



# Gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area

*Defining the role of the  
regional economic  
communities*



United Nations  
Economic Commission for Africa





**Gender-responsive  
implementation of the  
Agreement Establishing  
the African Continental  
Free Trade Area**

*Defining the role of the  
regional economic  
communities*



United Nations  
Economic Commission for Africa





Gender-responsive implementation  
of the Agreement Establishing the African  
Continental Free Trade Area:  
*Defining the role of the regional  
economic communities*

To order copies of *Gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area: Defining the role of the regional economic communities*, please contact:

Publications Section  
Economic Commission for Africa  
P.O. Box 3001  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
Tel: +251 11 544-9900  
Fax: +251 11 551-4416  
E-mail: [ecainfo@uneca.org](mailto:ecainfo@uneca.org)  
Web: [www.uneca.org](http://www.uneca.org)

© 2021 Economic Commission for Africa  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

All rights reserved  
First printing June 2021

Material in this publication may be freely quoted or reprinted.  
Acknowledgement is requested, together with a copy of the publication.

The designations employed in this report and the material presented in it do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa or the African Union concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Designed and printed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia by the ECA Printing and Publishing Unit. ISO 14001:2015 certified. Printed on chlorine free paper.

Cover photos: <https://www.shutterstock.com>

## Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Trade and gender in the regional economic communities: institutional mandates and policy frameworks</b>	<b>4</b>
A. Gender considerations in the legal frameworks of regional economic communities	4
B. Mainstreaming gender into trade policies at the regional level	5
C. Gaps and challenges	7
D. Opportunities for the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area	8
<b>III. Programmes and initiatives</b>	<b>12</b>
A. Cross-border trade, gender and the regional economic communities	12
B. Gender in the regional economic communities: donor-driven and overlooked	15
C. Key prerequisites for a gender-responsive AfCFTA	16
<b>IV. Women traders and entrepreneurs' networks</b>	<b>20</b>
A. Regional channels for working with women entrepreneurs and traders to facilitate implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area	20
B. Establishing linkages to AfCFTA governance structures through the regional economic communities	22
<b>V. Capacity of the regional economic communities to drive forward the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area</b>	<b>24</b>
A. Gender-sensitive analysis and data collection	24
B. Human resources required to implement a trade and gender agenda	25
<b>VI. Conclusion and recommendations</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>VII. Additional references</b>	<b>30</b>



Gender-responsive implementation  
of the Agreement Establishing the African  
Continental Free Trade Area:  
*Defining the role of the regional  
economic communities*

***Tables***

Table 1: Institutional arrangements and staff working on gender in the regional economic communities _____	26
Table 2: Gender mainstreaming in trade at the level of the regional economic communities – an overview _____	31



## Executive summary

With the adoption of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area,<sup>1</sup> African countries acknowledged the importance of achieving gender equality in order to promote structural transformation. Ensuring that the Agreement is implemented in a gender-responsive manner is now more crucial than ever, as evidence shows clearly that women are more likely than men to be negatively affected by the health, socioeconomic and trade repercussions of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

To accelerate the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement, it will be critical to build on existing initiatives, knowledge, and capacities, including, in particular, at the level of regional economic communities, which continue to lead trade liberalization in Africa.

There are clear opportunities to build on and scale up the activities of the regional economic communities in addressing trade and gender within the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The legal frameworks of several regional economic communities include provisions addressing women's economic empowerment and their participation in trade and business activities, providing a basis for initiatives to address trade and gender at the regional level. Several projects and initiatives in that regard have already been designed and implemented, with the support of relevant partners, and could be expanded in the context of AfCFTA. However, significant gaps must be addressed to strengthen the capacity of the regional economic communities to address trade and gender effectively.

---

<sup>1</sup> The text of the Agreement is available at: [au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36437-treaty-consolidated\\_text\\_on\\_cfta\\_-\\_en.pdf](http://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36437-treaty-consolidated_text_on_cfta_-_en.pdf) (accessed on 15 October 2020).

To address those gaps, a consolidated and practicable regional economic community framework on trade and gender will be needed, with effective linkages to relevant continental African Union strategies. That framework should be integrated into AfCFTA governance structures. The overall effectiveness of that continental framework will furthermore depend on its translation into actionable initiatives, a clearly defined reporting mechanism, and the availability of adequate resources to facilitate implementation and follow-up.

Further analysis is required to identify the appropriate institutional set up for regular reporting on the operationalization of the trade and gender agenda. One option could be to establish a dedicated continental working group on trade and gender within the governance structures of AfCFTA. Another could be to designate a high-level political champion to serve as a special rapporteur on the gender dimension of AfCFTA. The recently established AfCFTA secretariat could lend itself well to convening the working group and to providing support to a political champion, through a dedicated and appropriately staffed trade and gender directorate.

Focusing regional interventions on small-scale cross-border trade could give impetus to the gender responsive implementation of the Agreement. Interventions, such as simplified trade regimes, would need to be reviewed from

a gender perspective and made explicitly gender-responsive. In parallel, it will be crucial to address funding gaps in order to leverage the transformative potential of cross-border trade to promote gender streamlining. This will require a fundamental shift in outlook at the planning and programming levels within the regional economic communities. Regional priorities on trade and gender will also need to be further mainstreamed in donors' support programmes.

In addition, networks of women traders and entrepreneurs will require support to take full advantage of the opportunities stemming from the establishment of AfCFTA. This will entail building their capacity to understand the terms of the Agreement, and ensuring that the interests and concerns of women traders and entrepreneurs are fully articulated in all AfCFTA governance structures.

The systematic mapping of networks of women traders and entrepreneurs will help to identify gaps in terms of women's representation and interaction between national and regional level structures, and could give impetus to a campaign to broaden the membership base and strengthen collaboration. The regional economic communities are ideally placed to coordinate efforts aimed at building the capacities of women entrepreneurs and traders, and promoting collaboration at the national, interregional and continental levels.





Ultimately, however, the systematic and effective mainstreaming of gender in policymaking and planning processes depends on the capacity to conduct analysis of gender-disaggregated data, and the availability of adequate human and financial resources to implement and follow up on relevant gender mainstreaming initiatives. A major campaign is therefore needed to strengthen the capacity of relevant stakeholders to collect gen-

der-disaggregated data at the national, regional and cross-border levels. Rather than focusing on staff headcounts, however, meaningful change can occur if regional economic community secretariats and member States make serious efforts to understand the interplay between trade and gender. It is only on that basis that relevant policies can be formulated and implemented in a more gender-sensitive manner.





## Introduction

## I

The Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area entered into force on 30 May 2019. The Agreement was signed with the aim of establishing a single market for goods, services and investments for 1.3 billion people across 54 African countries.<sup>2</sup> In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the establishment of AfCFTA, originally scheduled for 1 July 2020, has been postponed until January 2021. Given the impact of the pandemic on intercontinental trade and its devastating socioeconomic repercussions, intra-Africa trade will be critical for the continent's recovery.

Trade is widely recognized as promoting socioeconomic development in Africa. As such, AfCFTA is expected to contribute to the structural transformation of African economies. Through the creation of larger markets and regional value chains, AfCFTA is expected to create jobs, increase value addition, promote

industrialization and improve standards of living. Intra-African trade in particular has significant potential for transforming the continent due to its diversified nature and proven resilience during global economic crises.

While trade liberalization may, in the long term, bring net benefits overall, it is also clear that its benefits and associated costs are not evenly distributed across economic sectors, and fundamentally, between genders. In some cases, women have disproportionately benefitted from increased trade, notably as low-skilled workers in the textile industry. In most cases, however, women are at a disadvantage and are less likely than men to reap the benefits of increased trade, owing to their lower participation and lower wages in export-oriented sectors of the economy, their limited access to productive assets and opportunities, including education, income, credit and

---

<sup>2</sup> Eritrea is the only African country that has not yet signed the Agreement.

land, and their limited involvement in trade negotiations.

It is widely acknowledged at the national, regional and international levels that increased trade may, in fact, widen the inequality gap between men and women and further marginalize women. To address that challenge, numerous measures have been adopted to support the participation of women in trade, and to encourage policymakers to adopt strategies that promote gender mainstreaming. At the global level, a major milestone was reached in that respect in 2017, when 118 members of the World Trade Organization and observers, meeting in Buenos Aires, endorsed the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment with a view to helping women reach their full potential in the world economy.<sup>3</sup>

African countries have explicitly acknowledged the pivotal role of gender equality in promoting structural transformation. Indeed, the preamble of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area underscores the importance of gender equality in the development of international

trade and economic cooperation, alongside international security, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Article 3 (e) further specifies that one of the general objectives of the Agreement is to “promote and attain sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, gender equality and structural transformation of the States Parties”.

Looking ahead, the capacity of African countries to consider the impact on women of trade policies and ensure that AfCFTA is gender-responsive will be crucial, in particular when there is increasing evidence that women are more likely than men to be negatively affected by the health, socioeconomic and trade repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in a recent policy brief, the Secretary-General of the United Nations stated that “emerging evidence on the impact of COVID-19 suggests that women's economic and productive lives will be affected disproportionately and differently from men. Across the globe, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. They have less access to social protections and are the majority of single-parent households. Their capacity

---

<sup>3</sup> The text of the Declaration is available at: [www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/minist\\_e/mc11\\_e/genderdeclarationmc11\\_e.pdf](http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc11_e/genderdeclarationmc11_e.pdf) (accessed on 14 October 2020)

<sup>4</sup> For further information, See World Trade Organization, *The economic impact of COVID-19 on women in vulnerable sectors and economies, Information Note* (August, 2020). Available at [www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/news20\\_e/info\\_note\\_covid\\_05aug20\\_e.pdf](http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news20_e/info_note_covid_05aug20_e.pdf); African Union, *Framework Document on the Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: African Union Guidelines on Gender-Responsive Responses to COVID-19* (2020) Available at [au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38617-doc-gewe\\_and\\_covid\\_19\\_eng.pdf](http://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38617-doc-gewe_and_covid_19_eng.pdf); United Nations Development Programme, *Briefing Note: The economic impacts of COVID-19 and gender inequality. Recommendations for policymakers* (April, 2020). Available at [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PNUD\\_GENERO\\_COVID19\\_ENG\\_FINAL\\_3.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PNUD_GENERO_COVID19_ENG_FINAL_3.pdf) (all documents accessed on 14 October 2020).



to absorb economic shocks is therefore less than that of men.”<sup>5</sup>

As, however, the mainstreaming of gender in the negotiation and implementation of trade agreements is a relatively new process, much remains to be learned regarding the practical steps that should be taken to uphold the gender equality principles enshrined in trade agreements.

The purpose of the present report is therefore to assess gender mainstreaming in trade at the regional level and identify ways to promote the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. The findings of the report are based on a literature review, a data collection exercise in selected regional economic communities, a desk review, and the outcomes of continental workshops on trade and gender organized by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

African Trade Policy Centre (ATPC).<sup>6</sup>

The report identifies challenges and opportunities for building on the activities conducted by the regional economic communities to address trade and gender concerns.<sup>7</sup> Section II of the report provides an analysis of the institutional frameworks of the regional economic communities in addition to their mandates in relation to trade and gender. Section III provides an overview of the programmes and initiatives formulated on the basis of those mandates. Section IV provides an overview of potential ways of encouraging women entrepreneurs and traders to play a full role in the implementation of the Agreement, while Section V looks at the current capacity of regional economic communities to promote gender mainstreaming in trade. Section VI, the final section of the report, set out a number of key policy recommendations.

---

<sup>5</sup> For further information, see UN-Women, *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women* (9 April 2020). Available at [www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406) (accessed on 14 October 2020).

<sup>6</sup> This study consolidates presentations made by the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) at the ATPC Annual Continental Workshop on Trade and Gender, held in 2017, in addition to the findings of a data collection exercise carried out in the East African Community (EAC), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern Development Community (SADC) between February 2018 and February 2019. Unstructured interviews were carried out with directors and programme officers in each of the regional economic communities visited. While the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Community of Sahelo-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) were not included in the scope of this study, the state of gender mainstreaming in those regional economic communities was analysed by means of a desk review.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the state of gender mainstreaming in trade within the regional economic communities, see table 2 at the end of the present report.



## II Trade and gender in the regional economic communities: institutional mandates and policy frameworks

The legal frameworks of several regional economic communities include provisions addressing women's economic empowerment and their participation in trade and business activities, providing a basis for initiatives to address trade and gender at the regional level. Several projects and initiatives in that regard have already been designed and implemented, with the support of relevant partners, and could be expanded in the context of AfCFTA. However, significant gaps must be addressed to strengthen the capacity of the regional economic communities to address trade and gender effectively.

### A. Gender considerations in the legal frameworks of regional economic communities

In line with their mandates, several regional economic communities have ad-

opted robust frameworks to promote gender mainstreaming in the area of trade.<sup>8</sup> In the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), gender equality provisions in those frameworks seek to promote women's economic empowerment and their participation in trade and business activities.

For example, chapter 22 of the Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community and chapter 24 of the Treaty Establishing a Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa call for measures to be adopted to maximize the contribution of women in efforts to promote socioeconomic transformation and sustainable growth. Both treaties moreover call for efforts to enhance the role of women in business and include

---

<sup>8</sup> Table 2 in the present report provides an overview of those frameworks



provisions on their participation in policy formulation and implementation, their access to financial resources, and capacity-building initiatives to address the specific needs of women traders and entrepreneurs.

Gender issues are comprehensively addressed within the scope of the Supplementary Act Relating to Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in the ECOWAS Region,<sup>9</sup> and in the Revised SADC Protocol on Gender and Development.<sup>10</sup> In chapters dedicated to productive resources and employment, both of those documents include provisions similar to the aforementioned provisions of the treaties establishing COMESA and EAC, while also calling on member States to review their trade and entrepreneurship policies to make them more gender-responsive. The Supplementary Act also details a number of sectoral measures to strengthen the competitiveness of women in agriculture and promote the involvement of women in infrastructure, energy and mining.

Gender issues and their relationship to trade feature less prominently in the founding documents of the Economic

Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Community of Sahelo-Saharan States (CEN-SAD). Article 60 (b) of the Treaty Establishing the Community of Central African States calls for collaborative research on policies to improve the economic, social and cultural status of women and to further the integration of women in development activities. At the eleventh ordinary session of Heads of State and Government, held in 2004, Central African countries endorsed a declaration on gender equality and made a commitment to mainstreaming gender in national and sectoral development policies and programmes and promoting women's access to economic resources, credit, and land. There are no specific provisions on gender issues in the founding treaties of CEN-SAD and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU).

## **B. Mainstreaming gender into trade policies at the regional level**

Regional economic communities that have adopted comprehensive gender frameworks are now successfully inte-

<sup>9</sup> As per article 52 thereof, the Supplementary Act is an annex to, and as such, an integral part of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty, article 63 of which deals specifically with women and development. That article provides: "Member States undertake to formulate, harmonise, co-ordinate and establish appropriate policies and mechanisms for enhancement of the economic, social and cultural conditions of women."

<sup>10</sup> While the Declaration and Treaty of the Southern African Development Community focuses, primarily, on the promotion of regional integration with a view to fostering economic development, Article 5.1 provides, among other purposes, that one of the core objectives of the Treaty is to mainstream gender in the process of community building. The Revised SADC Protocol entered into force in 2018 upon ratification by two thirds of SADC member States. To date, the Revised SADC Protocol has been ratified by all members of SADC with the exception of Mauritius.

grating gender into trade policy. Thus, specific objectives of the ECOWAS Trade and Gender Action Plan, adopted at ministerial level, include promoting the development and implementation of gender-sensitive trade policies by ECOWAS member States, enhancing women's productive capacity and export competitiveness, strengthening cooperation in trade and border management, and increasing investment in gender-sensitive infrastructure to facilitate trade.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing on their institutional mandates, EAC, COMESA and SADC have also formulated comprehensive policies on gender.<sup>12</sup> Those policies articulate the commitment of those regional economic communities to promote gender equality in trade and within the broader economy. The policies have been adopted to promote equitable access and control of productive resources and economic benefits, and provide, among other things, for the generation of gender-disaggregated data that can be used in trade analysis, the design of gender-sensitive financial products, reviews of border procedures and infrastructure to ensure their gender responsiveness, and raising the awareness of customs officials of gender issues and the specific concerns of women involved in cross-border trade.

SADC is particularly advanced in terms of its gender mainstreaming framework.

Indeed, SADC has not only formulated a comprehensive strategy on gender, but has also developed a toolkit to support efforts by its member States to mainstream gender across their policies, including in trade-related areas. The SADC Industrialization Strategy further integrates gender as an enabling requirement and provides the basis for a programme to promote women's economic empowerment.

Efforts by regional economic communities to mainstream gender in trade policies and practices have provided opportunities for partners to support relevant projects, both within and among those regional economic communities. The ECOWAS Trade and Gender Action Plan, for example, was developed with the support of ECA. COMESA designed its planning tool to ensure gender mainstreaming in trade with the support of the European Union, while EAC developed a guide for cross-border traders with the support of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the German Agency for International Cooperation. Several initiatives to promote cooperation and the sharing of best practices among regional economic communities have also received support from relevant partners. For example, ILO facilitated a visit by ECOWAS officials to EAC headquarters to study how that regional economic community had developed manuals on cross-border

---

<sup>11</sup> In what can arguably be seen as a positive repercussion of gender mainstreaming at the regional level, ECOWAS has been developing a regional response to the COVID-19 pandemic. That response includes the formulation of gender-sensitive guidelines on trade facilitation. Those guidelines have not yet been adopted by Member States.

<sup>12</sup> ECCAS is in the process of adopting a policy on gender.





trade, and facilitated the establishment of the East African Women in Business Platform. Meanwhile, the African Development Bank has provided support to 50 Million African Women Speak, a digital networking platform established by COMESA, EAC and ECOWAS to help African women entrepreneurs to source and share information on financial and non-financial services.<sup>13</sup>

### C. Gaps and challenges

Significant gaps and challenges will need to be addressed to ensure that regional economic communities are well-placed to support the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area.

First, regional economic communities operate at the regional level and within the limits of the mandates entrusted to them by their member States. Even in cases where gender is mainstreamed in their work programmes, regional economic communities cannot design and implement national-level gender-responsive policies or programmes unless

they are granted a specific mandate to do so.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore critical for national gender-sensitive implementation strategies to be adopted prior to implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area,<sup>15</sup> as that will, in turn, facilitate complementary action at the regional level, in areas such as coordination, monitoring and capacity-building.

Second, tangible progress can only be achieved if relevant frameworks are translated into action. The risk otherwise is that stakeholders' commitment to gender mainstreaming will wane and, at a more basic level, that their understanding of the concept of gender will remain limited. This is apparent in the ECOWAS region, where, despite the adoption of the ECOWAS Trade and Gender Action Plan, it has proved challenging to translate the Action Plan into specific actions on the ground, and where only limited human and financial resources have been made available to oversee implementation.

Third, even in countries where there is significant political will for change and practical steps have been taken to address the

<sup>13</sup> See section IV of this report for further details.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that, while the Agreement Establishing the Intergovernmental Authority on Development may not include specific provisions on gender, the Authority has developed a gender policy and strategy in addition to institutional technical documents to promote gender mainstreaming in the workplace. Effective implementation and monitoring of commitments appears limited, however, as commitments are not binding and no accountability mechanisms have been established to ensure compliance by member States.

<sup>15</sup> ECA has been actively supporting African countries to ensure that they make the most of the opportunity for greater gender equality offered under AfCFTA. Building on the outcomes of a report published in 2018, ECA provided support to 15 African countries to help them in developing national strategies for implementing AfCFTA in 2019. Furthermore, AfCFTA and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP) organized an online training course in September 2020 to strengthen policymakers' capacity to advance gender-equal outcomes in their implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area.

linkages between trade and gender at the regional level, there is often limited follow-up on implementation. In fact, monitoring and accountability mechanisms adopted to ensure that progress is made on trade and gender commitments are often weak. Only COMESA and SADC report that they are developing implementation matrices to monitor progress and even those regional economic communities report that only limited progress has been achieved in terms of achieving the objectives of their trade and gender agendas. Indeed, SADC is still piloting its monitoring and evaluation tool, while, in COMESA, significant challenges are posed by a general lack of understanding of the concept of gender and gender mainstreaming, and by insufficient gender-disaggregated data. As for EAC, the Community's Gender Equality and Equity Bill entered into force in 2018 and is expected to enable the monitoring of progress in the implementation of the EAC Gender Policy.

#### **D. Opportunities for the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area**

Several lessons may be drawn from this analysis with a view to promoting the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African

Continental Free Trade Area. There are clear opportunities to build on and scale up the activities of the regional economic communities in addressing trade and gender within the context of AfCFTA. It can be assumed that member States will face a number of similar challenges, which could be more efficiently addressed through the regional economic communities than at the level of individual States. In fact, many of the regional economic community frameworks provide guidance on how to address gender and trade and there is scope for the regional economic communities and their member States to learn from one another's practices, build on their respective strengths and pool their knowledge and resources to enhance the impact of measures to address challenges related to those issues.

A possible way forward would be to develop a consolidated framework on trade and gender linked to the implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area, which could be adopted by all regional economic communities. Coordinated by the recently established AfCFTA secretariat,<sup>16</sup> such cooperation among the regional economic communities would indeed provide for the continent-wide mainstreaming of trade and gender, and would help raise awareness of the importance of gender mainstreaming. It would also help deepen understanding of the issues at stake and mobilize support and

---

<sup>16</sup> The AfCFTA secretariat became operational in April 2020 and is based in Accra, Ghana.



resources for implementation of the Agreement at all levels, including from partners. As such, the inclusion of gender provisions in the preamble and objectives of the Agreement provides a major opportunity to drive action forward in that respect. A consolidated framework would be of particular benefit to those regional economic communities in which little progress has so far been achieved in terms of addressing the linkages between trade and gender, including AMU, CEN-SAD and IGAD.<sup>17</sup> Rather than taking measures to strengthen the capacities of their individual regional economic community secretariats, the AfCFTA secretariat could take on a central role in that regard and support efforts by member States to advance the trade and gender agenda.

The experience of the regional economic communities has demonstrated, however, that the effectiveness of such a continental framework will depend on its translation into action, the establishment of effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms and the availability of adequate resources for implementation and follow-up. To design that framework, further analysis is required so that stakeholders understand fully how the various frameworks developed by the regional economic communities compare with and complement each other,

and how they should be articulated with the African Union Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2018-2028,<sup>18</sup> and the African Union Action Plan for Boosting Intra-Africa Trade.

Furthermore, appropriate institutional mechanisms for regular reporting on the operationalization of the trade and gender agenda will be needed in order to maintain momentum and ensure full implementation of the AfCFTA gender response. Further research and analysis are required to identify the modalities for the establishment of those mechanisms.

One option for achieving that objective is to establish a dedicated continental working group on trade and gender within the governance structures of AfCFTA, to be convened by the AfCFTA secretariat on a regular basis. That group would ensure that progress is made in addressing trade and gender within the context of AfCFTA, and provide a platform for coordination, advocacy and the sharing of relevant knowledge and resources. The working group would review and monitor the provisions already agreed upon from a gender perspective, make necessary recommendations to ensure women's economic empowerment within the context of AfCFTA, and advocate and advise on mainstreaming gender in the remaining issues under negotiation.

<sup>17</sup> See Table 2 for further details.

<sup>18</sup> The first pillar of the Strategy focuses on maximizing opportunities, outcomes and e-tech dividends with a view to empowering women economically and supporting sustainable development. The Strategy thus emphasizes the need to ensure women's equal access to quality education and control over productive resources. The African Union Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2018-2028 is available at [au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36817-doc-52569\\_au\\_report\\_eng\\_print.pdf](http://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36817-doc-52569_au_report_eng_print.pdf) (accessed on 15 October 2020).

The working group would also provide a forum for member States to address any gender dimensions of the trade liberalization process that are not directly addressed at the level of the regional economic communities, including the impact of trade liberalization on women as consumers, producers and workers. For the AfCFTA secretariat to serve as an effective convener of the working group, gender must be effectively mainstreamed in its own structures, including through the establishment of an appropriately staffed directorate dedicated to gender issues. The AfCFTA secretariat must also focus on the promotion of equal opportunities for young people and women.<sup>19</sup>

Another option, which should be considered in parallel to the option outlined above, is the designation of a high-level political champion who would serve as a special rapporteur on the gender streamlining agenda. That person would report to the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government on the gender dimension of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area and mobilize support for gender streamlining, including from partners. The political champion could support the work carried out by the continental working group on trade and gender and, in partnership with that working group, advocate policy changes to promote gender streamlining within the context of AfCFTA.

The mechanism adopted for reporting on the trade and gender agenda at the continental level must be perceived as an integral part of the AfCFTA implementation reporting architecture. As such, the mechanism will help draw attention to the gender and trade agenda and help ensure that trade and gender are addressed in tandem rather than as separate issues. As indicated above, the recently established AfCFTA secretariat could lend itself well to convening an AfCFTA working group on trade and gender and providing support to its political champion through a dedicated trade and gender directorate. In that regard, lessons can be learned from the experience of COMESA, whose founding treaty maps out the institutional infrastructure for monitoring implementation of the community's mandate on trade and gender. More broadly, and while the AfCFTA secretariat is being established, the experience of regional economic communities offer valuable lessons in terms of the successes and challenges of mainstreaming gender in trade at the institutional level. Lessons can also be learned from other models of governance and other stakeholders' experience of reporting on cross-cutting issues, including youth employment, climate change and digitization, both within Africa and beyond.

There is therefore considerable scope for supporting the regional economic

---

<sup>19</sup> For further information, see Beatrice Chaytor, "The AfCFTA Secretariat", presentation delivered at the 2019 Tralac (Trade Law Centre) Annual Conference, Nairobi, 21 and 22 March. Available at [www.tralac.org/documents/events/tralac/2800-tralac-annual-conference-presentation-the-afcfta-secretariat-beatrice-chaytor-auc-march-2019/file.html](http://www.tralac.org/documents/events/tralac/2800-tralac-annual-conference-presentation-the-afcfta-secretariat-beatrice-chaytor-auc-march-2019/file.html), (accessed on 15 October 2020).



communities in addressing trade and gender within the context of AfCFTA. Roles and responsibilities in that regard must be clearly defined and practicable measures regularly reported on within AfCFTA governance structures. Since, however, implementation of the Agree-

ment Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area is taking place at the national level, it is critical to identify the most relevant focus for programmes and initiatives on trade and gender at the regional level to ensure that meaningful progress is achieved.



## III Programmes and initiatives

Making small-scale cross-border trade a priority focus of regional interventions appears to be the most sensible approach to adopt with a view to achieving the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area and driving forward transformative socioeconomic change. Across the regional economic communities, significant progress in terms of addressing trade and gender have been made through regional programmes and initiatives targeting women in cross-border trade. Interestingly, instruments that did not necessarily have a focus on gender in their design seem to have benefited women most. Overall progress remains limited, however, partly because of an over-reliance on donor support. Achieving meaningful and sustainable progress on the agenda will require a fundamental shift in mindset at the planning and programming levels.

### **A. Cross-border trade, gender and the regional economic communities**

As underscored by several regional economic communities, there is a strong case for making cross-border trade the focal area of gender interventions in trade at the regional level. Indeed, while cooperation and trade across immediate borders remain the natural strong point of the regional economic communities, measures aimed at addressing small-scale cross-border trade in Africa can have a significant impact on gender equality. This is due to the sheer volume of that form of trade and the prevalence of women among cross-border traders. Small scale cross-border trade represents around half of total intra-African trade and is often informal in nature.<sup>20</sup> Estimates suggest that informal cross-border trade contributes between 20 and 75 per cent of total intraregional

---

<sup>20</sup> Suffyan Koroma and others, "Formalization of informal trade in Africa. Trends, experiences, and socio-economic



trade, depending on the country.<sup>21</sup> Informal cross-border trade is a source of income for about 43 per cent of Africans,<sup>22</sup> and up to 70 per cent of that trade is carried out by women.<sup>23</sup>

In most regional economic communities, interventions have focused, primarily, on capacity-building and training to address the lack of information often identified by traders as the main challenge impeding their business activities. As mentioned above, EAC has designed a simplified manual on border procedures for women involved in small-scale cross-border trade, in partnership with the East African Women in Business Platform and with the support of ILO and the German Agency for International Cooperation. EAC has also conducted training for trainers courses for women association leaders. The work programme of ECCAS includes training courses for women cross-border traders to raise their awareness of their rights and trade formalities.

A more systemic approach can be noted in COMESA. In addition to a planning

tool to ensure gender mainstreaming in trade, COMESA has adopted several instruments to increase the availability of user-friendly infrastructure, facilities and services for women involved in cross-border trade. COMESA has also established the Women Economic Empowerment Fund to increase access to finance for women cross-border traders and adopted a Traders' Charter, which, building on a World Bank initiative, prescribes basic rights and obligations for traders and officials at border crossings, including minimum treatment standards for small-scale cross-border traders.<sup>24</sup> The Charter thus addresses many of the challenges frequently encountered by those traders, which include high fees and duties, burdensome bureaucracy, corruption, and harassment. The Charter has a clear focus on eliminating sexual harassment and other gender-related abuses, thus reflecting the prevalence of women among cross-border traders in the COMESA region. Indeed, when engaging in such informal activity, women are particularly vulnerable to violence, confiscation of goods and sexual harassment.<sup>25</sup>

---

impacts", policy brief (Accra, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); CUTS International, 2017). Available at: [www.fao.org/3/a-i7101e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7101e.pdf) (accessed on 15 October 2020).

<sup>21</sup> ECA, "A snapshot of cross-border trade along the Abidjan-Lagos corridor" (2019). Available at [www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/crossbordertradebrief\\_en.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/crossbordertradebrief_en.pdf) (accessed on 15 October 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Guy K. Afrika and Gerald Ajumbo, "Informal cross border trade in Africa: implications and policy recommendations", Africa Economic Brief, vol. 3 issue 10 (African Development Bank, 2012). Available at [www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/economic-brief-informal-cross-border-trade-in-africa-implications-and-policy-recommendations-30008](http://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/economic-brief-informal-cross-border-trade-in-africa-implications-and-policy-recommendations-30008) (accessed on 15 October 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Suffyan Koroma and others, "Formalization of informal trade in Africa. Trends, experiences, and socio-economic impacts".

<sup>24</sup> For further information, see Paul Brenton and others, "Improving behavior at borders to promote trade formalization: the charter for cross-border traders", Africa Trade Policy Notes, No. 41 (Washington, D.C., World Bank Group, 2014). Available at [documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/894601468346146304/pdf/894730BRI0Char0Box0385291B00PUBLIC0.pdf](http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/894601468346146304/pdf/894730BRI0Char0Box0385291B00PUBLIC0.pdf) (accessed on 15 October 2020).

<sup>25</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Opportunities for women entre-*

Remarkably, a number of interventions focusing, primarily, on areas other than gender streamlining have been more beneficial to women than to men. Simplified trade regimes, introduced by COMESA and EAC are cases in point. Under those regimes, customs officials can issue a simplified certificate of origin and simplified customs documents to traders trading goods featured on a common list and valued under \$2,000.

Another such example is the Great Lakes Trade Facilitation Project, a World Bank-supported initiative designed to facilitate cross-border trade by increasing the capacity for commerce and reducing the costs borne by traders at targeted border locations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. Other countries in the Great Lakes region, including Burundi and Zambia, will be covered in a second phase of the project, key components of which include improvements to core trade infrastructure and facilities, the implementation of policy and procedural reforms, capacity-building to facilitate the cross-border trade in goods

and services, and initiatives to support the regional coordination, facilitation and standardization of small-scale cross-border trade data collection, reporting, monitoring and evaluation.

While the implementation of those initiatives has been impeded by a lack of awareness and understanding of their benefits among traders,<sup>26</sup> they appear to have had a positive impact on women traders. Simplified trade regimes have indeed helped to address some of the challenges faced by small-scale and informal traders, including women, and facilitated cross-border trade flows.<sup>27</sup> In Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania, for example, the implementation of simplified trade regimes has often been complemented by the establishment of gender desks at police stations to facilitate the reporting, investigation and prosecution of cases of gender-based violence and/or discrimination. Furthermore, the staff at customs offices at certain border crossings within EAC now include female gender champions who can assist female traders if they encounter difficulties while crossing the border. Such ini-

---

*preneurs in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area*, (Nairobi, 2019). Available at [africa.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/07/opportunities-for-women-in-the-acfta](http://africa.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/07/opportunities-for-women-in-the-acfta), (accessed on 15 October 2020).

<sup>26</sup> For further information regarding the challenges associated with simplified trade regimes, see Asmita Parshottam and Samuel Balongo, "Women traders in East Africa: The case study of the Busia One-Stop Border Post", Occasional Paper, No. 305 (Johannesburg, SAIIA, March 2020), available at [saiaa.org.za/research/women-traders-in-east-africa-the-case-study-of-the-busia-one-stop-border-post/](http://saiaa.org.za/research/women-traders-in-east-africa-the-case-study-of-the-busia-one-stop-border-post/), and Taku Fundira, "A Look at the Simplified Trade Regimes in East and Southern Africa", *Bridges Africa*, vol. 7, No. 4 (Geneva, International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development, 2018), available at: [ictsd.iisd.org/bridges-news/bridges-africa/news/a-look-at-the-simplified-trade-regimes-in-east-and-southern-africa](http://ictsd.iisd.org/bridges-news/bridges-africa/news/a-look-at-the-simplified-trade-regimes-in-east-and-southern-africa) (both documents accessed on 15 October 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Suffyan Koroma and others, "Formalization of informal trade in Africa. Trends, experiences, and socio-economic impacts"; Lily Sommer and Chris Nshimbi, "The African Continental Free Trade Area: an opportunity for informal cross-border trade", *Bridges Africa*, vol. 7, No. 4, 2018, (Geneva, International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development, 2018) Available at [www.tralac.org/images/docs/13116/bridges-africa-june-2018-ictsd.pdf#page=11](http://www.tralac.org/images/docs/13116/bridges-africa-june-2018-ictsd.pdf#page=11), (accessed on 15 October 2020).





tiatives have effectively addressed some of the challenges faced by small-scale female cross-border traders. Reportedly, they have also encouraged positive behavioural changes among border officials, who are now more aware of the gender-sensitive nature of cross border trade.<sup>28</sup> In EAC, a study found that simplified trade regimes have benefitted women and young people the most.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the initial phase of the Great Lakes Trade Facilitation Project focused, among other issues, on women-sensitive infrastructure, and even temporary and relatively simple measures were found to greatly improve women's trading experiences.<sup>30</sup>

## **B. Gender in the regional economic communities: donor-driven and overlooked**

Despite the aforementioned success stories, overall progress in addressing trade and gender issues has remained limited. This is mainly because gender mainstreaming tends to be donor-driven. While certain development projects may include a gender dimension, they do not necessarily align well with the frameworks or planned activities of African regional economic communities.

For example, while AMU has so far failed to adopt a specific mandate on gender, it is implementing a project in the agriculture sector in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) with the aim of strengthening agricultural association networks, in which women have been identified as a particularly marginalized group.

In SADC, financial resources for gender initiatives are mainly made available by donors. As a result, donors' interests, rather than the subregion's own gender-mainstreaming frameworks, tend to drive the regional economic community's work on gender and women's empowerment. Interventions aiming to address gender-based violence tend to receive most donor support.

Such over-reliance on donor support has undermined the overall sustainability of interventions, even when funding is made available for initiatives focusing on trade and gender. In ECOWAS, for example, a number of studies have been carried out on women's participation in trade and commerce, including an ATPC-supported study that examined gender and trade dynamics in West Africa. Those studies in turn informed the formulation of the ECOWAS Trade and Gender Action Plan. No follow-up on

<sup>28</sup> Asmita Parshotam and Samuel Balongo, "Women traders in East Africa: The case study of the Busia One-Stop Border Post".

<sup>29</sup> Interview with EAC officials, October 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Asmita Parshotam and Samuel Balongo report that a recent study found that measures such as the introduction of solar panel lighting, which has allowed for greater security and longer trading hours, the installation of sex-differentiated toilets and the construction of border markets for women traders' agricultural goods have had a highly positive impact on women involved in informal cross-border trade.

implementation of the Plan has been conducted, however, and the ECOWAS Commission has reported that it has been unable to move forward with targeted actions for implementation.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, it is also clear that meaningful progress on the gender and trade agenda will only be possible if there is a fundamental change of mindset and greater recognition of gender issues in the planning and programming phases.

In the case of ECOWAS for example, gender is typically overlooked and not seen as a priority in budget allocations. Nonetheless, gender is recognized within several ECOWAS frameworks, including the ECOWAS Trade and Gender Action Plan. Furthermore, adequate resources are available, thanks to the regional economic community levy on imports, and the ECOWAS secretariat has put in place robust infrastructure to promote gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment, including the ECOWAS Gender Directorate, located at ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja, and the ECOWAS Gender and Development Centre, located in Dakar. Nonetheless, projects to address gender and trade in the ECOWAS region have remained largely donor-driven, with the Gender Directorate being involved in trade project meetings only upon the request of partners. It is critical that relevant stakeholders take note of the lessons learned

from those and other experiences if, as proposed in section II of the present report, they agree to move forward with the establishment of an AfCFTA working group or a political champion on trade and gender.

Even in the COMESA region, which has developed a comprehensive range of interventions and frameworks to address gender issues, there is limited understanding of the concept of gender and the importance of gender mainstreaming. As a result, as observed by COMESA, "gender usually vanishes from mainstream programmes during the process of planning, implementation or monitoring."<sup>32</sup>

### **C. Key prerequisites for a gender-responsive AfCFTA**

While it is important to bear the aforementioned challenges in mind, several regional initiatives and tools could be scaled up and launched as continental instruments to facilitate the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. For example, there is a clear opportunity to learn from and build on the work and experience of the regional economic communities in operationalizing instruments such as the simplified trade regimes and the Great Lakes Trade Facilitation Project. Already, there have been calls for the adoption

---

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with ECOWAS officials, October 2018.

<sup>32</sup> COMESA presentation to the ECA-ATPC 2017 Continental Workshop on Trade and Gender.



of a continental simplified trade regime to facilitate trade within the context of AfCFTA,<sup>33</sup> as that could help small-scale and informal traders, including women traders, to reap the benefits stemming from the establishment of the Continental Free Trade Area. Meanwhile, the regional economic communities could play an important role in ensuring that the design and implementation of the continental simplified trade regime is context-specific, with the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area providing an umbrella and high threshold under which a region-specific common list of goods and services to be exchanged could be negotiated.<sup>34</sup> The establishment by COMESA of the Women Economic Empowerment Fund, the development and dissemination of simplified guides and manuals, and the training and capacity-building initiatives carried out in several African subregions are other instruments that could be adapted and operationalized across the continent to facilitate trade within AfCFTA.

Current interventions should be reviewed from a gender standpoint to ensure that they are explicitly gender-responsive, and must be complemented by a systematic awareness-raising and outreach campaign to bring attention to

gender issues among all relevant stakeholders, including women cross-border traders and border officials. While they have significant transformative potential, simplified trade regimes are adopted, primarily, to facilitate cross-border trade and are not gender-sensitive in their design. It thus seems incidental that they have benefited women traders to such an extent. Other cross-border trade facilitation instruments could be included in such a review, including one-stop border posts, measures to facilitate the free movement of people, regional payment and market information systems, and incentives to encourage compliance with formal business requirements. In doing so, additional insights could be drawn from sectoral policies of regional scope. These include regional compacts developed under the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, regional industrialization strategies and public procurement policies,<sup>35</sup> all of which are of current or potential relevance for women's economic empowerment in cross-border trade.

In parallel, it will be crucial to address funding shortfalls in order to leverage the transformative potential of cross-border trade. Focusing trade and gender interventions on small-scale cross-border trade with a view to scaling

<sup>33</sup> Asmita Parshotam and Samuel Balongo, "Women traders in East Africa: The case study of the Busia One-Stop Border Post"; Lily Sommer and Chris Nshimbi, "The African Continental Free Trade Area: an opportunity for informal cross-border trade".

<sup>34</sup> Lily Sommer and Chris Nshimbi, "The African Continental Free Trade Area: an opportunity for informal cross-border trade".

<sup>35</sup> For further information, see: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area*.

and diversifying that type of commerce could help mobilize and streamline support from regional economic communities and relevant partners for gender mainstreaming. Gender-responsive interventions thus identified should be anchored within a comprehensive programme of measures to boost women's trading capacities at regional borders, and they should be operationalized in tandem with AfCFTA implementation. Such an approach would reduce the risk that such interventions would be undertaken on an ad hoc basis and only when partners showed sufficient interest or provided adequate support. By the same token, partners should allocate funds for gender-related interventions under a specific budget line in their cooperation programmes and projects. As suggested by several regional economic communities, earmarking funds for gender mainstreaming in donor projects would facilitate the achievement of tangible progress in the area of gender.

More fundamentally, it is critical to raise awareness and deepen understanding of the gender implications of AfCFTA implementation at the planning and programming levels. As illustrated by the experience of COMESA and SADC, while monitoring and evaluation instruments are essential if African States are to es-

tablish a gender-responsive AfCFTA, those instruments, by themselves, are insufficient to foster a deeper understanding of the concept of gender in trade policy.

More evidence-based and targeted advocacy is therefore required, addressing, specifically, planners and programmers, but also leaders and policymakers, so as to maintain momentum for the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. This also means that gender-disaggregated data must be made available to inform policy processes on the gender implications of implementation. Such a data collection and dissemination process could inform a gender-sensitive review of existing data collection tools and mechanisms on cross-border trade and help identify potential gaps for gender analysis and the steps that should be taken to address them. Data collected through simplified trade regimes, in addition to initiatives such as the ECA AfCFTA country business index,<sup>36</sup> could offer valuable starting points in that respect.<sup>37</sup>

Overall, improving the working conditions and environment for women cross-border traders within the context of AfCFTA could support women's

---

<sup>36</sup> Through ATPC, ECA has developed a country business index to measure and monitor how the establishment of AfCFTA is affecting businesses at the country level. The index aggregates the views of businesses in Africa, which are collected by means of a survey administered via regional and local chambers of commerce and industry, and benchmarks countries in four areas, namely: ease of trade; trade for development, the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 of the African Union; and the impact of AfCFTA. For further information, see [www.uneca.org/implementation-afcfta/pages/afcfta-country-business-index](http://www.uneca.org/implementation-afcfta/pages/afcfta-country-business-index).

<sup>37</sup> The issue of gender-sensitive data collection and analysis is discussed further in section IV of this report.



economic empowerment, thereby contributing significantly to the continent's inclusive and sustainable development objectives. Ultimately, however, regional programmes and initiatives on trade and gender can only be effective if their main beneficiaries are aware of their ex-

istence and understand the tools meant to support them. The next section therefore looks at existing channels for collaborating with women entrepreneurs and traders to facilitate implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area.



## IV **Women traders and entrepreneurs' networks**

Women traders and entrepreneurs require support if they are to take full advantage of the provisions of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. Traders' networks and associations are pivotal in channelling such support. It is therefore crucial to strengthen their understanding of the Agreement and ensure that they are fully involved in implementation efforts. Their ability to do so will depend, however, on whether adequate linkages and communication lines are established to the bodies overseeing implementation. The regional economic communities are ideally placed to undertake a catalytic role in that respect.

### **A. Regional channels for working with women entrepreneurs and traders to facilitate implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area**

If they are to reap the benefits of AfCFTA, women entrepreneurs and traders must acquire an in-depth understanding of the Agreement and its operational structures, in addition to the opportunities and challenges that are likely to stem from the establishment of AfCFTA. Only then will they be able to leverage the opportunities for economic diversification afforded under AfCFTA, and thereby access regional markets and enter regional value chains.

Trade networks and associations have a crucial role to play in that respect. Indeed, they provide a platform through



which their members may learn about the provisions of the Agreement and their applicability.

African women entrepreneurs constitute a dynamic and relatively well organized group at the national and, in some cases, regional level. The East African Women in Business Platform and the Federation of National Associations of Women in Business in Eastern and Southern Africa stand out as particularly active regional networks. Both organizations derive their institutional mandates directly from constitutive treaties – the Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community and the Treaty Establishing a Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, respectively – and are an integral part of the institutional architecture of the relevant regional economic communities. In ECOWAS, a women's business federation carries out advocacy work, and the Dakar-based ECOWAS Gender and Development Centre works closely with women civil society organizations on cross-border trade issues, agriculture and women's rights. A regional network of female entrepreneurs is currently being established in ECCAS. In SADC, there appears to be no systematic cooperation at the regional level with women's groups or civil society associations. Collaboration has instead tended to occur within the context of specific projects. While there is no formal regional network of women entrepreneurs in

AMU, some member States have established strong women's organizations at the national level.

Women business networks are also cooperating across regional economic communities. The most prominent example of such cooperation is 50 Million African Women Speak, a digital networking platform established by COMESA, EAC and ECOWAS with funding provided by the African Development Bank.<sup>38</sup> The platform was launched in November 2019 to support the economic empowerment of women by facilitating their access to information and financial services so that they may successfully grow their business. The platform fosters a dynamic exchange of ideas among women entrepreneurs in Africa and peer-to-peer learning, mentoring and knowledge-sharing activities. Pursuant to a memorandum signed with COMESA in December 2017, 50 Million African Women Speak is being expanded to cover AMU countries, and support other gender-mainstreaming and e-training activities. Other examples of cooperation between the regional economic communities include a peer-learning visit by ECOWAS to the East African Women in Business Platform. Participants in that visit, which was supported by ILO, focused on the production of simplified guides on cross-border trade. Similarly, the secretariat of the Federation of National Associations of Women in Business in Eastern and Southern Africa has

<sup>38</sup> For further information, see [www.womenconnect.org/](http://www.womenconnect.org/) (accessed on 15 October 2020).

provided technical advisory support to IGAD on the establishment of a women in business division.

## **B. Establishing linkages to AfCFTA governance structures through the regional economic communities**

While those initiatives could provide a solid foundation on which to build support, the challenge will be to ensure that women traders and entrepreneurs' interests and concerns are adequately articulated and addressed within all relevant AfCFTA governance structures.

The systematic mapping of existing networks would facilitate the identification of gaps in terms of women's representation and the interaction between national and regional level authorities, and facilitate efforts to broaden the membership base and establish linkages. That mapping exercise would also help to raise awareness among women traders and entrepreneurs on their central role as stakeholders in the implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area at the national, regional and continental levels. To ensure that women stakeholders are involved at all levels of the implementation process, the mapping should cover organizations that do not focus

primarily on women but are relevant to women's economic empowerment, such as sector-specific and cross-border traders' associations, business councils and chambers of commerce and industry operating at the national and regional levels. Further analysis is indeed required to gain a clear understanding of how existing regional networks interact with cross-border trade associations, as the latter play a crucial role in responding to the needs of small scale cross-border traders, the majority of whom are women.

Besides ensuring that women traders and entrepreneurs' interests are articulated effectively, the mapping exercise would help to identify capacity gaps that prevent women from taking full advantage of AfCFTA market access and trade facilitation provisions. Targeted advocacy or capacity-building initiatives could thus be designed for networks to ensure that they participate effectively in relevant AfCFTA governance structures. By the same token, those initiatives could help mobilize the support of partners keen to engage on trade and gender issues.

For example, at the national level, support might be required to strengthen – or even help to establish – women's associations and ensure their participation in national committees overseeing implementation of the Agreement.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> ATPC conducts training and capacity-building exercises targeting women entrepreneurs and traders through associations at the regional and national levels. The aim of those exercises is to ensure that women traders understand the AfCFTA negotiation process and the provisions of the Agreement and to maximize the potential





At the continental level, robust linkages must be established with the African Business Council that is to be established pursuant to the Agreement, so that the views of women traders and entrepreneurs are taken fully into consideration. In that respect, it would be pertinent to take advantage of the 50 Million African Women Speak project, as a platform that women entrepreneurs can use to develop common positions and articulate those positions in continental policy processes. Such a platform could, for example, be coordinated by the AfCFTA secretariat and launched by the regional economic communities. Scaling up that intervention within the context of AfCFTA could mobilize additional support from partners.

Support will also be required at the regional level to leverage the potential of cross-border trade to promote the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement. Indeed, given the prevalence of women traders in small-scale cross-border trade, it will be crucial to ensure that women traders' interests are effectively articulated and feed into relevant AfCFTA processes taking place at the regional level, such as the development of the continental simplified trade regime. Capacity interventions at the

regional level should build on the good work already being conducted by the regional economic communities. Existing training materials and guides, including those developed by EAC, could be adapted to reflect issues pertaining to the implementation of the Agreement and disseminated continent-wide through the networks thus identified.

More broadly, the regional economic communities can play a catalytic role in supporting women entrepreneurs' networks within the framework of AfCFTA. While they may not be formally involved in the implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area, regional economic communities are centrally placed to coordinate efforts aimed at building the capacities of women entrepreneurs and traders, with linkages to the national, interregional, and continental levels. Notwithstanding the strong potential of the regional economic communities to support the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement, the systematic inclusion of gender issues in policymaking and planning processes remains contingent, however, on their capacity to conduct gender-sensitive analysis and programming, as discussed in the following section.

---

benefits of AfCFTA for women's businesses. The International Trade Centre is also carrying out a similar initiative, with funding provided by the German Agency for International Cooperation, to help women-owned businesses benefit from trade opportunities created by AfCFTA through capacity-building, networking, and advocacy. For further information, see SheTrades AfCFTA, available at: [www.shetrades.com/en/projects/shetrades-afcfta](http://www.shetrades.com/en/projects/shetrades-afcfta) (accessed 15 October 2020).



## **V Capacity of the regional economic communities to drive forward the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area**

The ability to build on and scale up interventions by regional economic communities on trade and gender within the framework of AfCFTA depends on their institutional capacities to address those issues in a comprehensive and effective manner.

Regional economic communities must have the capacity to carry out gender-sensitive analysis of gender-disaggregated data, and must have available adequate human and financial resources to implement and follow-up on planned activities.

### **A. Gender-sensitive analysis and data collection**

Data combining trade and gender are typically not collected in most regional economic communities, whether at the regional level or at the level of member States. On the one hand, when data

are collected on trade, they are not disaggregated by sex. On the other hand, when data on gender are collected, the purpose of such collection is often donor-driven and project-specific, for instance, to report on women's participation in meetings and projects funded by donors. In the case of EAC, for example, statistics collected from member States are used to assess compliance and are not necessarily driven by the policy agenda set forth in the Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community or in existing strategies.

COMESA has taken a number of specific steps to address the lack of gender-sensitive data. Data collection is an integral part of the community's gender strategy, through which it seeks, among other goals, to promote the generation and use of gender-disaggregated data. Several efforts have also been made to engage policymaking bodies and relevant experts in the Gender Division of the



COMESA secretariat and the Statistics Unit to make available gender-disaggregated data on trade. For example, the COMESA Council has instructed the Statistics Unit to produce gender-sensitive trade data whenever such data are applicable, and COMESA published its first gender and statistics bulletin in 2017. Those steps are still in their early stages, however, and there is still insufficient gender-disaggregated data in key economic sectors, including trade, investment and industry.

A major drive is therefore required to strengthen the capacity of regional economic communities to collect gender-disaggregated data. In the context of AfCFTA, this will entail making gender-disaggregated data available at the national level, but also at the regional and cross-border levels. The availability and robustness of gender-disaggregated data and, in turn, the quality of gender analysis, also depend, however, on the statistical capacity of the regional economic communities in a more general sense. It is therefore important to strengthen capacities for gender anal-

ysis within the broader context of measures aimed at supporting regional data collection and analysis.<sup>40</sup>

## **B. Human resources required to implement a trade and gender agenda**

As briefly discussed in previous sections of the present report, most regional economic communities do not have dedicated staff working on trade and gender issues. Indeed, as illustrated in table 1, very few staff focus on gender. At present most work on gender is conducted through a system of focal points, including in regional economic communities that have established dedicated gender units or directorates.

It may not be necessary to increase the number of staff members working on gender mainstreaming to address the gaps observed in this analysis. In fact, rather than a question of workforce numbers, meaningful change can come about if regional economic community secretariat staff and member States

---

<sup>40</sup> ATPC is currently developing a methodology to measure women's involvement in trade and is also in the process of developing, piloting, and validating a continental methodology for measuring informal cross-border trade. For more information, see: [www.uneca.org/stories/west-africa-afreximbank-announces-grant-unece-data-collection-west-africas-informal-trade](http://www.uneca.org/stories/west-africa-afreximbank-announces-grant-unece-data-collection-west-africas-informal-trade) and [www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/crossbordertradebrief\\_en.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/crossbordertradebrief_en.pdf) (both accessed on 15 October 2020). In addition, ECA is working through ATPC to improve capacities for the generation and use of gender-responsive trade statistics at the national level within the context of a project entitled "*Data and statistics for more gender-responsive trade policies in Africa, Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia*". The project, which is funded by the United Nations Development Account and overseen by UNCTAD, is helping relevant stakeholders develop a statistically robust methodology, which is to be piloted and localized in national contexts. ATPC is planning to expand the methodology upon demand from countries and regional economic communities. For further information, see: [unctad.org/en/Pages/DITC/Gender-and-Trade/UNDA-Project-2023D-on-Trade-and-Gender.aspx](http://unctad.org/en/Pages/DITC/Gender-and-Trade/UNDA-Project-2023D-on-Trade-and-Gender.aspx) (accessed 15 October 2020).

**Table 1: Institutional arrangements and staff working on gender in the regional economic communities**

EAC	Full-time staff and two project or short-term staff members. No focal point for gender in trade.
ECOWAS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Commission has established a Gender Directorate in Abuja. The Directorate focuses on policy issues and interacts mainly with member States. The Gender Directorate has a Director and one staff member and relies on external resources and partnerships to carry out most of its activities.</li> <li>2. The ECOWAS Commission Trade Directorate does not have a gender focal point because of insufficient staff. The gender dimension of trade is instead integrated across the work and staff of the Directorate. A key focal point is the staff member working on cross-border trade issues.</li> <li>3. Most ECOWAS gender activities (including field activities such as training in agroprocessing) have now moved to the ECOWAS Gender and Development Centre in Dakar.</li> </ol>
AMU	There is no team working on gender issues at the AMU secretariat. Gender issues are covered by focal points working on food security and political considerations.
SADC	A gender unit composed of two staff members and reliant, primarily, on external consultants has been established. A gender mainstreaming officer was in the process of being recruited in 2018.
COMESA	The Directorate on Gender and Social Affairs employs six staff members, including two gender mainstreaming officers.

*Source:* ECA interviews with regional economic communities, February 2018–February 2019.

understand trade issues in gender and vice versa, including at the highest levels. Only then can the planning, programming and implementation of policies take place in a more gender-sensitive manner.

There is a crucial need to raise awareness and deepen understanding of gender issues across African development priorities, including trade. In addition to training measures on the broader concept of gender, COMESA, EAC and SADC recently took part in an online course on trade and gender that was conduct-

ed by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), with the aim of “providing participants with the knowledge needed to analyse the two-way relationship between trade and gender, and ultimately produce gender-aware policy recommendations.”<sup>41</sup> COMESA made this a mandatory course for all professionals in the COMESA secretariat and its other institutions. In ECOWAS, a limited number of training events were carried out on the gender dimension of trade and value chains within the context of the African Growth and

<sup>41</sup> For further information, see: [unctad.org/en/pages/MeetingDetails.aspx?meetingid=2115](http://unctad.org/en/pages/MeetingDetails.aspx?meetingid=2115).



Opportunity Act, adopted by the United States of America in 2000, but none have been conducted since 2015. In SADC, the Regional Multi-Dimensional Women's Economic Empowerment Programme was adopted in 2019 with a view to promoting equal participation of women and men in policymaking processes.

While those initiatives may need to be streamlined into a coherent package, there is an opportunity to build on and scale up their activities. This is particularly true for the online training course delivered by UNCTAD. As the aforementioned training packages were designed to address the specific features of the regions in which they were delivered, a new round of such training sessions should be aligned with ongoing efforts to implement the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area.<sup>42</sup> A key challenge will be to ensure that the capacities established in earlier training courses are retained. Indeed, staff turnover in some regional

economic communities is high. Building on the experience of COMESA, one approach might be to make the training course mandatory for all new staff members joining those institutions.

More broadly, and as discussed in section III above, formulating a dedicated strategy and thereby institutionalizing trade and gender considerations would facilitate the organization of activities, mobilize support and address capacity challenges at various levels, including systemic issues such as high staff turnover. That strategy should also prescribe measures to address gaps in gender analysis and gender-disaggregated data. In doing so, it might be useful to look beyond Africa and learn from institutional mechanisms in countries or regions that have successfully promoted gender mainstreaming across policies and institutions. The support of bilateral and multilateral partners should be mobilized in that respect to facilitate the identification of best practices.

---

<sup>42</sup> That round of training sessions could build on the training programmes on AfCFTA currently being conducted by ATPC and the International Trade Centre with women's associations and public sector officials.



## VI Conclusion and recommendations

There are clear opportunities to build on and scale up the activities of the regional economic communities in addressing trade and gender within the context of AfCFTA. More broadly, the regional economic communities can play a catalytic role in supporting the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement by focusing on measures to support small-scale cross-border trade and women traders' and entrepreneurs' networks.

Significant gaps will need to be addressed to strengthen the capacity of regional economic communities to promote the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement. Those gaps include the lack of systematic reporting on trade and gender, the dearth of gender-disaggregated data, limited gender-sensitive trade analysis, an over-reliance on donor support and, more fundamentally, limited understanding of the concept of gender and gender mainstreaming in policy planning and programming circles.

Those challenges can be addressed by formulating a continent-wide strategy to mainstream trade and gender considerations within the context of AfCFTA, including at the level of the AfCFTA secretariat, and with adequate linkages to relevant continental African Union strategies. Drawing on existing regional frameworks, a consolidated strategy on trade and gender should adopt a two-pronged approach to support small-scale cross-border trade on the one hand, and strengthen women traders' and entrepreneurs' networks on the other. This is particularly important given the huge volumes of small-scale cross-border trade across the continent and the prevalence of women among cross-border traders. To ensure the overall sustainability of those measures, it will be critical for the strategy to include a clearly defined reporting mechanism, embedded within AfCFTA reporting and governance structures, including at the level of the AfCFTA secretariat, in addition to measures to



support gender-sensitive trade analysis and sex-disaggregated data collection. Making the issue of gender more visible within the context of AfCFTA implementation will help to increase awareness and understanding of the concept of gender at the policy planning and programming levels, and will facilitate efforts to mobilize donor and partner support with a view to moving the continent's trade and gender agenda forward.

In a context where the COVID-19 pandemic has brought cross-border trade to a halt due to the closing of borders,<sup>43</sup> it has become even more urgent to identify measures that can be quickly implemented and can rapidly improve livelihoods.<sup>44</sup> The regional economic communities can play a key role in empowering women in cross-border trade, ensuring the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area and achieving the continent's broader development objectives.

---

<sup>43</sup> ECA, *Informal traders: A balancing act of survival* (2020). Available at [www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/informal\\_traders\\_-\\_a\\_balancing\\_act\\_of\\_survival\\_eng\\_3.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/informal_traders_-_a_balancing_act_of_survival_eng_3.pdf), (accessed on 15 October 2020).

<sup>44</sup> In the light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, COMESA has been actively supporting small-scale traders, including women. For further information, see: [www.comesa.int/covid-19-affects-small-scale-cross-border-trade-programme/](http://www.comesa.int/covid-19-affects-small-scale-cross-border-trade-programme/) and [www.comesa.int/38584-2/](http://www.comesa.int/38584-2/) (both accessed on 15 October 2020).



## VII Additional references

Anouka van Eerdewijk and others, *The State of African Women* (2018). Available at <https://rightbyher.org/the-state-of-the-african-women/>, (accessed on 15 October 2020).

ECA, *Gender mainstreaming in African Continental Free Trade Area national implementation strategies. An inclusive and sustainable pathway towards gender equality in Africa* (2018). Available at [www.uneca.org/publications/gender-mainstreaming-african-continental-free-trade-area-national-implementation](http://www.uneca.org/publications/gender-mainstreaming-african-continental-free-trade-area-national-implementation), (accessed on 15 October 2020).



**Table 2: Gender mainstreaming in trade at the level of the regional economic communities – an overview**

Regional economic community	COMESA	ECOWAS	SADC	EAC	ECCAS	AMU	IGAD	CEN-SAD
Frameworks	Gender provisions in founding treaty	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	Gender policy	✓	✓	✓	✓ <sup>1</sup>		✓	
	Trade and gender	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓			
Programmes <sup>3</sup>	Studies	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	Training	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	Instruments	✓ <sup>4</sup>			✓ <sup>5</sup>			
Networks	Regional networks	✓	✓	✓	✓ <sup>6</sup>		✓ <sup>7</sup>	
	50 Million African Women Speak	✓	✓		✓	✓		
		✓		✓				

**Source:** Desk review and ECA interviews with regional economic communities, February 2018–February 2019

<sup>1</sup> In the course of being adopted.

<sup>2</sup> Trade and Gender Action Plan adopted but little progress in terms of implementation and follow-up.

<sup>3</sup> This includes studies, trainings and trade facilitation instruments with a direct or indirect focus on women's economic empowerment.

<sup>4</sup> Simplified trade regime, Traders' Charter, Women Economic Empowerment Fund, Framework for the Comprehensive Support for Women and Youth Cross Border Traders in the COMESA region.

<sup>5</sup> Simplified trade regime.

<sup>6</sup> Regional network of female entrepreneurs under development.

<sup>7</sup> IGAD Women in Business Conference held in 2011, with discussions to establish a regional umbrella organization. No progress reported since 2012.

