

## Cross-border Women Trade in Eastern Africa: The Social-Cultural Environment

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This brief synthesizes the results of the baseline study on women cross-border traders in Eastern Africa, conducted for the TradeMark East Africa's (TMEA) 'Women in Trade' (WiT) programme. The WiT programme strives to contribute to greater inclusion of women in trade in Eastern Africa. This brief focuses on the social-cultural aspects of women cross-border trade in Eastern Africa.

### Key messages

- Cross-border women traders' businesses are still characterised by low trade capacity. This is reflected in the observed limited access to formal credit, the small size of businesses both in terms of capital and capacity to employ, the restricted portfolio of products traded, and low levels of formal business registration as well as business management skills, among others.
- To improve trade capacity of cross-border women traders, it is imperative to: enhance the formalisation of their businesses, facilitate access to formal finance, scale-up interventions aimed at improving trade facilitation, and facilitate access to crucial information as well as tailor-made training on essential knowledge and skills.
- The role of Cross-border Traders Associations (CBTAs) is crucial. Institutional strengthening is therefore critical so as to be able to support their members in improving trade values and trade capacity.

### 1. Why focus on Women Cross-border Trade?

Over the years, trading activities have been an essential source of livelihoods – and consequently a catalyst for economic empowerment – for the majority of women in African countries. Pro-poor and gender sensitive trade is considered an integral pathway towards women empowerment (UNDESA, 2015). Among other forms of trade, cross-border trade (CBT) is a vital facet of African countries' economies. Estimates show that CBT contributes to the income of about 43 per cent of the entire population, constitute 35-40 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and forms a sizable part of overall inter African trade by 50 per cent (World Bank, 2016; Brenton and Soprano, 2018).

For most women near borders, participation in CBT is an essential strategy for securing decent livelihood outcomes. Women participate in both formal and informal cross-border trade (ICBT). Essentially, ICBT is primarily dominated by vulnerable, and often unregistered traders. Of these, women constitute a sizable proportion (UNCTAD, 2019). Specifically, women make about 70

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per cent of informal cross-border traders in Africa (Koroma et al., 2017). Overall, ICBT accounts for between 50 per cent and 60 per cent of total intra-African trade (Fundira, 2018), and supports up to 60 per cent of non-agricultural self-employment of women within the SSA and thus provides vital income to sustain their households (Benton and Soprano, 2018).

Despite women constituting a sizable proportion of players in cross-border trading activities, as well as persistent challenges related to their active, equitable and sustainable participation, women in trade is a policy area that has so far not received requisite attention.

## 2. The TMEA’s ‘Women in Trade’ Programme

The TMEA’s Corporate Strategy 2017-2023 is anchored on two strategic objectives: reduced barriers to trade; and improved business competitiveness. Anchored within the second objective of improving business competitiveness is the ‘Women in Trade’ Programme (WiT). The programme aims at contributing to the greater inclusion of women in trade as one of the pathways to increased business competitiveness and increased trade in the East African Community (EAC) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). To achieve its aims, the programme pursues two objectives: (i) increasing trade value and incomes of women traders by addressing the constraints faced by women as they gradually transition to formal trade and ensure that they trade gainfully; and (ii) increasing women traders through the elimination of trade entry barriers for women across the EAC.

**Box 1: TMEA’s Work on Women (Corporate Strategy I)**

- Since its establishment in 2010, TMEA work has focused on reducing barriers to trade and increased business competitiveness. The organization combines a regional approach with national-level interventions and works closely with East Africa institutions, national governments, private sector and civil society organizations.
- Responding to prevailing challenges faced by women in trade in EAC, and in line with its practices, TMEA, over the years, has joined forces with a wide range of stakeholders to implement interventions that address some of the specific challenges faced by women traders.
- In its Corporate Strategy I (S1, 2010-2017), over 27,000 women traders in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and South Sudan (consisting of women entrepreneurs, exporters, urban traders, processors and informal cross border traders) have benefitted from these interventions, as envisioned in TMEA Corporate Strategy I.

The programme addresses these objectives through a three-pronged approach that responds to the constraints at policy, sectoral and enterprise level. The key focus areas of the program are (i) improving the trading environment for women in trade; (ii) building trade capacity of women traders/Small Medium Enterprises and institutional capacity for trader associations/cooperatives for increased market access and trade value; and (iii) increasing transparency of and access to trading and market information through Information Communication Technology (ICT) based solutions. The WiT programme operates in several borders in East Africa and DRC and targets to benefit at least 300,000 women traders.

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**Box 2: Baseline Study Data and Methodology**

- The baseline study covered ten border posts covering six (6) countries: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The borders include: Bugarama /Kamanyola (Rwanda/DRC); Busia (Kenya/Uganda); Elegu/Nimule (Uganda/South Sudan); Gatumba/Kavimvira (Burundi/DRC); Goli/Mahagi (Uganda/DRC); Malaba (Kenya/Uganda); Mutukula (Uganda/Tanzania); Namanga (Kenya/Tanzania); Rubavu/Goma (Rwanda/DRC); Rusumo (Rwanda/Tanzania) These border points represent the major trading points in CBT among the EAC countries and the DRC
- Of the estimated 27,953 cross-border women traders operating in the targeted border points, the study used a systematic random sampling technique to draw a sample of 871. Using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the study collected quantitative and qualitative data from the selected cross-border women traders as well as from leaders of Women Cross-border Traders Associations (WCBTAs), Government/ Border officials and NGOs.
- In terms of data analysis, the study employed content analysis and the narrative analysis for qualitative data, and descriptive and regression techniques for the analysis of quantitative data.

### 3. The Social-cultural Aspects of Women Cross-border Trade

The baseline study provides several vital insights, with respect to the social-cultural aspects related to cross-border women trade in eastern Africa:



**On average, women in CBT are young to middle-aged adults with primary education, and to a large extent have significant household responsibilities.** These women have, on average, 6.6 years of education, and are of ages between 32 and 44, and majority (64 per cent) are married. Of the surveyed women traders, about 48 percent are heads of their households and have, on average, 5 dependants suggesting significant household responsibilities. Notably, about 5 per cent of the cross-border women traders surveyed have visible physical disabilities.



**Cross-border women traders still encounter considerable problems when crossing borders:** A sizable proportion of women traders (about 57 per cent) cite bribes, harassment/abuse, rude behaviour by border officials, long waits, illegal confiscation of goods, and unfair fines as common problems encountered when crossing borders. Importantly, cross-border women traders with disabilities are more likely to experience these problems. For the case of harassment, physical and emotional abuse dominate.



**Physical and emotional abuse constitute the main forms of harassment experienced by women participating in CBT.** Results show that about 20 per cent of the surveyed cross-border women traders have experienced some form of harassment or abuse. However, fewer women (only about 25 percent) report these incidences to relevant authorities as they “believe nothing will be done about it”.

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**Agency – the ability to make decisions and act on them – varies among cross- border women traders.** Majority of cross-border women traders (above 73.5 per cent in all borders) indicate that they make spending decisions on income earned from trade. Conversely, only about 14 per cent of the cross-border women traders report having partial decision-making powers for spending income earned from their trading activities. Results further indicate that those heading households have more agency.



**Most cross-border women traders are only aware of a small set of rights related to cross-border trade.** Results show that a considerable majority are aware of the rights to be searched by a woman, and have separate toilets, albeit with significant variation among borders. However, some rights (e.g. right to have a nursing facility; right to receive a formal receipt for taxes or levies paid; right to be provided with necessary trading information on request) are less known by women traders.



**There is a need to enhance women empowerment in CBT.** Analysis of results suggest that although cross-border women traders are relatively better in some indicators of women empowerment (such as decision making on money earned from trade), the same cannot be said on other aspects empowerment, in particular, resources and achievements.

## Key Lessons and Recommendations for Policy

The baseline study generated several key lessons for the TMEA's work on women in trade:

1. **Enable provision of gender-sensitive border environment and procedures.** Women cross-border traders still confront a multitude of problems, particularly relating to bribes, harassment/abuse, rude behaviour by border officials, long waits, illegal confiscation of goods, and unfair fines are still prevalent. Policy efforts should aim at delivering interventions enhance trade facilitation, and in particular, having gender-sensitive border environment, regulations and procedures. Importantly, national governments in Eastern Africa, in collaboration with stakeholders such as TMEA should put efforts in scaling up adequate controls against gender-based violence and other forms of problems that women traders face at borders.
2. **Facilitate increased role of CBTAs to address gender-based constraints.** CBTAs are critical institutions in addressing problems faced by cross-border women traders. Strengthening their governance as well as resource and technical capacity is therefore crucial. Policy efforts should aim at institutional strengthening of CBTAs and other platforms that bring together women cross-border traders. In particular, the TMEA's WiT programme should work with CBTAs in addressing gender- based constraints through designing and delivering gender-sensitive interventions to women traders.
3. **Provide gender-friendly legal structures to cross-border women traders.** Findings reveal that gender-based violence to women in cross-border trade is still prevalent. Further, the level of reporting incidences of violence faced by women trades is very low. This requires enhancing awareness of rights of women traders as well as mechanisms and procedures for addressing such gender-based violence. It is thus important for the relevant authorities as well as stakeholders to work towards enhancing awareness of rights by women cross-border traders, instituting effective and women- friendly mechanisms to report abuses as well as efficient legal structures and institutions to deal with issues of harassment of women

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traders.

4. **Enhance the empowerment of women in CBT.** Findings reveal that to significant efforts are still needed to empower cross-border women traders in Eastern Africa, particularly with respect to resources, achievements and agency. Cross-border women traders with disabilities deserve a deliberate and concerted efforts to address their vulnerabilities. This calls for deliberate policy efforts to enhance the various aspects of women empowerment in CBT. In particular, the focus should be on increasing women traders' awareness of rights and other crucial aspects of CBT, increasing ownership and control over resources and improving their collective action as well as their awareness of the crucial aspects of CBT.

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