



Upholding A Legacy

Annick Tengue

A land of music and dance, housing numerous tribes with unique choices of attire and ornaments, and well preserved flora and fauna, is Benin, a French-speaking West African nation. It is popular for its Beninese cuisine which incorporates exotic ingredients and involves the use of a number of sauces, the traditional trade of this place being agriculture and cotton manufacture and production. Although regarded as a region of economic instability, it is rich in culture while people are wealthy in their hospitality.

Benin custom propagates balance

The Benin customs fairly approves of women working to lend a helping hand in the family's economy, but they are also required to look after the household chores. Since not many in the nation can afford the luxuries of refrigerators and other home appliances, it directly means that striking a work life balance may be more difficult as compared to women of developed countries.

Women in the cashew sector – An important highlight

Amongst these seemingly known facts about Benin, one that does not gain much limelight is the commendable cashew production. The nation is the ninth largest producer of cashew in the world, but the country is still underrepresented on the global cashew market. With this being said, another area that needs to be highlighted in this regard is the active participation of women in the industry which is otherwise ignored.

Thus, in this section, we bring to you the life of Ms Annick Tengue, a Beninese woman in her late adulthood, who has managed to contribute significantly to the cashew market. In fact, her factory is one of the most important in Benin, with a production capacity of up to 1,800 kg.

Following her mother's lead

Confident, smart, and with a clear vision for a better future, Ms. Tengue has been a part of the market from the past sixteen years. Today, she is the owner and managing director of AFETRAPA (Association of Women Processors of Agricultural Products) with a team of 30 members, more than 25 of which are women.





Talking about her early life, she says, as a kid, she lived in Cotonou, Littoral department, where she studied and then moved to Calavi, where she lives nowadays. Her father owned a chemicals distribution company while her mother was a lawyer before she initiated her own cashew business. Her mother was the first person in Benin to start raw cashew nut processing into white kernels. The lack of finances led to setting up the establishment in a traditional form, with out much modern equipment. Since Ms. Tengue has been a witness to her mother’s struggles and efforts that have gone behind stabilizing the factory, this experience, in itself has been a huge lesson for her to deal with her day to day affairs.

From Accountant to the proprietor of AFETRAPA

She first joined the business as an Accountant, so as to use her degree in Accountancy and help take her mother’s enterprise forward. While this was her initial job, working with a parent as dedicated as her mother, she also learnt the dos and don’ts of managing, trade and processing. This training she received came in handy when her mother passed away and Ms. Tengue decided she wouldn’t let the years of hard work die with her, and thus, today, being the owner of AFETRAPA, she continues the legacy left behind.

Hurdles in the path of flourishing the cashew business

However, living in a country that is still in the process of developing, it is not easy to establish and flourish the empire that one builds. Even to this day, Ms. Tengue is met with a number of challenges but her effort to overcome them is what makes her admirable. She says, she faces difficulty when it comes to labor, for work in cashew business is complicated as the whole process is made by traditional methods and people do not appreciate getting injured. Since the drying, smoking and shelling are done manually, it opens doors to sickness and in such a state, a considerable amount of workers abandon the jobs. This is one of the reasons why she finds it a challenge to get women to work in her enterprise, another being husbands who aren’t willing to let their wives on jobs.

Providing a wholesome package to the women employees
But Ms. Tengue, being the kind of woman who wouldn’t let the problems define her, tries to balance out the





hardships by providing a number of facilities to the women workers. She tries to aid her employees by literacy trainings, for she herself is a degree holder while being fluent in two languages, namely French and English. She also tries her best to raise awareness regarding women's rights and imparts education on HIV/Aids. As a woman, she understands the problems faced by her kind, especially those whose husbands are reticent to their works because they do not wish for them to possess financial independence.

It is this quality of hers, to stay humble and understand someone else's issues, while respecting them that has probably got her so far. She is not only concerned about subjects that bother her, but is also willing to help out her community as a whole with their problems.

The secret remains unrevealed

Moving on, while commenting on the quality of her products, she says they stand out from the rest in the market because of a secret ingredient she uses. It is this ingredient that makes all the products of her brand

different, the one that is characteristic of her enterprise. However, despite this uniqueness, she does not receive a higher price for buyers settle their rates in the market.

Relishing the demanding work

Talking about her job, she says the first activity is to receive the raw materials. These are then handed over to the employees where it is dried, smoked and shelled under her watch. Once done, the kernel is buttered, caramelized or left in the natural form. Now, as the products are ready for packaging and sale, she adds in her secret ingredient. These are the activities that are carried out at her enterprise, a brief summary of her typical day at work.

It requires a lot of investment of time and energy, but she isn't one to complain for she enjoys her work.

The boss believes in equality

Contrary to what one when may think about her being the female boss and having male employees under her, she says she does not face any hassles with such a concept. In fact, all workers, whether men or women respect her as the head and go about their daily chores. Elaborating on the same, she feels largely, women are not denied rewards when compared to their male counterparts. Equality is the key, although sometimes, not all may follow it.

She also thinks that the position of the women in the industry can be improved by government support so as to ease their loan application. They must be given ample



training so that the knowledge shared will aid them to work better and help acquire new processing skills that can prove to be beneficial.

Finding strategies to problems

Continuing about some of the challenges she faces in the general market, she says supply of raw materials is difficult, add to it the suppliers who taxed them in the beginning for the sole reason that they were women. Also, it is complicated to meet the growing demands.

Another struggle is that when the buyers get used to a specific flavor or type of product, it sometimes proves to be a task to introduce a new product and encourage them to try it. Giving an example, Ms. Tengue says, when her mother introduced caramelized kernels, customers were hesitant to buy the new variety.

But as successful people do not let obstacles in their path stop their climb to the pinnacle, instead of being let down or withholding the production of the innovation, they found a strategy. They increased the publicity of the caramelized kernel and also let the customers taste the product for free, thereby accomplishing the earlier battle and making a place for this variety in the market.

Since getting financial support to continue the enterprise is also a problem, she says they overcame this by applying and receiving fund from the African Development Foundation and this has proved to be helpful in building the factory. The money has helped with the equipment, and work has been made slightly easier by purchasing machinery like crushers.

She is not one to compromise on family

Talking about her personal life, she confesses that being in a position like her, handling a job that is her livelihood; it takes effort and requires investment of time. Her husband is extremely encouraging and as much as he can, she tries not to compromise her role as a spouse and mother by doing her best and spends time with her husband and four children during the weekends. The support from family means a lot to her.

A clear vision

When asked, where she sees herself five years down the line, she clearly states her goals. She visualizes herself in her big sized processing unit, with modern equipment, more employees. Since currently she uses breakable bottles for packaging, she hopes that in the coming years, she can replace them with unbreakable bottles with round tips, and printed bags which are more professional. In addition to this, her biggest goal is that by then, she hopefully will be exporting her products worldwide.

No shortcut to success!

While giving advice, she says, other women like her can survive in such a male dominated market by working hard. She is of the opinion that there is no other way to success because hard work eventually pays off. She does not believe in pitying oneself or cribbing about a situation. She thinks there is no force that can stop women from becoming leaders in the market, provided this is what they want.

If someone still has doubts, Ms. Tengue's story is inspiring enough to gain motivation

