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CATEGORY: Human Interest Story | Women's Enterprise | Value Chain Development | East Africa

From the Lakeshore to the Supermarket Shelf: How Akinyi Built a Business That Lasts

"For eleven years, Akinyi Atieno processed and sold smoked fish by the shores of Lake Victoria — skilled, determined, and stuck. Then EMPOWER arrived. This is the story of what happened next."

By Mbuyu Bilga | EMPOWER Communications Officer, ITC Kenya | Kisumu, March 2026

47%Revenue increase
in 9 months**4**Naivas branches
now supplied**4**Women workers
hired from community

The smoke rises before dawn. By 5:30 in the morning, Akinyi Atieno is already at her kiln — a corrugated iron structure she built herself, piece by piece, over three years — tending the tilapia that will be smoked, packaged, and sold by midday. She has been doing this since she was twenty-four years old. She is thirty-five now.

Akinyi lives in Dunga, a fishing village on the southern edge of Lake Victoria, about eight kilometres from Kisumu's city centre. She is a single mother of three — her eldest, a daughter named Zawadi, is thirteen and already helps with the packaging after school. Her business, Akinyi Smoked Fish, is well-known in the local market. Traders come from as far as Kisumu town and Ahero to buy from her. She is, by any measure, a successful woman.

And yet, for eleven years, her business had a ceiling. She could not break through it, no matter how hard she worked.

 Akinyi Atieno at her smoking kiln in Dunga village, Kisumu County, February 2026. | Photo: EMPOWER Programme / ITC Kenya

THE CEILING

The problem, Akinyi explains, was not demand. There was always demand. The problem was everything else.

'I knew my fish was good,' she says, sitting in the shade of a mango tree outside her home. 'But when I tried to sell to the supermarket in town, they said I needed a Kenya Bureau of Standards certificate. I didn't know what that was. I didn't know how to get it. And I didn't have the money to hire someone to help me.'

She tried to get a bank loan to expand her kiln and buy a small refrigerated storage unit. Three banks turned her down. 'They said I didn't have collateral. I have my kiln, I have my equipment, I have eleven years of customers, but none of that counts as collateral in their system.'

She was not alone. According to ITC's 2024 Kenya Women Enterprise Survey, 67% of women-led MSMEs in the agro-processing sector report that access to formal credit is their single biggest constraint. Sixty-one percent say they have never received any formal business training. And 54% say they have never been able to sell to a formal buyer.

"I knew my fish was good. But I didn't know how to prove it to the people who could pay me what it was worth."

EMPOWER ARRIVES

In March 2025, an EMPOWER Business Development Advisor named Ochieng' visited Dunga village as part of the programme's pilot phase in Kisumu County. He held a community meeting under the same mango tree where Akinyi now sits. He explained what EMPOWER was offering: free business training, help with certification, connections to buyers, and access to a new credit guarantee scheme.

Akinyi was sceptical. 'I had heard promises before,' she says. 'Government programmes that came and went. NGOs that gave you a training and then disappeared.' But she went to the first training session anyway.

The first module was on financial management. Akinyi had been running her business for eleven years without ever separating her personal and business finances. By the end of the two-day session, she had set up a simple ledger and calculated her profit margin for the first time: 23%.

'I was shocked,' she says, laughing. 'I thought it would be more. But then I understood because now I could see where the money was going. And I could start to fix it.'

 Akinyi reviews her business ledger with EMPOWER Business Development Advisor Ochieng' Otieno, March 2025. | Photo: EMPOWER Programme / ITC Kenya

THE BREAKTHROUGH

Over the following six months, Akinyi completed all fourteen modules of the EMPOWER Business Development Services curriculum. She attended a buyer-seller matchmaking event in Kisumu in July 2025, where she met the procurement manager of a regional supermarket chain, Naivas.

With support from her EMPOWER advisor, she applied for and received her Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) Grade A certification in August 2025. In September 2025, Akinyi signed her first formal supply agreement with Naivas — a commitment to supply 200 kilograms of KEBS-certified smoked tilapia per week to three Kisumu branches.

"When I signed that contract, I cried. Not because I was sad. Because I finally felt like a real businesswoman — not just someone trying to survive."

The impact was immediate. Her weekly revenue increased from an average of KES 18,000 to KES 26,500, a 47% increase. She hired two additional workers from her community, both women. She used her increased income to apply for a loan through the EMPOWER Credit Guarantee Scheme, in partnership with Equity Bank, and received KES 150,000 to purchase a second kiln and a small solar-powered cold storage unit.

By December 2025, nine months after joining EMPOWER, Akinyi Smoked Fish was supplying four Naivas branches, employing four workers, and generating a monthly profit of KES 85,000. Her profit margin had increased from 23% to 38%.

RIPPLE EFFECTS

Akinyi's story does not end with her own business. It ripples outward.

Her two new employees, Awino and Nafula, are both single mothers from Dunga village. Awino had previously been selling vegetables at the local market, earning an average of KES 3,000 per week. She now earns KES 8,500 per week at Akinyi Smoked Fish, with regular hours and a written employment contract.

'Akinyi taught me what EMPOWER taught her,' says Awino. 'She showed me how to keep records. She explained the KEBS standards to me. I feel like I'm learning a profession, not just doing a job.'

Akinyi has also become an informal mentor to other women in the EMPOWER programme. Her daughter Zawadi, now thirteen, has started keeping the business accounts on a second-hand smartphone. 'She is better at Excel than I am,' Akinyi says, laughing. 'I want her to go to university. That is what this is all for.'

"I want my daughter to see that a woman can build something. Something real. Something that lasts."

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Akinyi is one of 200 women entrepreneurs who participated in the EMPOWER pilot phase in Kisumu County. Across the pilot cohort, the average revenue increase was 28% within six months. Eighty-five enterprises signed formal off-take agreements with verified buyers. Twelve enterprises received KEBS certification. And one, a textile manufacturer from Kisumu's Kondele neighbourhood, has begun exporting to Uganda.

The EMPOWER Programme, funded by the European Union and implemented by ITC and Ecologists Without Borders, is now scaling up to five counties — Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, and Meru, with a target of 2,000 enterprises over four years.

For Mbuyu Bilga, EMPOWER's Communications Officer, Akinyi's story captures exactly what the programme is designed to achieve. 'We talk a lot about numbers, 2,000 enterprises, 4,000 jobs, EUR 5.5 million. Those numbers matter. But behind every number is a woman like Akinyi. A woman who was already working incredibly hard, who already had the talent and the determination, and who just needed the system to stop working against her and start working for her.'

WHAT'S NEXT

Akinyi has her eyes on the next horizon. She has enrolled in the EMPOWER export readiness module and is working with EWB's Green Enterprise Network team to register on the platform, a global marketplace connecting women-led enterprises with international buyers. Her target: to supply smoked fish to at least one hotel chain in Nairobi by the end of 2026.

'Lake Victoria has the best tilapia in the world,' she says, with a certainty that leaves no room for argument. 'People in Nairobi should be eating it. People in Kampala. People in Dar es Salaam. Why not?' She pauses, and looks out at the lake — silver and vast in the morning light. 'I used to think my ceiling was here, in Dunga. Now I think my ceiling is much higher.'

The smoke from her kiln is still rising. But now, it is rising towards something.

ABOUT THE EMPOWER PROGRAMME

The Enterprise and Market Pathways for Women's Economic Resilience (EMPOWER) Programme is a EUR 5.5 million, 48-month initiative implemented by ITC and Ecologists Without Borders, funded by the European Union. It targets 2,000 women-led MSMEs in agro-processing and light manufacturing across five Kenyan counties.

For more information: empower.intracen.org

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