

With hands in the soil and eyes on the market, women farmers are reshaping agriculture, building wealth and claiming their place at the top of the oilseed industry.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

At dawn in Kampala's suburbs, women open small rented rooms, where charcoal stoves and pans fill the space with the nutty aroma of roasting groundnuts. From these modest kitchens, they prepare *kipooli/ochi* (ground or sim sim paste or a mixture of both) and roasted nuts that will feed the city for the day. Some carry their stock on their heads, weaving through town to reach busy commuter hubs, while others, particularly during harvest season, sell boiled groundnuts to passersby. Many women also source *ochi* and *kipooli* from processors in rural districts, transported into the city by taxi or bus.

Street vending in main towns, including Kampala, has now been banned, pushing women further into suburban kitchens, door-to-door sales, and informal supply networks. Yet despite these challenges, they remain the backbone of Uganda's informal snack economy, turning humble oilseed products into a steady income for themselves and their families.

Behind these small enterprises lies a much larger story: the groundnuts, soybeans, sunflower, and simsim they sell ultimately come from rural fields tended largely by women farmers. Through the National Oil Seeds Project (NOSP), these farmers are now transforming oilseed cultivation into a structured commercial enterprise linking urban consumption to rural production and opening new paths to financial independence and empowerment.

The invisible backbone

In Uganda, women account for about 70 percent of agricultural labour, yet they often lack ownership of land, access to improved seeds, credit, and formal markets. Oilseed crops such as soybeans, sunflower, simsim and groundnuts, have become a strategic choice because they are drought-tolerant, high-demand and compatible with small plots.

The NOSP, implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries with support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the OPEC Fund for International Development, operates in 81 districts, deliberately targeting women as primary beneficiaries. About 60 percent of participants are women, receiving improved seeds, agronomic training, post-harvest guidance, and cooperative organisation support.

"Women have always been the backbone of our farms. Our goal is to give them the tools, knowledge, and market access to turn farming into a business rather than just survival labour," says Christopher Gumisiriza, NOSP project manager.

Nansubuga's journey

Few stories capture the transformation in Uganda's oilseed sector better than that of Fatimah Nansubuga, a mother of three who now farms soybeans, sunflower and groundnuts in Jaluko Village, Namutumba District.

Born in Kayunga District, she dreamed



A local oil processing line is giving women farmers economic empowerment, turning their soybeans, sunflower and groundnuts into income, independence, and leadership opportunities. PHOTOS/GEORGE KATONGOLE

Seeds of power: Women turning seeds into wealth

of farming her family's land, but customary practices and limited inheritance options denied her that chance. Without land, she moved to Kampala, surviving by selling roasted maize.

In 2023, Nansubuga returned to the village, joining the Magada United Farmers' Cooperative, introduced under NOSP. The cooperative trained her in improved seed varieties, planting techniques, pest management, and post-harvest handling. For the first time, she approached farming not just as survival, but as a business.

Through careful reinvestment, she purchased her own acre of land for Shs1.5m, built a house, acquired livestock and rented four additional acres to expand her farm. Soybeans provide capital, groundnuts offer savings and sunflower adds regular income.

"I used to sell maize by the roadside or carry it across town. Now I grow crops on my own land. That difference is everything," she reflects.

Nansubuga's journey, however, also underscores a broader reality: even with training and opportunity, women in oilseed farming face persistent structural and social challenges that can slow progress or limit profitability.

Challenges remain

Land insecurity is one of the most pressing barriers. Less than 20 percent of women in Uganda legally own land, forcing many to cultivate rented or borrowed plots and restricting long-term investments in improved seeds, irrigation, or storage facilities. Access to credit is another hurdle. Many banks require collateral that women cannot provide, and only about 10 percent of rural women farmers access formal financial services, leaving the rest reliant on informal lenders with high interest rates.

Women also spend long hours in the fields, yet still shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities, including

childcare, cooking and water collection, leaving little time for adopting new technologies or improving post-harvest practices. Many still rely on recycled seeds and basic hand tools, which can limit yields and reduce crop quality.

Market constraints mean women must adapt by selling through suburban kitchens, door-to-door networks, or informal transport routes, increasing labour and reducing margins. Taken together, these barriers highlight why individual effort alone is not enough. Success in oilseed farming often depends on collective organisation, shared knowledge, and access to formal markets.

Engines of women-led transformation

Women are not only producing crops but also leading cooperatives, which have become central to the country's oilseed revolution. According to the Uganda Cooperative Alliance, there are more than 10,000 registered cooperatives nationwide, with women comprising 40 to 50 percent of active members, though leadership positions were historically male-dominated. NOSP ensures women now hold key roles as chairpersons, treasurers and mobilisers, giving them a voice in decisions about production, marketing, and access to credit.

In Kole District, the Te-Opok Community Cooperative Society began in 2016 with 10 male members. Today, membership has grown to 464, including women and youth. By introducing collective marketing, quality control and crop aggregation, the cooperative enables farmers to command higher prices for soybeans, sunflower and simsim.

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Kamutur Oil Seed Farmers' Cooperative Society

In Apac District, the Okutuagwe-Ololango Cooperative demonstrates the power of collective bargaining. "Selling alone made us weak. Cooperatives have given us bargaining power and access to reliable markets," says Jennifer Okodi, member, Okutuagwe-Ololango Cooperative.

Cooperatives participating in NOSP report selling up to 80 percent of their produce through formal buyers, compared with less than 30 percent prior to organised marketing. In Apac District, the Okutuagwe-Ololango Cooperative demonstrates the power of collective bargaining. Women members, who once sold individually at low prices, now negotiate bulk contracts with processors, ensuring better rates and timely payments.

Similarly, the Sebei Farmers' Cooperative Society has more than 1,000 members, nearly 600 of them women. With cooperative support, farmers can meet minimum quality standards required by processors such as Mukwano Industries and Bidco, linking rural fields to urban and industrial markets. "The more united and committed farmers are, the more benefits they will realise. Cooperation ensures collective bargaining power, consistent production standards, and shared learning," explains Alex Mukuluma, monitoring and evaluation officer, NOSP. These cooperatives are centres of training, savings and social support, equipping women with the skills and confidence to run farms as businesses. For women like Nansubuga, the journey from suburban kitchens and hawking stock across Kampala to landownership and cooperative leadership is more than an economic victory as it helps reclaim identity and dignity.

"I did not recover my parents' land, but I built my own. That is my victory," she reflects.