

THE FRUIT OF LABOR

Aïssatou Seydi

When you look for something with a desperate heart, you will eventually find it. Never settle for less, know your worth and do not be ashamed to reach the high standards you think you deserve. It may be a long chase, but if one craves to succeed in life, they must be ready to look around with an open mind and maybe they'd find what they've been looking for all this while.

The best decision

When Ms Aïssatou SEYDI was looking for a company where she could work to earn a livelihood as well as make the best use of her time, she was advised by a local NGO to explore the cashew sector, given its obvious scope. And as she looks back, accepting this advice was probably one of the best decisions of her life.

President of the economic interest group FASS DIOM, processor and Trader in Ziguinchor, SENEGAL, 56 year old Ms Aïssatou SEYDI is a woman of many talents. With over a decade worth of experience in the cashew industry, she has abundant knowledge and vast understanding of the sector.

The first step

As we trace back to her journey, we see that although she knew a few women in cashew business, they were used to doing traditional processing, and she wasn't familiar with women who were managers themselves. Thus, Ms SEYDI took the first step by educating herself and opted for a vocational training in local products processing (fruits and vegetables), local cereals and wood and non-wood forest products.

Education came handy when she didn't have much experience

Trainings in cashew nut processing, in cashew processing unit management, and a few years later a training in cashew apple processing, and non-fermented juice also helped her strengthen the foundation and gain an understanding of the different zones of the market.

This education served as a tool for her to begin her very own enterprise even though she did not have any prior experience in it. While many other ladies were still into the traditional methods, she didn't shy away from the idea of setting up her own work place and putting in her sweat and blood to establish it. She believed learning to be a continuous process and constantly took up a number of trainings in cashew processing techniques, and business management to equip her in the organization.





Content with her achievements

With a current strength of eight workers, with seven of them being women, Ms SEYDI is glad to have come this far and to have been able to provide a platform for other women to work and proceed with her.

Ensuring smooth flow

Cooking, pre-drying, oven drying, de-hulling, grading and packaging are some of the daily chores that are carried out at the enterprise every day. However, being the Managing Director, Ms SEYDI's main job is to supervise the work being done by the other members of the company as well as to ensure the smooth flow of labor without any hassles.

A fair trade

Given the amount of effort she has put into the industry, when asked, she beams that a lot of people, especially women, are attracted towards her company and labor is available without any complains. In regard to her male counterparts, she admits that neither does she face any problems from their side nor is she denied rewards in their comparison. She is positive that she is recognized in the cashew sector and everyone receives the fruits of their efforts.

Having said that, she is of the opinion that providing an access to appropriate equipment and raw materials will help improve the overall position of women in the industry. She also believes that the lack of adequate funding prevents women from becoming leaders in the cashew industry.

An ethical approach

While they do not offer any fancy benefits, her company has an ethical approach of work which involves offering a fair and unbiased policy to all. Taking into consideration the intense amount of work put in by the laborers, they are offered lunch during the break and a short time to relax and refresh.

Reaching high standards

When asked about the uniqueness of her products and what makes them stand out, we were informed that their company promises international standards for their products, and this is also the reason for their high prices in the market. It is no easy job to reach the high standards set and she faces a number of challenges in the process, which includes access to funding and inventories of raw materials. Extremely high and unsteady prices and equipment modernization also remain some big issues that still need to be overcome.

However, at the moment, direct collaboration with the producers and microfinance support are some of the strategies that the company has adopted in order to ensure the easy flow of work.

Sharing the ups and lows with family

Speaking about her family and personal life, she says a few of her family members work with her in the factory and share her struggles and success. And those members who are not directly involved in the factory, ease her tasks by doing the household chores due to which she can concentrate and spend more time at work – which rounds up to about 10 hours per day. It is due to this reason that she is able to strike a positive work life balance and their support helps her aim higher. She is extremely passionate of her work, and simply put, it means the world to her.

Focusing on big numbers

In the years to come, she hopes to expand her factory and see it grow with a processing capacity of 1000 tons per annum. While that is a big number, with her focused vision and the urge to improve with every passing day, it definitely is not impossible to accomplish the dream!

