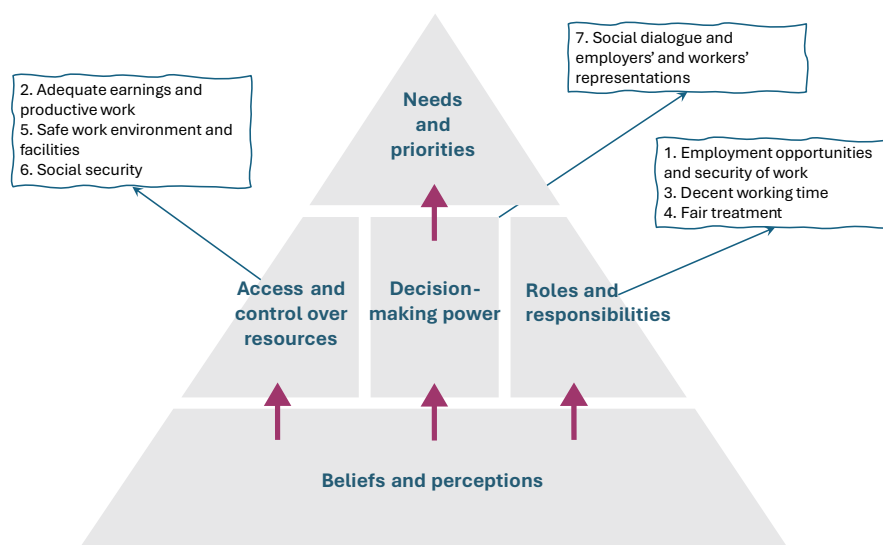


Figure 1: The five building blocks of gender mainstreaming with embedded decent work indicators

By combining these two frameworks (Figure 1 above), we were able to analyse both the gendered structures that shape women's position in the shea sector and the specific conditions under which they work. This dual lens helped us to identify patterns, reinforce cross-cutting issues, and better understand needed changes and current opportunities.

3. RESULTS

In this chapter, we present our findings on women's position in Benin's shea sector structured along the five building blocks, with relevant insights from the decent work indicators embedded within each. The needs and priorities of women active in the sector follow from these findings and are presented in the next chapter, Recommendations.

The findings can be summarised in the realisation that value chains do not operate in a vacuum. They are embedded in broader social and cultural dynamics. Gender norms, power relations, and local identities shape who has access, who benefits, and who gets left out. As Marlene and Seema et al. (2016) argue, interventions that focus only on upgrading production or market access – without addressing these embedded dynamics – risk reinforcing inequalities. Friman (2023) similarly warns that as shea becomes more valuable, competition over land, labour, and decision-making is intensifying. If these tensions are not addressed, they may erode the very systems that women depend on.

3.1 Beliefs and perceptions

Cultural norms and belief systems continue to play an important role in shaping women's position in the shea value chain in Benin. In some communities, animist traditions still influence how people interact with shea trees, which are seen as spiritually significant. Trees may be believed to host spirits (*génies*), and rituals or pacts are sometimes required before they can be used (Marlene & Seema et al., 2016). Shea butter itself is closely tied to everyday life – it is used in ceremonies for newborns, funerals, and initiations, and is appreciated for its natural skincare properties (Bidou, Koukpéré, & Droy, 2019).

The saying, “whoever plants a shea tree will not live to harvest its fruits,” is often cited in literature. While it is sometimes interpreted as a spiritual warning, it mostly reflects a practical concern: shea trees take over 15 years to mature, and many people feel they won't live long enough to benefit from planting them. This discourages long-term investment, especially among older generations. Grafting, which shortens the time to fruiting, is increasingly seen as a more acceptable and realistic alternative (Alliance Global Karité & AAK, 2022).

Shea is also widely seen as a feminised product, both in its uses and its production. Friman (2023) describes how shea is seen as holding an “embodied meaning” of femininity in West African societies. This symbolism, together with familial and patriarchal expectations, reinforces gender roles in the shea sector. In a survey of 81 women, 90% reported that processing shea butter was a tradition imposed by their family or husband, with 71% stating they engaged in it because it was inherited. Only 25% reported entering the activity for food security reasons (Guy & Honorat, 2016). Despite the heavy labour burden, women still linked shea work to prestige and feminine identity.

At the same time, cultural representations of shea are shifting. Bidou, Koukpéré, and Droy (2019) report that in parts of North-West Benin, there is a clear shift away from earlier spiritual interpretations. Trees are increasingly described as economic resources, to be managed and monetised. This shift is driven by wider transformations – including religious conversion, the spread of modern agriculture, and growing commercialisation. However, these changes are not experienced uniformly: Women's perspectives often still include spiritual and medicinal understandings of shea and other tree species like *baobab* and *nééré*, while men tend to talk in terms of timber, land, or income potential.

Moreover, perceptions of shea butter itself vary across ethnic groups. A study in Kalalé municipality found that preferences in shea butter colour and processing methods are shaped by sociocultural identity (Agúndez et al., 2019). For example, the Boo ethnic group prefers white or grey-white butter, while the Fulani and Gando groups favour yellow-toned butter, often adding colourants during processing. The Baatombu showed no strong preferences. Nearly all consumers (96%) preferred a slightly floral odour, fruity taste, and firm texture. Ethnic identity also influences consumption patterns and willingness to pay: Fulani consumers were more willing to pay for both butter and nuts than other groups, and some Fulani households have replaced traditional milk butter with shea butter for cooking.

Finally, ethnicity also shapes production and leadership in the sector. In Northern Benin, the Bariba are the most prominent group among women shea producers. Their position likely stems from a combination of factors, including land access, longstanding involvement in shea, and stronger connections to local cooperatives (Bio Timperegou et al., 2024).

3.2 Access to and control over resources

3.2.1 Access to land, shea trees, and fruits

Access to land, trees, and fruit in the shea sector is shaped by a combination of social norms, patrilineal land tenure systems, and shifting economic incentives. In Benin, land is predominantly owned by men, and the shea trees growing on that land are considered part of their property. While women are typically responsible for collecting and processing the nuts, they do so without land ownership or formal rights to the trees they depend on. Their access is mediated through male family members and is often conditional. Men are also responsible for managing parklands, deciding whether trees are protected, cut, or replaced (Bidou, Koukpéré, & Droy, 2019). Although women play a central role in the value chain, they have little influence over how shea resources are managed. Their priorities—such as preserving fruit-bearing trees—often conflict with men’s decisions to plant cashew or sell timber (Agúndez et al., 2019).

These customary arrangements are under pressure. As the commercial value of shea increases, men are asserting greater control over land, trees, and the income they generate. In some areas, long-standing access rules are breaking down, particularly where indigenous communities claim priority over migrants (Marlene & Seema et al., 2016). In Burkina Faso, women have described this shift as intrusive, using terms like “shameful” or “not manly” to challenge men’s entry into nut collection—what Friman (2023) describes as a form of tactical resistance through de-masculinisation. Others refer to indiscriminate tree cutting by men as “disorder,” signalling both ecological concern and frustration with the erosion of traditional roles (Bidou, Koukpéré, & Droy, 2019). Still, where livelihoods are under pressure, men often override these norms in pursuit of income.

While some women and cooperatives do own trees, these cases remain limited. Women may access land through gifts, leases, inheritance, or informal family arrangements, but formal land registration is rare. Without documentation, women are vulnerable to losing both land and long-term investments. During the Global Shea Alliance conference in May 2025, a woman from Nikki (northern Benin) shared how her group planted nine hectares of shea trees on land that had been entrusted to them. Years later, the landowners reclaimed both the land and the trees. Lacking proof, the group had no legal means to defend their work. This story illustrates the risks women face when access is informal and insecure, and how this undermines not only their economic autonomy but the long-term sustainability of the sector as a whole.

3.2.2 Access to Financial Resources: Adequate Earnings and Productive Work

For many women in Benin, shea is a vital—sometimes their only—source of income. Although earnings are often modest compared to other household revenues, shea income is typically used to cover essential needs such as school fees, food, and healthcare. It plays a crucial role as a seasonal buffer, especially during financially difficult periods (Bidou, Koukpéré, & Droy, 2019).

However, the ability of women and their cooperatives to increase income from shea is constrained by a range of structural and financial factors. Most women are involved in nut collection and primary processing – tasks that are physically demanding, informal, and poorly paid. Shea is a seasonal product, and for those who participate only in collection, income is equally seasonal and inconsistent. Prices fluctuate sharply throughout the season: at the start of the nut collection period (June–July), prices are low, typically between 100 and 150 FCFA/kg. As the season progresses, prices can rise to 500–800 FCFA/kg for conventional shea. But many women are forced to sell early, when prices are lowest, due to urgent financial needs and lack of storage capacity.

In some cooperatives, women members sell their products to the group, which then redistributes earnings in the form of ristournes once buyers are secured. However, access to buyers remains limited. Most cooperatives operate without formal contracts or advance price information. When cooperatives have access to finance, they are able to buy and stock more volume and wait to sell when prices rise. But this is not the norm.

Adding to this challenge is a regulation that prohibits cooperatives from selling shea nuts or butter directly to exporters. Instead, they must work through intermediaries—typically traders or aggregators. This reduces their bargaining power and limits the income they can generate. Some organisations have tried to improve the situation. For example, the Fédération Nationale des productives de Kartité (FNPK) collects products from cooperatives and negotiates prices with AAK, the largest buyer, with a small negotiated margin of at least 5 FCFA above the market price.

Financing remains one of the biggest bottlenecks. Without access to capital, cooperatives are forced to sell at the beginning of the season, when prices are low, or in small quantities, without the ability to store. Even when cooperatives make the effort to store products, poor storage conditions can lead to a decline in product quality and value at the time of sale.

Some financial institutions, such as ALIDE and ProFiNA Project (Promotion du financement agricole en faveur des exploitations agricoles et entreprises agro industrielles en milieu rural' of GIZ, are beginning to support cooperatives. FNPK also supports field-level staff who assist cooperatives with preparing financing applications. However, only cooperatives can access credit, and eligibility depends on their legal status and expected production volumes. Most cooperatives in the sector are formalised and legally registered, which is a precondition to benefit from government support. But even when cooperatives qualify, they often face a mismatch between their needs and the products offered by financial institutions. Credit is rarely available at the beginning of the season, when it is most needed, and interest rates are high – reaching up to 20% in some cases.

The FNDA (Fonds National de Développement Agricole), a Beninese government initiative, has made efforts to reduce this burden by offering loans at a subsidised interest rate of 5%. However, the mechanism is slow to implement. FNDA works through financial institutions and covers part of the interest rate, but funds are not always released in time.

In response, some buyers have attempted to formalise relationships with cooperatives through training and coaching on product quality. Companies like Africa Green Cooperation, ITRAK, and Zikora

have initiated partnerships, but these generally do not include pre-financing or advance price information. Meanwhile, local NGOs such as OAN-NIKKI, active in the Nikki region, support around 500 women through group formation, pre-financing, and harvest-time purchasing – providing more stability and reducing undervaluation of products. It is also evident that sometimes women's cooperatives fail to fulfil their commitments to companies, such as not providing shea products on time.

Finally, as the commercial value of shea rises, control over the income it generates is also shifting. In some households, men are beginning to claim rights over the earnings and products generated by their wives (Agúndez et al., 2019). This tension highlights deeper inequalities in financial decision-making and reinforces the need to secure women's access not just to markets, but to income, autonomy, and long-term value.

3.2.3 Access to Education, Knowledge, and Skills

Despite limited access to formal education, women in the shea sector possess deep indigenous knowledge that is passed down through generations. This includes expertise in nut selection, harvesting, processing techniques, and evaluating butter quality. Women know how to assess nut maturity and flavour – skills that are directly linked to the production of high-quality butter (FAO, 2017; Agúndez et al., 2019). These forms of knowledge are rarely recognised formally, but they play a key role in the quality and reputation of Benin's shea production.

At the same time, limited human capital remains a barrier for many women's cooperatives. While women bring practical skills, they often lack the literacy and training required to navigate contracts, keep records, or access higher-value markets. In a study by Guy and Honorat (2016), 78% of surveyed women were found to be illiterate. Interviews suggest that only 2% of the workforce in the sector are able to read and speak French. This limits women's ability to engage with formal actors, apply for funding, or benefit from government support. Language barriers add another layer of complexity. In northern Benin, local languages differ from one area to the next, meaning that training and support need to be tailored to the linguistic reality of each region.

Several organisations are making efforts to respond to these needs. Partner companies such as Africa Green Cooperation (AFG), ITRAK, Zikora, and OAN-Nikki offer training to cooperatives on harvesting techniques and improving nut and butter quality. Some of these activities are supported or co-financed by AAK and tMENDORE, often in collaboration with FNPk. ProFiNA, a project funded by GIZ, has provided training on financial literacy. Despite these efforts, the demand for basic skills development remains high. Many cooperatives report the need for continued support in areas such as financial education, transparency in cooperative management, and workplace safety and health.

Women have expressed a strong interest in understanding the roles and responsibilities within their cooperatives – both as members and as leaders. They seek greater clarity on how decisions are made and how funds are managed, pointing to the need for training in governance and cooperative management. This is particularly relevant given that formalisation is now a condition for receiving public support. Through the Agence Territoriale de Développement Agricole pole 3 (ATDA) under the Ministry of Agriculture, the government has focused its efforts on helping cooperatives register legally and obtain the documents required to access state-led services and financing schemes.

Still, participation in cooperatives is not guaranteed. Social norms related to age, marital status, and household dynamics may prevent some women from joining or attending training. In some households, husbands act as gatekeepers, and women require their permission to participate in

collective structures (Marlene & Seema et al., 2016). Even when training is available, access remains uneven, reinforcing gaps in capacity and knowledge within and between cooperatives.

3.2.4 Access to Technology

Access to equipment and infrastructure remains one of the biggest constraints for women in the shea sector. In most rural areas of Benin, shea processing remains largely artisanal. Women continue to rely on manual methods such as crushing, roasting, and kneading nuts by hand—tasks that are physically demanding and time-consuming (Cornelius et al., 2016; Armah et al., 2017). Despite their central role in production, women’s access to mechanised tools is limited. Where equipment like grinders, crushers, mills, or churns is available, it is often out of reach due to high costs, lack of training, or because the tools are controlled by men within cooperatives (Hessavi et al., 2019; FAO, 2017).

The lack of infrastructure further deepens the problem. Most processing sites do not have access to electricity or running water, making even basic mechanisation difficult to implement (CBI, 2024). This technological gap not only increases physical hardship but also affects the quality and efficiency of production, further limiting women’s ability to earn a stable income. These challenges have been consistently raised by women’s cooperatives and community leaders across regions (FAO, 2017; Yabi et al., 2014).

Women have expressed a clear need for support in upgrading processing techniques, especially in the early stages of production. Manual crushing, in particular, is seen as one of the most burdensome tasks. In addition to processing, women also face constraints in transporting nuts. Many walk long distances with heavy loads carried on their heads, often for several kilometres. This causes fatigue, limits how much they can collect, and slows down the process during peak harvest times. Some women have pointed to the need for small-scale transport solutions, such as tricycles, to ease this burden and increase collection volumes.

Some private actors have started to respond to these needs by introducing simple but effective innovations. These include protective gloves, solar-powered roasters, and nut trolleys, which have been well received by women (Friman, 2023; GSA, 2024). ATDA has also made some efforts to address these gaps, including through the installation of small-scale drilling mini-complexes designed for shea butter production. These types of investments are promising, but they need to be better tailored to women’s realities and scaled in a way that ensures access across cooperatives—not just a select few.



Figure 2: Female collector on a tricycle (GSA, 2024)

3.2.5 Safe Working Environment: Access to Protective Equipment

Health and safety risks remain a major concern for women working in the shea sector. The lack of protective equipment significantly increases their exposure to physical and environmental hazards. During roasting, women are frequently exposed to open fires and toxic smoke, which can lead to respiratory problems and burns. Collection also takes place in forested areas where women face

biological risks such as snake and scorpion bites. In more isolated collection sites, the absence of community safety mechanisms increases vulnerability to physical assault and other security threats (CBI, 2024).

Several companies, including ITRAK, and Africa Green Cooperation etc, have made efforts to supply protective gear to women, with additional support from government actors such as ATDA, Catholic Relief Services, and CNV International. However, the quantities distributed remain insufficient. Most women still work without adequate protective equipment, leaving them exposed to preventable risks. Even when gear is available, usability remains an issue. Boots, for example, are often too heavy or uncomfortable, limiting women's mobility and discouraging use. As a result, safety is compromised, and productivity suffers. There is thus a clear need to design and distribute protective equipment that is tailored to women's needs – ergonomic, lightweight, and practical for use during physically demanding tasks like roasting and nut collection.

Sun exposure during long hours in the field is another health risk that often goes unaddressed. Few programmes include awareness or provisions for sun protection. Compounding the issue is the lack of childcare options. Many women bring young children with them to collection sites, exposing them to the same risks. The presence of children in the workplace also raises concerns about child labour, particularly during peak harvest periods. Several initiatives have acknowledged this risk and highlighted the need to prevent children from being present in processing areas (AAK, 2021).

Since 2016, the Confédération des Organisations Syndicales Indépendantes of Benin (COSI Benin) has worked to promote decent work in the shea sector, with a focus on the very issues outlined above. Their activities include awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy on occupational health and safety, and lobbying for improved working conditions and social protection for women producers. These efforts are important, but greater investment and coordination are still needed to close the gap between policy commitments and the reality on the ground.

3.2.6 Social Security and Health Care

In Benin, the shea sector is largely informal, and most women working in this sector do so without access to formal social security. The majority are members of cooperatives, but these structures do not provide health insurance, maternity benefits, or pension schemes. Only women employed by formal companies in the shea sector are eligible for social security coverage through the national system.

Instead, women rely on informal systems such as tontines – village-level savings groups that allow members to contribute small amounts of money on a regular basis. These funds are distributed on a rotating basis or at the end of the year. The money is typically used to cover household expenses, pay school fees, invest in small-scale business activities, or buy land. Though informal, tontines provide an important safety net and are one of the few financial tools accessible to most women in rural areas.

The absence of formal protection leaves women vulnerable to shocks. Injury, illness, or poor harvests can quickly result in financial stress, especially during the off-season. For women who perform physically demanding work, such as nut collection and processing, there is also a higher risk of long-term health impacts. Training on safe harvesting and carrying techniques could help reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders, which are common in this line of work.

A case from Burkina Faso illustrates the potential of these informal mechanisms. A 2017 FAO study found that 46% of women in the shea sector had access to some form of social protection. Most of this came through informal channels—community savings groups (*mutuelles*) or group-based support

systems (*caisses de menu dépense*). A small proportion had access to formal coverage through private insurance schemes such as the Caisse nationale de sécurité sociale. Although these systems did not reach all women, they offered a degree of protection and stability. The study highlighted the value of informal mechanisms as possible stepping stones toward more inclusive, formal systems.

The situation in Benin is comparable. Tontines, while informal, serve a similar function and could be further strengthened and expanded. Meanwhile, exploring pathways toward formal social protection, for example through government policy, micro-insurance schemes, or cooperative-level partnerships, could reduce women's vulnerability and improve their long-term well-being.

Some promising steps have already been taken. The Confédération des Organisations Syndicales Indépendantes (COSI) of Benin has actively supported more than 400 women involved in shea and cashew processing to enrol in the Mutual Social Welfare Fund. Through this initiative, women gained access to health insurance that covers 70% of medical expenses. COSI facilitated the process by covering membership fees, providing health booklets, and paying contributions for the first two to three months on behalf of participants. This example shows that with targeted support, civil society can play an important role in bridging the gap between informal work and formal protection systems.

3.3 Decision-making power

Women's ability to make decisions in the shea sector is shaped by a combination of household dynamics, structural gender norms, and unequal access to land and financial resources. Although women organise themselves into cooperatives and play an essential role in production, decision-making power remains uneven—both within households and in the market system.

In cooperatives, women often manage daily operations and make decisions on production and marketing. However, weak governance structures can limit their collective influence, particularly on issues such as pricing strategies, financing decisions, or negotiations with buyers.

Women have the skills and ability to plant and manage shea trees, just like men. But because land ownership remains largely male-dominated, their ability to make decisions about tree management or long-term investments remains constrained. Without secure access to land, women's role in resource governance is limited to the operational level rather than the strategic one.

3.3.1 Household Decision-Making

In most rural communities in Benin, household structures are still deeply patriarchal. Men are generally seen as the main decision-makers, especially in households where women collect shea from plots controlled by their husbands. The income women generate from shea plays a vital role, particularly because shea is harvested during the lean season. Their earnings are often used to cover gaps in household budgets.

Compared to literature from neighbouring countries on intra-household decision-making, the situation in Benin appears more flexible. In many shea-producing communities, women collectors are older or widowed—meaning their involvement in the sector is less influenced by spousal consent. These women are often able to participate in the shea economy without needing household approval, which opens up more space for independent decision-making.

3.3.2 Financial Decision-Making and Market Influence

At the household level, women usually manage the income they earn from selling shea nuts or butter. Many decide independently how to spend or reinvest their earnings, depending on the needs and structure of their household. In this sense, participation in shea processing contributes to their financial empowerment.

However, this financial autonomy does not always extend beyond the household. In the broader market system, women's influence remains limited. Men continue to dominate in the more profitable segments of the value chain, such as bulk buying, industrial processing, and export, largely due to their better access to capital, networks, and mobility (Marlene & Seema et al., 2016; FAO, 2017). Women, by contrast, remain concentrated in low-margin, labour-intensive roles.

Access to credit plays a critical role in shaping financial decision-making. When women can access financing, they are more likely to invest in equipment, hire labour, and expand their businesses. In a study by Bio Timperegou et al. (2024), access to credit was linked to improved economic performance among women's cooperatives. Yet in practice, most women still face major barriers to credit, as previously elaborated in Section 3.2 'Access to and control over resources'. This lack of access limits their ability to make long-term or strategic decisions about their role in the shea value chain.

3.3.3 Social dialogue and employers' and workers' representation

Several initiatives led by civil society organizations such as COSI Benin and international partners like CNV International aim to strengthen this dialogue. Their activities include awareness-raising on workers' rights, the promotion of decent work, training in collective bargaining, and the establishment of representative structures such as workers' committees in companies like AFOKANTA and Fuldor. Despite their efforts, social dialogue in the shea value chain struggles to become institutionalized and to produce tangible results. It should take into account the concerns of both the women collectors and primary processors, as well as employees in the processing industries. In both these segments, the absence of trade unions is a significant bottleneck that hinders the establishment of effective social dialogue, which is essential for improving working conditions. Despite efforts by some trade union confederations, such as COSI-BENIN (which succeeded in organizing women collectors/processors in Perma into a union), significant work remains. Issues related to occupational health and safety, social protection, and low incomes are still not addressed through formal negotiation frameworks. Efforts must continue to promote the ILO's international conventions 87 and 98.

3.4 Roles and responsibilities

3.4.1 Employment opportunities and security of work

The early stages of the shea value chain—collection and primary processing—are largely informal. Women typically work in small groups, often without contracts or price guarantees. Most operate without access to pre-negotiated rates or formal buyer agreements, which leaves them vulnerable to market fluctuations and opportunistic buyers (CBI, 2024). This informality reinforces women's marginal position in the sector and limits their ability to move toward more professional, stable forms of work.

Seasonality adds to this instability. Shea work is concentrated in short harvest and processing periods. Outside these windows, many women shift to other informal activities to generate income. This

cyclical pattern makes it difficult to maintain consistent earnings or institutional engagement over time.

Land and natural resource governance remain largely under male control. Men traditionally oversee parklands and decide whether to protect, cut, or replace shea trees (Bidou, Koukpéré, & Droy, 2019). In patrilineal systems, such as those observed in Burkina Faso, men are the primary landholders and also control the output and labour of their wives (Friman, 2023). These dynamics position men as the gatekeepers of land and tree resources – both formally and informally – leaving women with limited say over how the resource base is managed.

Women's roles are concentrated on the use and transformation of shea fruit. They are the main actors in nut collection, processing, and local sales of products such as butter and soap (Bidou, Koukpéré, & Droy, 2019). Their work begins in the field – often on common lands or plots accessed through male relatives – and continues through time-consuming tasks like drying, roasting, kneading, and packaging (Yabi et al., 2014). These practices are passed down through generations, and many women hold deep knowledge of nut quality, processing techniques, and marketing strategies that contribute to household food security and income (FAO, 2017).

However, as the value of shea increases, labour roles are shifting. Men are beginning to take on activities traditionally performed by women, including collection and trading of kernels (Friman, 2023). In some households, this shift is seen as a way to meet financial needs and strengthen cooperation between spouses. In others, it creates friction, particularly when control over labour and income becomes contested.

The result is a sector in transition. While some families are moving toward more collaborative arrangements, others are experiencing greater tension over who does the work and who benefits. As commercial interest in shea continues to grow, these questions are likely to become even more relevant within both households and cooperatives.

3.4.2 Decent working time

Shea-related work is physically demanding and carried out under challenging conditions. The process often starts with long walks to remote collection sites, where women gather nuts and carry loads of 20 to 30 kilograms back to their homes or villages (CBI, 2024). Once the nuts are collected, women move on to processing – tasks that include drying, roasting, grinding, and kneading (Yabi et al., 2014; FAO, 2017).

These activities are rarely done in isolation. Most women balance shea work with agricultural labour and household responsibilities. The combined workload leads to chronic fatigue, physical strain, and musculoskeletal stress. Many women describe the drudgery of traditional processing as one of the most difficult aspects of their involvement in the shea sector (FAO, 2017).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this gender analysis, the following section presents three layers of recommendations. The first outlines priority training topics for SMEs to be implemented in the current phase of the programme. These trainings are designed to improve business performance, strengthen relationships with women suppliers, and contribute to more inclusive and decent working conditions. The second set of recommendations suggests training topics for cooperatives, should the programme extend to include them. Lastly, broader areas for future focus are proposed, addressing systemic issues that go beyond individual training interventions.

In all three cases, it is important to consider the social, religious, and linguistic realities of northern Benin to ensure trainings and other type of interventions are both inclusive and effective. The textbox below presents five key principles as guidance.

Guiding principles for an inclusive and context-sensitive approach

Working in the shea sector in northern Benin requires a careful, respectful approach. This region is shaped by strong patriarchal and religious structures, where women's roles are clearly defined and literacy levels are low. To ensure that all activities—whether training, coaching, or broader support—are effective and inclusive, they need to respond to these realities. The principles below are meant to guide how we design and deliver interventions in a way that works with, rather than against, the women we aim to support.



Adapt to local realities: inclusive communication and learning

Literacy levels among women are extremely low. Trainings and other activities need to be adapted so that they are accessible and easy to follow, regardless of literacy level or language spoken.

- Deliver trainings in local languages spoken in northern Benin (e.g., Bariba, Dendi, Fulfulde etc.) instead of French.
- Use visual tools, storytelling, role-playing, and participatory methods rather than relying on written materials only.
- Use simple, clear language and avoid jargon during training.
- Include practical demonstrations and hands-on learning.
- Provide follow-up support and refresher sessions to improve learning.



Promote inclusive participation while respecting local norms

Northern Benin is characterised by a strong Muslim and patriarchal social structure. To ensure women's participation, it's important to acknowledge the structures they live in – and to find ways to work within them.

- Speak with male community members, including husbands and elders, about the goals of your activities. Invite them to observe or participate. Explore where they can participate so that they can familiarise themselves with your working approach and gain trust in your attentions.
- Highlight the economic benefits of women's participation for the entire family and community.
- Engage local female facilitators or community leaders who understand cultural nuances and can build trust.
- Design flexible training schedules that consider women's household responsibilities, based on their own preferences.



Facilitate social dialogue: addressing beliefs and perceptions

Value chains are shaped by gender norms and power dynamics. Facilitating social dialogue and showcasing positive alternatives can help address these dynamics at their root.

- Capacitate project staff working directly with the MSMEs, cooperatives, and community members to facilitate the dialogue about norms and beliefs, including gender roles, rights, and power dynamics. These discussions often connect to other training topics and may come up at both expected and unexpected moments. Being prepared to handle them is key to creating a constructive and safe environment within your project activities.
- Showcase positive stories from other MSMEs, women's groups and cooperatives where women have taken on new roles. Learning from someone who's done it before can make it feel more possible to challenge persistent beliefs and perceptions.
- Support women to take leadership roles in groups and cooperatives. Opening up norms and beliefs starts with the pioneers who dare to challenge them.



Implement Learning Oriented Monitoring and Adaptive Programme Management

Empowerment takes time and requires sensitivity. While we aim to be gender-responsive and transformative by considering the full, holistic picture, there is always a risk of unintentionally reinforcing unequal gender norms if we are not careful. It is therefore important to gather feedback from those directly affected, learn from it, and adapt the programme accordingly.

- In your project's monitoring approach, include dedicated indicators and a methodology for tracking women's empowerment resulting from project activities. This should include regular learning sessions with the project team and stakeholders to assess whether the project is still on the right track.

- Regularly collect feedback from project participants to understand what works well, what has changed, and how the programme has contributed to that change. Use their feedback as a basis for your learning sessions.
- Collaborate with local NGOs and institutions experienced in gender-sensitive community work. Ensure our project's work aligns with their best practices.

4.1 Recommended Training Topics for SMEs

The training topics for SMEs respond directly to gaps identified in the analysis, including limited leadership by women, poor working conditions, weak supply chain linkages, and lack of access to finance and markets. Each training is designed to address a specific constraint that, if tackled, could contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable business model.

1. Confidence and Leadership

Many women business owners face barriers to growth that go beyond finance or production capacity. This training focuses on building confidence and leadership skills among women entrepreneurs, by discussing the expansion of their voice, claiming decision-making space, and providing strategies to access new opportunities and leadership positions.

2. Decent Working Conditions

In many MSMEs, working conditions are not clearly structured, and safety procedures are informal or absent. This set of sessions focuses on three key areas:

- *Health and Safety at Work:* Women in processing roles are often exposed to risks such as heat, smoke, and repetitive strain. This session will help SMEs identify risks and put in place basic safety measures to prevent incidents.
- *Worker Representation:* SMEs will receive guidance on how to set up simple, functional systems that allow workers to voice concerns – individually or collectively – through worker representatives or other feedback mechanisms.
- *Positive Workplace Communication:* Poor communication often leads to tension, misunderstandings, and low morale. This training introduces tools such as non-violent communication and constructive feedback. The goal is to create a more respectful and collaborative working environment that can support social dialogue over time.

3. Access to Finance

In the shea sector, access to raw materials often depends on timely access to finance. Yet many SMEs struggle to secure loans or know how to approach financial institutions. This training will help SMEs understand what banks require, how to prepare loan applications, and how to identify the right type of finance for their needs. It also includes how to pitch funding proposals effectively to financial institutions and investors.

4. Supplier Relationships with Cooperatives

SMEs rely on cooperatives for their supply of nuts and butter, yet these relationships are often informal or unbalanced. This session focuses on building more structured and sustainable partnerships with women's cooperatives. It includes how to draft clear service agreements, support cooperatives through quality improvements and business advice, and facilitate their access to finance. The aim is to strengthen the supply base while ensuring mutual benefit for both SMEs and women producers.

5. Market Access and Positioning

As the programme supports SMEs to access export markets, particularly in Europe, several key competencies will be addressed:

- *Intercultural Communication:* Navigating export markets requires the ability to communicate effectively across cultures. This session will help SMEs adapt their communication to the expectations of European buyers, and understand how cultural norms shape negotiation and business relationships.
- *Gender-Sensitive Marketing and Branding:* This session goes beyond gender awareness to explore how SMEs can reach wider markets—including women and youth—through packaging, product presentation, and branding choices. The goal is to expand market share by identifying underexplored customer segments.
- *Business Negotiation:* In a context of price volatility, strong negotiation skills are essential. This training will cover how to prepare for negotiations, determine price points, and establish clear, formal agreements with buyers. Strengthening these skills will help SMEs secure better prices and longer-term commercial relationships.

4.2 Recommended Training Topics for Cooperatives

If the programme is extended, we foresee an opportunity for additional training to women's cooperatives. These sessions should respond to gaps identified during the analysis and be designed to strengthen cooperative performance, protect worker wellbeing, and improve relationships with buyers.

Emphasising the guiding principles: when providing trainings to cooperatives, it is important to consider the low literacy levels of cooperative members and therefore rely on visual tools – such as posters, illustrations, and short videos – and deliver trainings in local languages to ensure clarity and accessibility.

1. Health and Safety at Work

Many women in cooperatives work under physically demanding and sometimes hazardous conditions. It is thus recommended to raise awareness of occupational risks and introduce good health and safety practices, such as basic ergonomic principles to prevent strain and injury during nut collection and processing.

2. Professional Engagement with Buyers

We furthermore recommend focusing on how cooperatives can build a professional reputation through respectful and reliable engagement with clients. This should include attention to the importance of honouring formal agreements, such as contracts, and offer strategies to improve communication, meet quality standards, and strengthen buyer relationships over time.

3. Governance and Financial Literacy

We recommend strengthening cooperatives' internal governance and financial management capacities as a foundation for sustainable operations. This should include attention to the roles and responsibilities of both members and executive committees, and explore how transparency and information sharing can build trust. Key topics could include basic bookkeeping, management of group funds, and ensuring that all members understand their rights and obligations.

4. Leadership, Negotiation, and Confidence Building

There is a need to support cooperative members – particularly women leaders – to strengthen their leadership capacity and build confidence in business interactions. Recommended topics include negotiating fair prices and working conditions, representing the cooperative in commercial partnerships, and building long-term business relationships. This focus can help amplify women's collective voice and equip them to take a more strategic role in managing external relationships.

5. Facilitating Access to Finance

Improved access to finance would allow women's cooperatives to collect and store products, enabling them to sell when market prices are higher. We recommend focusing on how cooperatives can identify appropriate financial institutions, prepare loan or grant applications, and navigate the steps required to access seasonal working capital. Strengthening financial capacity will also help cooperatives increase income and improve their position in the value chain.

6. Raising Awareness of Child Labour

In some areas, children are involved in nut collection, raising concerns about health, education, and child protection. We recommend raising awareness among cooperative members and communities about the risks associated with child labour and the long-term impact on children's development. The training should promote alternatives that prioritise school attendance and child safety, and encourage cooperatives to adopt practices that align with national and international child rights standards.

7. Securing Land Tenure for Women

Many women plant and manage shea trees on land accessed through informal agreements, without legal documentation. This creates insecurity and limits their ability to benefit from long-term investments. We recommend raising awareness on the importance of land formalization – regardless of whether land is obtained through purchase, inheritance, or family arrangements. Support could focus on guiding cooperatives and their members through the steps required to legalise land use, helping to secure tenure and strengthen women's control over production resources.

4.3 Broader Areas for Future Focus

The recommendations in this section move beyond individual training topics to address the structural barriers that continue to shape women's position in the shea sector. They reflect deeper issues that emerged throughout the analysis and should be considered if the programme is extended or expanded. These broader areas are not standalone interventions, but rather system-level priorities that require longer term collaboration with public institutions, financial actors, buyers, and other organisations.

1. Access to finance across the value chain

Across the shea value chain, limited access to finance remains one of the most significant constraints, both for cooperatives and MSMEs. Without working capital, many actors are unable to store products or wait for more favourable prices, forcing them to sell at the start of the season when prices are lowest. This reduces income potential and weakens negotiating power. While training can help prepare businesses to apply for finance, more structural solutions are needed. These may include improved coordination with financial institutions or stronger linkages between buyers and cooperatives to facilitate pre-financing and contract-based lending.

Several actors could play a supporting role in this effort. **FNPK** has already facilitated financing applications for women's cooperatives and could continue to serve as an intermediary. Financial institutions such as **ALIDE** and **ProFiNA** (supported by GIZ) have experience working with rural producers and could be engaged to tailor financial products to the shea sector. The **Fonds National de Développement Agricole (FNDA)**, which offers subsidised loans to agricultural actors, could also be a key institutional partner. Although their efforts are currently not functioning effectively, the potential thereof remains worth exploring.

2. Legal land rights for women

Informal land arrangements continue to limit women's ability to secure long-term control over the shea trees they manage and invest in. While many women access land through family, inheritance, or informal agreements, these arrangements offer little protection and can be revoked at any time. Without legal documentation, women remain exposed to land loss—even after planting and maintaining productive trees. Raising awareness about the importance of formal land ownership is critical, but should be paired with legal support to navigate the formalisation process. Future programme activities could support cooperatives and women's groups in accessing land titles and help remove administrative or financial barriers to formalisation.

This could be done in collaboration with decentralised land services and local authorities, with support from legal aid organisations or NGOs with experience in women's land rights. Cooperatives that have registered their land could also serve as an example to others. Local offices of the **Ministère de l'Agriculture** and the **Agence Territoriale de Développement Agricole (ATDA)** may also provide an institutional entry point for legal land support activities.

3. Access to safe and appropriate technology

The physical burden of shea collection and processing continues to undermine women's health, productivity, and capacity to scale. While some technologies exist, they are not widely accessible, and many are not designed with women's needs in mind. Heavy tools, poor usability, and limited distribution often prevent adoption. There is a need to prioritise the development and scaling of ergonomic, affordable, and gender-sensitive equipment.

Several organisations are already experimenting with practical tools – such as **Africa Green Cooperation**, **ITRAK**, and **Zikora**, which have introduced nut trolleys, solar roasters, and protective equipment. These actors could be engaged to refine and expand technology offers, while cooperative leaders and processors can provide feedback on usability and design. Public institutions such as **ATDA**, which has piloted mini-processing units, could also be brought in as scaling partners for infrastructure deployment.

4. Informal protection as a stepping stone toward social security

Most women in the shea sector operate outside formal employment systems and lack access to health insurance, maternity protection, or pensions. Instead, they rely on informal savings groups (*tontines*) to cope with shocks or plan for future needs. These mechanisms play an important role, but they remain fragile and limited in coverage. Future interventions could support the expansion and formal linking of these systems, for example through partnerships with mutual health funds or micro-insurance providers. Experiences from Burkina Faso show that such systems can serve as stepping stones toward more inclusive social protection.

The experience of **COSI Benin**, which has supported over 400 shea and cashew producers to enrol in the Mutual Social Welfare Fund, provides a strong model for scaling. A future programme could build on this approach by working with COSI to facilitate enrolment, subsidise contributions, and advocate for policies that integrate informal workers into national systems.

5. Addressing gendered power dynamics within the chain

As the shea sector becomes more commercialised, the balance of power is shifting—particularly in land use, income control, and leadership. In some households and cooperatives, this has led to greater collaboration. In others, it has resulted in increased competition and exclusion. Future programme activities should pay close attention to how commercialisation affects women’s position and ensure that upgrading does not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. This includes supporting women’s participation in cooperative leadership, building their capacity to negotiate directly with buyers, and ensuring that gender dynamics are explicitly addressed in supplier–buyer relationships and governance platforms.

Organisations such as **COSI Benin** and **CNV International**, which are already active in promoting social dialogue and setting up workers’ committees, could be engaged to support this work. These actors have experience raising awareness of workers’ rights and training both employers and employees in non-violent communication, negotiation, and inclusive representation. In parallel, the programme can engage key buyers such as **AAK** and cooperative unions like **FNPK** to establish gender-sensitive frameworks for supplier engagement, pricing, and long-term partnership.

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