




Economic Integration and Women Entrepreneurs' Involvement in Cross-Border Trade: The Case of the East African Community

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Abstract. The study aimed to assess how economic integration supports women entrepreneurs' engagement in cross-border trade, with a focus on the East African Community (EAC). Three policy documents and four policy practices were analysed using an adapted reading guide, coupled with content and discourse analysis, to categorise the data and understand the patterns and meanings of the imagery and text. Findings revealed that the EAC has made efforts to consider gender and women's empowerment issues. The policy documents have included clauses that specifically show the intention to support women's entrepreneurship engagement in cross-border trade, and some projects have been implemented. However, it was noted that there is little inclusion of gender and women's empowerment issues in the trade policy, which is the main policy governing trade. Additionally, in some cases, language bias was observed, women entrepreneurs were treated as homogeneous, and there was a limited focus on system change; more emphasis was placed on "fixing the women."

Key Words: Economic Integration, Women Entrepreneurs, Cross-Border Trade, The East African Community.

1. Introduction

Women constitute a significant portion of participants in entrepreneurship activities, especially in low-income countries, and there has been an increasing involvement. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [1] showed that from 2001 to 2023, in the 43 countries with a high participation rate, women's involvement in starting new businesses increased from 6.1% to 10.4 % on average, which represented an increase of 76% globally. However, most of their businesses tend to remain small and locally based [2,3,4]. When involved in cross-border trade, the majority end up operating informally [5,6]. This is largely attributed to the societal structure, which has led to a low level of business skills among women, limited access to financial resources, restricted access to relevant information, and an overburdening of domestic responsibilities, among others [7]. Likewise, women traders are more affected by the misconduct at the border, such as bribes and harassment, compared to their male counterparts [8,9]. The unique challenges that women face necessitate a need for gender sensitivity when policies, plans, and strategies are developed and implemented.

Among others, economic integration is seen as an engine to propel regional development. While several studies have been conducted on the role of economic integration in trade facilitation in general, studies specifically focusing on the facilitation of women's involvement in trade through economic integration are scarce. This may limit access to empirical evidence that supports proper gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment efforts by the Regional Economic Communities (REC). In that regard, this study aimed at assessing how the RECs support women entrepreneurs' engagement in cross-border trade, focusing on the East African Community (EAC), which has been an exemplary performer in Africa [10].

The current EAC was formed in July 2000 by the initial three member states: Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda; later on, other East African countries joined. As of to date, the EAC comprises a total of eight countries; other member states apart from the initial three are Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. In response to the need for gender consideration, the East African Community (EAC) formation treaty included articles that demonstrate its intention to perpetuate efforts towards gender equality. Article 5, 3[e] of the EAC treaty, explains the need to mainstream gender in all its undertakings and enhance women's role in cultural, political, social, economic, and technological development. Article 6 [d] indicates good governance among the fundamental principles, and it includes adherence to equal opportunities and gender equality. Article 121 emphasises the full participation of women in economic and social development endeavours, and Article 122 advocates for partner states to support women's involvement in business, including facilitating access to finance, education, and training [11]

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To achieve the study objectives, the researcher employed an adapted reading guide, coupled with content and discourse analysis under the lens of Social and Post-structural feminism paradigms, to assess the EAC policies and practices regarding their relevance in supporting women entrepreneurs' involvement in cross-border trade (CBT).

2. Methodology

The assessment involved the coding scheme that categorized data as per the adapted Women Entrepreneurship Program (WEP) reading guide, similar to how it was utilized in [12,13,14]. The WEP adapted reading guide involved the organisation of data based on the type of the document, authorship, imagery, language bias, gender bias, and relevance of the document on women entrepreneurs' engagement in cross-border trade. To determine the relevance of the document on women entrepreneurs' engagement in cross-border trade, the focus was on whether there is an acknowledgement of the supply and border constraints that women are facing in relation to business, as identified by [15], as well as the identification of measures to deal with them. The supply-side constraints are: limited access to finance, limited access to market, limited access to information, limited access to assets and resources, limited access to transportation, low education level, high share of domestic responsibilities, and a lack of a conducive business regulatory environment. The border constraints are: lack of transportation, lack of warehousing facilities, lack of sanitary facilities, lack of accommodation, lack of an information desk, and corruption. A summary of the policies data categorisation is presented in Table 1.

The assessment involved three policy documents: the EAC gender policy, the EAC regional trade policy, and the Sixth EAC development strategy [16,17,18]. All documents were retrieved from the EAC website, and the corresponding links are included in the reference list.

Regarding policy practices, the categorisation involved the title of the project or initiative, description, responsible authority, duration, and its relevance to women's entrepreneurs' participation in cross-border trade, adapted from [12]. The policy practices assessed were: EAC Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) Trade Fair, A Simplified Guide for Micro and Small-Scale Women Cross-Border Traders and Service Providers within the EAC, EAC Simplified Guide for MSMEs on Cross-Border Trade of Perishable Agricultural Goods, and 50 Million African Women Speak Networking Project Platform (50MAWS) [19,20,21,22]. A summary of the policy practices data categorisation is presented in Table 2.

For a better understanding of the context in which the policies were designed and implemented regarding their relevance in supporting women entrepreneurs' involvement in cross-border trade, the categorized data were subjected to content and discourse analysis. While content analysis brings the understanding of the text by identifying themes and patterns, discourse analysis goes deeper to integrate the interpretation of the language used as shaped by socio-cultural dynamics; it goes beyond what the context is, it also considers what it does [23,24]. The analysis was done under the lens of socialist and post-structural feminist paradigms. The two paradigms have been championed by entrepreneurship researchers as their approach to tackling gender inequality is considered inclusive, since it focuses on the system as a whole [12,24]. The Socialist paradigm emphasises that women's subordinate status results from the societal structure and norms. On the other hand, the post-structural paradigm brings attention to how language contextualization is important in shaping meanings and understandings. The approach brings awareness to "othering" of women, in the sense that women are being portrayed as "other" and not equal participants as their male counterparts. It also advocates for the intersectionality principle, cautioning against treating women as homogeneous [25,26]

Table 1. Summary of the Policies' Data Categorisation Based on the WEP Reading Guide

Name of the Document	EAC gender Policy	EAC Regional Trade Policy	Sixth EAC Development Strategy
Document Type	Policy Document	Policy document	Strategy document
Authorship	EAC Secretariat	EAC Secretariat	EAC Secretariat
Imagery	Women and men are both represented	The EAC logo	Multiple images representing the EAC and various sectors, images with women at the market and at the farm
Language	Gender neutral	Gender neutral	Gender neutral
Gender Bias	No bias was observed	Gender bias was observed [Section 9.2, vii]	Gender bias was observed; women were mentioned alongside underprivileged groups in some sections [Section 2.7.6; 3.2.2, 5.8.3]
Focus/Key theme	Emphasis on mainstreaming of gender in all sectors; Situation analysis regarding gender equality in different sectors and spheres	Focus on how the region can build a competitive trade environment and have a common approach to external trade promotion for the benefit of all partners. Indicated priority areas, policy action, and the strategy to achieve the strategic objectives	Focuses on providing directions towards improving the social, economic, and political sphere of the region by building strong economic resilience and becoming a lower-middle-income economy by 2030
Relevance in supporting women entrepreneurs' participation in cross-border trade	Acknowledging women's exclusive challenges [Section 2.5], indicating promotion of women's participation in regional trade among the objectives [Section 4.5, d], promotes women's participation in CBT through training and access to finance [Section 5.5]	The policy has touched on multiple issues on improving the trade environment in general. One part has specifically mentioned women, showing the consideration of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in an all-inclusive e-commerce platform with the potential to trade across borders [Section 9.2, Policy action VII]	Acknowledgement of the contribution of societal structure to women's disadvantaged position [section 2.7.5]. Emphasis on mainstreaming of gender in all EAC endeavours, including in value addition and market access [Section 2.7.5]. Emphasis on finalising and implementing the regional strategy for promoting women in business [Section 5.9.5]

Table 2. Summary of the Policy Practices Data Categorisation

Project/Initiative	EAC MSMEs Trade Fair	A Simplified Guide for Micro and Small-Scale Women Cross-Border Traders and Service Providers within the EAC	EAC Simplified Guide for MSMEs on Cross-Border Trade of Perishable Agricultural Goods	50 Million African Women Speak Networking Project Platform (50MAWS)
Project/Initiative description	The trade fair connects MSMEs from all partner states with buyers and potential buyers, potential investors, and other stakeholders	Guideline with simplified information on policies, procedures, requirements, exemptions, and facilities available	Provide information on the existing policies, procedures, requirements, rules of origin, taxes, tariffs, exemptions, and facilities available to cross-border MSMEs	An online-based platform available via web and mobile devices as an application aims to provide relevant business information to women entrepreneurs and networking services.
Responsible Authority	EAC Secretariat, the Confederation of Micro and Small Enterprises Organization (CMSEO - EA), and the Partner States	EAC and ILO	EAC and GIZ	EAC, COMESA, ECOWAS
Duration of the Project/Initiative	Annually	Continuous	Continuous	Sept 2016- Dec 2020
Relevance of the Project/Initiative in supporting women entrepreneurs' participation in cross-border trade	Provide women entrepreneurs with access to new markets and connect them with different stakeholders	Provide relevant prerequisite information to engage in cross-border trade within the EAC	Provide relevant prerequisite information to engage in Perishable Agricultural Goods within EAC	Provide women with vital business information, financial services, training resources, and powerful networking opportunities

3. Findings

3.1 Policy Content

Document type, Authorship, Imagery, Language, and Gender Biases for the Policy Documents

The assessment involved two policy documents and one strategy document. All the documents were prepared by the EAC secretariat. The images on the top page of the gender policy represented both women and men as they are involved in economic activities. This reflects consideration of both women and men as they engage in entrepreneurial activities. The regional trade policy document had no other images apart from the EAC emblem. This can be taken as a more gender-neutral approach. The Sixth EAC development strategy document had images of both male and female individuals, some of whom appeared to engage in economic activities. This depicted a consideration of focusing on both women and men as they take part in productive activities.

The language used in the gender policy was gender-neutral, but also contained themes that drew attention to the disadvantaged position of women and girls, highlighting the need for change, as well as acknowledging some efforts that had been made and their outcomes. For the regional trade policy, the language was also gender neutral, with only a single mention of women that was pointing at the disadvantaged position they face and the need for efforts to have them considered. The second mention of women in the document was in the annexes, in the highlights of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) trade policies, which were used for benchmarking. The language used in the Sixth EAC development strategy document was also gender-neutral, with themes that highlight the socio-cultural system that has led to women's disadvantaged position. It also emphasized the necessity of promoting women's participation in social, economic, and political issues. Although the language was generally gender-neutral, some biases were observed. EAC [17, Section 9.2, VII] and EAC [18, Section 2.7.6, 3.2.2, 5.8.3] bundled women together with vulnerable and underprivileged groups, which depicted them as "other" or "less than". The portrayal of women largely displayed them as homogeneous, generally seen to lack essential capacities and resources, such as business skills, access to information, and the like.

Focus/key themes and relevance of the policy documents in supporting women entrepreneurs' participation in cross-border trade

The EAC gender policy focused on a situational analysis, highlighted gender disparities in various spheres, and emphasized gender mainstreaming in all sectors. It acknowledged the exclusive challenges that women are facing, which hinder their participation in business and trade activities [16, Section 2.5]. Supporting women's participation in regional trade was among the policy objectives as mentioned in [16, Section 4.5, d] and [16, Section 5.5]. There was also an emphasis on the promotion of women's participation in business and trade. The Regional Trade Policy focused on the facilitation of building a competitive trade environment for the region and adopting a common approach to external trade promotion, which benefits all partners. The policy outlined priority areas, plans, and strategies to achieve strategic objectives. While the policy has touched on multiple issues that aim at promoting the trade environment in general, only one part specifically mentioned women. EAC [17, Section 9.2, Policy Action VII] indicated the consideration of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in an all-inclusive e-commerce platform with the potential to trade across borders. The Sixth EAC Development Strategy focused on showing directions towards improving the social, economic, and political spheres of the region by building strong economic resilience through attaining a full customs union, strengthening the common market, infrastructure, human capital, and regional governance that will enable the region to become lower-middle income by 2030. The strategy acknowledged the contribution of societal structure to women's disadvantaged position [18, Section 2.7.5] and emphasised the need to mainstream gender in all EAC endeavours, including in value addition and market access [18, Section 2.7.5]. EAC [18, Section 5.9.5] emphasised the finalisation and implementation of the regional strategy for promoting women in business.

3.2 Policy Practices Content

The implementation of the EAC policies is done at the national level while working closely with the EAC secretariat and the EAC legislative Assembly. There are several projects that have been initiated by the EAC with regard to the implementation of the policies in relation to their relevance in supporting women entrepreneurs'

participation in cross-border trade. These include the EAC MSMEs Trade Fair, A Simplified Guide for Micro and Small-Scale Women Cross-Border Traders and Service Providers within the EAC, EAC Simplified Guide for MSMEs on Cross-Border Trade of Perishable Agricultural Goods, and the 50 Million African Women Speak Networking Project Platform (50MAWS) [19,20,21,22].

The EAC MSMEs Trade Fair connects MSMEs from all partner states with buyers and potential buyers, allows them to network, and also meet with potential investors and other stakeholders. It is organised collaboratively by the EAC Secretariat, the Confederation of Micro and Small Enterprises Organisation (CMSEO - EA), and the Partner States. The trade fair takes place annually, rotating among state partners. According to information on the EAC website, the last EAC MSMEs Trade Fair, which was the 24th, took place in October 2024 in Juba, South Sudan. The trade fair involves both female and male MSMEs; however, considering that most women's businesses fall under the MSMEs category, it becomes essential for women entrepreneurs, as it provides them with access to cross-border markets and connections with different stakeholders.

A Simplified Guide for Micro and Small-Scale Women Cross-Border Traders and Service Providers within the EAC contains simplified information on policies, procedures, requirements, exemptions, and facilities available to facilitate women's participation in intra-regional trade. It was developed jointly by EAC and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Similarly, the EAC Simplified Guide for MSMEs on Cross-Border Trade of Perishable Agricultural Goods provides information on the existing policies, procedures, requirements, rules of origin, taxes, tariffs, exemptions, and facilities available to cross-border MSMEs. Considering that the majority of women businesses are falling under MSMEs, the guideline is invaluable for women MSMEs that are engaging in perishable agricultural goods within the EAC.

The 50 Million African Women Speak Networking Project Platform (50MAWS) is an online-based platform available via web and mobile devices as an application, covering 38 countries from the EAC, ECOWAS, and COMESA RECs. The platform provides women with vital business information, financial services, training resources, and networking opportunities.

4. Discussion

Findings show that the EAC has been taking actions to support women entrepreneurs' engagement in cross-border trade. The presence of policies, including the gender policy, the regional trade policy, and the development strategy, which have clauses that emphasise promoting women's participation in cross-border trade, shows a good direction. While the language used in the assessed policy documents was generally gender neutral, some sections showed biased representation of women, which may perpetuate the subordinate status. EAC [17, Section 9.2, VII] indicated the need to offer an inclusive e-commerce platform to allow active involvement of women, youth, and persons with disabilities to trade across borders. EAC [18, Section 2.7.6, 3.2.2 and 5.8.3] also bundled women with the underprivileged and vulnerable groups. This representation portrays women as "less than" or "others", which perpetuates the existing stereotype. A similar depiction of women was observed by [14] in their study on policies for supporting women entrepreneurs in Tanzania.

The results have also revealed that there is little consideration of issues of gender and women's empowerment in the regional trade policy. While EAC has a gender policy, it is still important to have a section for gender issues in the trade policy. This is backed by the fact that issues related to trade are wide, and a poor mainstreaming of gender in the policy may lead to little positive effect on the marginalised group, in this case, women. UNCTAD [15] indicated that Trade Policies have an important role in narrowing the gender gap, but that can only be achieved if the development of the same considers the existing gender inequalities.

Findings show that the implemented strategies to change women's disadvantaged position have mainly focused on the women themselves and less on the system. This was observed in the policy documents, and the reflection of the same was seen in the practice, as most of the projects have focused on issues like more training for women and more information. This particular pattern was also observed by [12] in their study on policy support for women's entrepreneurs' access to financial capital. Richard [24] indicated that, to support meaningful gender inclusivity, more focus on the whole ecosystem is essential. For stance emphasising on changing laws, such as customary laws that limit women's inheritance and ownership of assets, like land, could

support women's access to finance, as they will have collateral. Balasubramanian et al. [27] and Brixiová et al. [28] have shown a positive relationship between land ownership and women's use of financial services as well as their engagement in entrepreneurial activities.

Diversity among women seems to be given little consideration, which may limit the outcome of the policies. The policies have generally depicted women as less educated, less skilled, less informed, and the like; this was also reflected in the implemented practices. While it is true that women are disproportionately disadvantaged in socioeconomic variables, it is important to understand that women have diverse experiences and capabilities. This contributes to the importance of advocating for structural changes and not only focusing on “fixing” the women. For instance, a woman entrepreneur may have the required skills and the relevant information but may not have the required experience to win a procurement tender, which is the result of a long-term sideline of women in entrepreneurial activities. Having a percentage dedicated to women in procurement contracts can support women in gaining experience and building their competence. UNCTAD [15] indicated public procurement as one of the mechanisms that may be used to mainstream gender in trade policy. Likewise, it has been noted that Kenya leads in the number of users of the 50 million women speak platform. This could implicate countries' variations on women entrepreneurs' readiness or skills required to make use of the platform, which may call for customised support to achieve the intended objectives of the platform among member countries.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

The EAC has given consideration to women entrepreneurs' engagement in cross-border trade, which can be observed in the clauses included in the documents. Likewise, there are implemented projects that show the REC's dedicated efforts to support women entrepreneurs. However, there are essential improvements that need to be made. There is a need to be gender sensitive when developing the policy documents to avoid depicting women in a way that perpetuates their subordinate status. Likewise, despite having a standalone gender policy, other policy documents must include sections on gender issues. In this case, the trade policy, which contains matters regarding cross-border trade, needs to have a specific section that is dedicated to gender matters so that all the necessary trade elements as they affect women and men should be taken into consideration.

Focusing on supporting women directly, like providing them with necessary entrepreneurship skills, access to information, and the like, is essential. Yet, it is important to pay attention to the entire ecosystem and advocate for structural changes, which will make the impact of the policies and practices more significant. It is also recommended to consider the “intersectionality” principle when developing policies, and the same should be reflected in the practices for supporting women entrepreneurs. The “intersectionality” principle takes into account variation in women's experiences.

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