

Prosper Cashew Project: Women and Youth Participation Assessment Brief

Introduction

Prosper Cashew is a large, five-year, project funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that seeks to strengthen cashew processing in Côte d'Ivoire (CIV), Ghana, and Nigeria. Prosper Cashew commissioned a women and youth participation assessment with the purpose of providing insights into agribusiness opportunities for women, with a secondary focus on youth (young women and young men aged 18-30), within the cashew processing and support services sector.

The assessment was carried out between May-July 2021 and combined a desk review of program documents and secondary literature and interviews with key informants. The assessment team conducted 43 stakeholder interviews with individuals from Prosper Cashew; processors; support enterprises (consisting of private enterprises providing capacity building or equipment provision); host country government institutions working to develop the cashew processing sector; industry associations; educational institutions; and investors, with 70 percent level of effort dedicated to informants in CIV, 20 percent to Nigeria, and 10 percent to Ghana. The assessment team is grateful to all the individuals who generously shared their time and contributed to the findings that are presented in this summary brief.

Findings

1) Women and youth participation in beyond production activities: While women make up most the staff of most cashew processing companies, they are typically found in low paying, seasonal positions. Both at the semi-skilled labor and managerial level, men and women perform different roles. On the factory floor, women clean and peel, while men take on the more physical jobs such as carrying the bags or operating the machines. When women are found in managerial positions, they often fill non-technical roles such as human resources or accounting. However, particularly in CIV, where there is an overall labor shortage in the sector, employers are building the capacity of both male and female employees to enable them to take on more senior roles. In addition, more women are graduating with advanced degrees and are slowly making inroads into technical positions traditionally held by men. For example, one manager said he has one woman who is an electro-mechanic. The assessment team heard of only one woman who had been promoted to production manager, a position that oversees several section chiefs. This was in a woman-owned enterprise where the owner is committed to promoting her female employees.

In all three countries, processors are engaging youth primarily through internships that they access through universities or government programs. These institutions do not intentionally send CVs of young women, but at least one processor had requested the university they partner with to send them more female candidates. While the team was not able to access any data on how many of the interns take on jobs within the processing enterprises, it appears that it is more common for students who enter internships through university programs to accept positions, as their studies are typically aligned with the jobs on offer.

2) Constraints, opportunities, or risks related to women's economic empowerment: In general, women in West Africa have limited access to land, markets, technology, finance, training, and education. They also have household responsibilities that they are often asked to prioritize, and they

are constrained by social norms that determine male and female roles at work and at home. Some additional constraints that emerged during consultations included: long shifts, including late rotations; challenges finding childcare; long travel time to processing units in rural areas; a lack of self-confidence on the part of women; and a lack of trust on the part of some male managers. There is less known about youth in the sector, but one constraint appears to be their lack of knowledge about the cashew processing sector and its opportunities for meaningful employment.

Owners and managers seek out good performers, both women and youth, and provide them with targeted opportunities for training and promotion to put them on a career path within the sector. This includes not only technical training but also soft skills training. Some processors also carry out sensitization campaigns in the communities to address potential household conflicts and build support for working women.

- 3) Strategies to advance women's economic empowerment as owners, managers and employees:** All processors interviewed abide by local laws in terms of working conditions. The CIV processors have all put in place additional measures to incentivize women to increase productivity and remain committed to their employer. Some of the additional initiatives the assessment team heard about included:

- Day care facilities
- Medical facilities (especially to offer care to pregnant women)
- Subsidized or free meals for employees and children
- In CIV, several processors help female employees register for national health care (CNPS-Caisse Prevoyance Nationale)
- Flexible hours and shifts for women
- Maternity leave

Anecdotally, this appears to be having the desired effect. One manager said these initiatives are crucial to reduce the absenteeism and turnover rate of the women they have trained. While they had no exact data, they understand they lead to increased productivity and decreased losses for the company. However, young women still lack female role models and mentors to help them overcome their concerns; learn from each other how to manage work and household responsibilities; and compete for “traditionally male” roles.

- 4) Promoting women as owners and founders of processing units:** Women in West Africa face numerous constraints to becoming owners of large processing units. Although the percentage of women owners interviewed for this assessment was quite large (three out of nine total), this is not representative of the industry as a whole. Particularly when looking at processing companies with an annual capacity over 5000 tons, the number of female owners is small, and many of those who do exist are either in partnership with their husbands or inherited the business from a relative. The reasons given for these low numbers were lack of access to finance (linked to lack of collateral); family constraints; and lack of technical knowledge.

It appears that there may be more women owners of smaller processing units but speaking to those women was outside the scope of this assessment.

- 5) Promoting women in technical and operational roles:** There is a shortage of qualified staff of either sex in technical roles, which presents an opportunity for women to move into the sector. One CIV

manager said, “for roles that you can find in any industry or company such as human resources, finance, etc., there is no problem to find qualified candidates, but for the more technical roles, we have difficulties even finding suitable male candidates.” Respondents in Ghana and Nigeria did not mention staffing shortages, instead they highlighted the challenge of recruiting qualified women. However, the number of respondents in these countries was low and more interviews are needed to draw clearer conclusions.

To address this issue in CIV, educational institutions and government-sponsored youth employment programs are developing relevant curricula to meet the staffing needs in the sector. Most institutions do not have strategies to advance women in technical and operational roles and are not using disaggregated data to guide their efforts, but they all see the opportunity to engage more women and are open to supporting GESI efforts.

Industry association representatives in all three countries are aware of the opportunities and constraints facing women and youth in the processing sector. One respondent said many of their members want to develop and implement an action plan to involve more women in senior positions. They are at least partly motivated by the fact that this can give them more traction with international investors. These institutions could potentially support GESI initiatives through data gathering, sensitization and awareness raising.

- 6) Best practices to make cashew processing units supportive and empowering places to work:** As above, several processors have already begun working on creating a supportive environment for their employees and to build the capacity of their staff. Investors are increasingly looking at considerations for women, youth, and climate resilience, etc. as part of their investment strategy. Processors are aware of this and may be willing to make internal investments that prepare them to respond to such investors. Using a scorecard approach or return on investment (ROI) analysis to assess if and how these investments pay off can motivate more targeted investments and can be used to persuade other sector stakeholders that investing in women and youth is an economically sound decision.

Recommendations & Conclusion

The assessment team suggested three intervention areas to boost the meaningful participation of women and youth in the cashew sector. These are:

- 1) Support processors and support firms to provide a decent work environment for semi-skilled workers
- 2) Develop a culture of advancement within supported enterprises:
- 3) Support the development of technical and managerial skills needed in the cashew processing sector

The assessment revealed that cashew processors are aware of and interested in increasing the participation of women and youth in beyond production activities. However, significant challenges exist and processors, industry associations and educational institutions need support from programs like Prosper Cashew to develop and test creative solutions to overcome these obstacles.