

# RELEASING POTENTIAL OF WOMEN IN INFORMAL CROSS-BORDER TRADE FOR ENHANCING AFRICAN INTRA-TRADE.

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines the role of Women in Informal Cross-Border Trading (WICBT) in Africa. Women continue to be visible at exit and entrance points in Africa involved in various cross-border transactions. There have been efforts at regional economic community (REC) level by COMESA to integrate the so called informal cross-border trade and women to be specific although there have been minimal efforts on the implementation which resulted in the premature death of the initiatives. The paper seeks to assess how many have fared in trading across borders under the COMESA Customs Union. This will assist in the policy initiatives which can be adopted at continental level to support these women. The ultimate goal of the study is to contribute to the body of literature on gender and regional trade policies which can be used by academic and professional in furthering women empowerment under regional integration. As regional integration seeks to contribute to economic development it is critical to have engendered regional trade policies which contributes to all inclusive economic growth which takes into account gender differentiated needs of African people. The paper identifies major challenges which need to be addressed if women in ICBT are to contribute to African intra-continental trade. The policy initiatives to address these challenges at continental level require the involvement of women at policy design and formulation to ensure the policies are gender sensitive and gender responsive.

RECs

## Introduction

The paper examines the role of Women in Informal Cross-Border Trading (WICBT) in Africa. Women continue to be visible at exit and entrance points in Africa involved in various cross-border transactions. Varied studies have been done on WICBT and the role of regional economic communities in assisting these women as they trade across borders and nations (Kitaru & Roy 2010; Koroma et al 2017). There has been an agreed consensus that WICBT play a vital role in regional trade in Africa despite lack of policy initiatives to support their activities which continue to be classified under the informal sector and going unrecognised by policy makers (Mitaritonna et al 2016).

The formation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which is a leading outcome of the African Agenda 2063, epitomizes a crucial stage as the continent embarks on an excursion on the way to the operationalisation of an incorporated market that is expected to end in the realisation of an African Economic Community, in accordance with the Abuja treaty (UNCTAD 2010). Aspiration 6 of African Agenda 2063 requests for Africa to push for a developmental agenda which is driven by its populace taking advantage of the underutilised skills and resources, particularly the women and the young population (Hings-ton 2016). The aspiration set the attitude which the AfCFTA has to subscribe in relation to gender equality and respect of women in regional trade. The question is how WICBT will benefit from the establishment of the free trade area (FTA) at continental level. This comes against the background of absence of a specific protocol on gender in the AfCFTA treaty after all the consultative researches done prior to its launch. It is of interest for the paper to contribute to the debate on how AfCFTA can include women in the operationalization of its programs and projects for it to tap into the rich resources availed by their continued presence in international trade without sound policy initiatives at both national and regional level.

The continental FTA was envisioned by the African leaders prior to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 as they sought to integrate themselves after obtaining independence from the colonial masters. Africa's regional integration programs enjoys a stretched history, going back to the formation of the South African Customs Union (SACU) in 1910 and the East African Community (EAC) in 1919 (Geda and Kibret 2002). The vision was to create an integrated African continent and

strengthen the economies of newly independent states. Regional integration process in Africa aims at self-reliance and endogenous self-sustained development which thrives to make use of both natural and human resources on the continent. Regional integration in the African context in the post-colonial Africa drives for a regional cooperation that involves the prerequisite for a greater international bargaining power and broad economic, political, social interests.

In post-colonial era, regional integration is being pushed by broad economic, social and political interests, (Adetula,2004). The Lagos Plan of Action that was earlier implemented by the OAU Extraordinary Conference in 1980 affirmed the obligation of Africa's political leaders to the promotion of the African economic integration to ultimately facilitate the gradual establishment of the African Economic Communities (AEC) (Aniche 2015). The resolutions of the LPA were to have sub regional economic communities which were to merger into a single economic community at an advanced stage. This saw the recognition and establishment of eight separate Regional Economic Communities with Common Market for Southern and Eastern Africa (COMESA) being one of them. Despite all these efforts there has been little improvement on the African intra trade statistics which have resulted in most of her economies being found on the poorest countries in the world list.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), that is likely to be the largest free trade area ever since the establishment of World Trade Organisation (WTO) in relation to the number of partaking countries, symbolizes a crucial shift for Africa in an attempt to accelerate trade, investment and industrialisation within the continent. The AfCFTA which comes as a result of the both LPA 1980 and the Abuja Treaty 1991 for the establishment of an African Economic Community (AEC) is highly dependent on the achievements and linkages established by the existing RECs. This notion positions existing RECs as key and fundamental actors to the success of the AfCFTA. The RECs have a continuous role which should not be underestimated and this call for smooth relationships between the regional economic community and the sub regional economic communities. This means that having the AfCFTA will not diminish the role of RECs but should use it as the blocs to build the relationship on.

According to Khandewal (2004) modernisation and industrialisation seems to be an achievement of regional integration. Regional integration in Africa have been depicted to be a way of achieving industrialisation as well as modernisation through the reinforcement of trade and securing economies of scale and access of market. The assumption is that once trade is liberalised, the newly created markets will create opportunities for traders across the borders which were previously restricted. Regional integration remains Africa's strategy of enlarging their fragmented economies, expanding their markets, widening of their region's economic space as well as enjoying the benefits of economies of scale of production and trade, thereby improving the social welfare of their countries (Elmorsy, 2015). The overall aim is to have a united Africa which can leverage itself on negotiations with other global players at equal footing as compared to individual country negotiations. Regional economic integration is the intersection between neo-mercantilism and neo-functionalism representing a shift from economic nationalism to economic regionalism or from nation-state to region-state (Aniche et al 2009). This demands that with regional integration, member states are supposed to relinquish their control on internal markets and subscribe to the values and principles of regional institutions with the intentions of creating one large market.

Africa has vast potential of trading among its self in the untapped market which have remained a preserve of other global players making it vulnerable to world economic and political shocks. This call for the African member states to capitalize on the given scenario by considering how to invest in policies which encourages and support trade among them. One of the ideas of the Abuja treaty 1991 was to manage and complement policies among existing and future economic communities in order to foster the gradual establishment of the community (UNCTAD 2010). Intra -regional trade statistics show that intra-Africa rates among the lowest (15 percent), with less than 20 percent of what is produced in the region staying within the region (Afrexim Bank 2019). Economic regionalisation for Aniche (2009:405) cited in Okeke and Aniche (2012) arise as "a result of the need for integrating states to enjoy the benefit of common market and custom union in which they erect uniform common tariff walls against non-member states, while enjoying duty-free trade relations between/among themselves". Major drives which sustains regional economic integration has been fostering of entrepreneurship, resource mobilisation, political stability and peace, at national or domestic level.

## **2.0 Historical development of the Common Market for Southern and East Africa**

The study adopted the use of the COMESA which developed into a customs union, a stage ahead of an FTA. There have been efforts at REC level by COMESA to integrate the so called informal cross-border trade and women to be specific although there have been minimal efforts on the implementation which resulted in the premature death of the initiatives. With the failure of the initially proposed United States Africa by Nkrumah in 1963 as a result of lack of political will by head of states to relinquish their state sovereignty, any future attempt for an integrated Africa should aim to establish suitable institutional structures and devices to guarantee a justifiable sharing of social and economic costs and benefits throughout the African region that is in the 54 countries in a manner that is acceptable politically by all.

In 1994 COMESA was formed from the former Preferential Trade Area (PTA). COMESA was coined in 1982 as a preferential trade area (PTA) and have at present 19 members with 11 of them participating in a free trade area (FTA) and others trading on preferential terms Khandewal (2004). COMESA establishment treaty came into effect after the signing of the treaty in in 1993 in Kampala, Uganda. It was transformed into an FTA in 2000; in 2009 COMESA Customs Union was launched in Harare, Zimbabwe with high hopes of seeing a fully integrated region and growth in intra-regional trade. The COMESA FTA came into effect after a series of negotiations on the reduction of tariffs among the member states. The key objective of any REC formation is to encourage regional economic, social and political development in the region. This has to be achieved through the interaction of member states in the region. The regional bloc will facilitate the interaction through appropriate policies for economic corporation which is believed to have spill over effects to achieve sustainable development. The COMESA region has managed

to establish a customs union from being a preferential trade area. The region now needs to fully integrate its members and increase the intra-trade volumes which have remained low. The scope and scale of informal cross-border trade across in the region seems to be making a substantial impact to the regional trade and the retail economies of the region and they are in line with the stated goals and aims of COMESA to promote intra-regional trade (Perdeby et al 2015).

### **2.1 Informal cross-border trading under COMESA.**

The region is also a home to SMEs and informal sector which are contributing around forty-three percent of the GDP in Africa (Matsongoni and Mutambara2018). Research has shown that without investing in policies which support the growth of this sector Africa will remain with untapped potential. This requires the adoption of policy initiatives at both regional and national level which assist in the shaping and reconfiguring of the size and dissemination of the gains from the economic activities across Africa. The gist of the paper is to generate knowledge on how RECs can take advantage of skills and distribution channels being exploited by WICBT for increase in intra-African trade. This study contends that policies on WICBT within COMESA Customs Union (CU) and the Continental Free Trade Area ought to be decisively constructed and implemented in a manner to enhance and outline the advancement of regional value chains in the region and the continent and nurture structural transformation, with the aim of increasing the intra-regional trade. The contribution by WICBT to regional economic growth can be evaluated through a prism that combines contribution to value addition in trade and production of goods and services traded by the country (Koroma et al 2017).

Informal cross-border trade is called so because of the involvement of small entrepreneurs, those trades with no access to preferential trade agreements; trade that involves buying and selling being in the informal markets; traders that export or import their goods without following the formal ways (Koroma et al 2017; Afrika & Ajumbo 2012). Though Formal intergration efforts are met with challenges, ICBT is being useful in the advancement of intergration of African fraught people and ICBT is dominated by women. It has been referred to as informal because it involves small entrepreneurs, who are having challenges in accessing preferential rates and eventually resort to use of unrecognised channels of importing and exporting (Koroma et al 2017). The less attention to the activities of ICBT by policy makers shows lack of information as well as incorrect information of the actors.

It is not by slip that the importance of gender equality is recognized by both the Preamble and the General Objectives of Agreement of the AfCFTA. Such high-level continental development frameworks present greater opportunities for hastening progress in the execution of gender equality if they are harnessed and implemented at both national and regional level. The Pan-African AfCFTA endavours to empower the African populace and their business activities within and across borders to increase intra-African trade. Women's informal trading activities cannot be ignored as much as trade in Africa is concerned because it is as good as turning a blind to a critical proportion of trade (Jawando et al 2012). Studies done have pointed to lack of women inclusion in the design and formulation of regional trade policies which have resulted in continued marginalisation of women in trade related policies. The overall goal of this paper is to contribute to the body of literature on the importance of WICBT in increasing intra-trade in the COMESA region and come up with ways this can be translated to other RECs given the critical role of women in trade in Africa. This will be done through analysis of past and on-going initiatives in the COMESA region and member countries aiming at elimination of both tariff and non-tariff barriers and facilitation of trade and travel for the ICBT. The paper will also highlight appropriate case studies and policy initiatives across the content and the world over the normalisation of informal trade in a way that maximises benefits and minimise constraints to Informal Cross-Border Trade. The research will contribute to the development of regional trade policies which resonates with the challenges affecting trade in the region and proffer suggestions to policy makers on the significance of WICBT in African trade.

### **3.0 Objective statement**

With the need to increase intra-regional trade in the COMESA, there is need for region to identify its strengths and capitalize on them. There have been several attempts to ease trade which included migrating from the PTA to the FTA and later the Customs Union with little if any tangible results on intraregional trade. The question which motivated this study is what can be done to boost intra-regional trade in the COMESA which can be useful in the implementation of the AfCFTA? There is a section of traders which have remained visible across the borders with no support or minimum policy initiatives. This is the Informal Cross-Border Traders (ICBT). Literature has shown that in Africa ICBT is dominated by women and they are resilient to both global and national economic and political shocks. The study seeks to contribute to the policy programs and initiatives on how the region can promote the linkages between the WICBT and the formal large corporates to ensure they assist in the movement of goods and services made in the region. It is in the interest of the researcher to point out how important it is for the region to formalize the relationship between the formal economy and WICBT rather than spending resources on trying to formalize their operations. The investigator takes the position that the WICBT should be recognised as a key sector which just needs institutional and legal support at both regional and national level rather than eliminating it. The investigation appreciates the need for the COMESA region to accelerate trade within its members and they look forward to amalgamating into the AfCFTA. In the absence of practical policies changes in the way cross-border trade is being carried out, it is likely that those already facing difficulties in taking advantage of trade opportunities continue to be side-lined. It is therefore of paramount importance that trade policy and infrastructural constraints are removed in such a manner that is likely to be advantageous to women as it would be advantageous to other traders specifically in areas women in informal trading networks constitute a larger percentage.

#### 4.0 Existing knowledge:

The main constraints of intergration are the absence of macroeconomic policy management among members of African RECs and political instability (Kamau 2010). The study by Elfadil & Ibrahim (2007) focused on the prospective of trade in agricultural products in COMESA established a great potential of intraregional trade in agricultural produces (Albagoury & Anber 2019). Regardless of years of a modern phase of regional intergration in Africa, the African nations trade more with the outside than within the region Aniche (2015). There have been strong regional and continental efforts towards formalizing informal trade within Africa (Laub et al 2016; Koroma et al 2017).

There is quiet a number of other studies on Africa's regional blocs suggesting that the African intergration hasn't had a substantial effect on trade in Africa. According to Jebuni (1997), there is need for member states to invest in the liberalisation of trade than mere membership claims if they are to benefit from the regional trade policies. There is need for regional trade agreements to address the issues of benefits and costs sharing to individual member states at drafting and formulation stages to ensure that member states benefit equally from the establishment of these FTAs. The study seeks to highlight the potential WICBT have in facilitating and promoting intra-regional trade if regional and national policy makers publicize their efforts and have legislative framework which supports their activities. Literature has shown that there is lack of adequate measures which take into account woman specific roles in regional trade resulting in existing regional and national policies and programs failing to address the challenges by these women in their day to day cross-border activities.

According to Afrika & Ajumbo (2012) ICBT is a source for forty-three percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa and if harnessed properly has the capacity to support regional and national efforts in contributing to intra-regional trade. ICBT has been defined as basically retailing which takes place across the borders by people who lack capital and can be carried out on a flexible schedule (Dejene 2001; Morris and Saul 2001, Randriamaro and Budlender 2008). To Yussuf (2014) ICBT refers to trade not officially accounted by customs officials at the border which is legit and licit trade. As the regional and continental efforts towards establishing a Pan African FTA continues there is also need to consider how women crossing the borders can be factored in for the benefit of the region and nations (Koroma et al 2017). Afrika and Ajumbo (2012) defines ICBT as the trade in processed and semi processed merchandise which may be legal imports on one side of the border and illicit trade on the border and vice versa. The major reasons which have contributed to that assertion have been the view of ICBT as illegal and seeking ways to stop it.

To Goldberg and Pavcnik (2003) ICBT is defined as the sector of the economy that doesn't comply with labour and market legislation. In circles of government it is more associated with smuggling, tax dodging, and illegality than with innovation, enterprise and job creation (Perdeby et al 2015). The greatest challenge in defining ICBT has been the existence of inter linkages with the formal economy which have remain unrecognised. With limited attention being paid to it by policy makers it remains significantly under acknowledged and under researched in Africa without proper data and information on ICBT trade policies and integration strategies in Africa are lacking on accurate or more specifically half of the trade related activities. Research has shown that WICBT trades in both agricultural and non-agricultural goods in Southern and Eastern Africa which include cereals, clothing, handcrafts, and raw materials among other products.

WICBT business activities have remained invisible in trade statistics, policies and in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of their countries (Laub et al 2016; Jawando et al 2012). This has resulted in absence of allocation of budgets for their sector and ends up receiving restrictive policies which seeks to demonize their activities. With no legal and institutional support their businesses have remained small resulting in continued marginalisation despite the value they contribute (Aina and Odebiyi 1998; Osuala 1991). Measures to ease trading and using trade for promotion of development focuses more on large scale formal sector trade rather than cross-border trade (Perdeby et al 2015). The contribution of women in trade is not much due to various specific challenges that impose in particular heavily on the trade activities of women and women-owned enterprises. These challenges therefore push women traders and producers into informal sector where there is less access to finances, information and networks affecting their ability to expand and develop in their businesses (Brenton & Gamberoni 2013). The objective of achieving an effective continental free trade area needs much attention to be drawn towards the barriers.

Approximations suggest that informal cross-border trade contributes significantly to many economies in the African region and it's a source of income for approximately 43 percent of the total African population (Afrika and Ajumbo 2012). In Southern Africa, informal cross-border trade take as much as 30-40 percent of total recorded formal trade between countries in the region, generating some US\$20 billion per year (Brenton & Gamberoni 2013). Regional infrastructure and financial integration has also remained low failing to inspire intraregional trade. Research have shown that there has been attempts for establishment of regional monetary institutions and investments in regional infrastructure have not done much to contribute to intra-regional trade. The WICBT are the most affected as transport and logistics have remained high in the region thereby limiting their capacities to fully contribute to the regional trade and national economies.

Though COMESA have existed for more than twenty years its impact on intra-trade between member countries is not that clear. What is more worrisome is that this is taking place against a background of efforts to further integrate the region. The incapacity of the manufacturing sector and inadequate diversity in production affect capacities of COMESA members in terms of raw materials production, capital goods and intermediary processes within their trading blocs; thereby being forced to depend on external sources. Primary commodities fail to be processed due to shortages of proper industries in COMESA countries which lead to importation of finished products such as food, medicine as well as cotton based textiles. Therefore COMESA entrepreneurs are, hindered by shortages of physical infrastructures and by deficiency of telecommunications.

Moreover, the introductions by the government of costly trade procedures that involve customs documents processing have

increased the problems of transport (ECA, 2013a, 102). If Africa is to achieve sustainable development and a structural transformation of its economy there is need to go beyond just the production and exportation of agricultural products to transforming them into finished products that are ready for consumption and distribution. In a bid to secure income cross-border trade seems to be a key to deal with complexities of supply and access to new suppliers and customers.

Gradually, the studies identifies a plethora of elements that are key to transitioning Sub-Saharan Africa to agro-industrialisation; improved productivity and regional integration being fundamental elements. Regional communities harmonisation efforts have been increased, which involve lessening of customs and tariff barriers. Nonetheless substantial levels of non-tariff barriers which affect traders' activities as well as the potential of inclusive growth are still there. There are various justifications for falsely reporting or failure to record, but are mostly related to recurrent practices of goods misclassification, under-invoicing, non-declaration of country of origin, non-compliance with quality standards and use of unofficial trading routes and procedures at the border points (USAID 2012; Lesser and Moisé-Leeman 2009; Macamo 1999). This trade usually involve unqualified or quasi-professional traders who deal with sundry but small stock of merchandise (Minde and Nakhumwa 1998). Mbo'o-Tchouawou et. al (2016) stipulates that in recent years ICBT has emerged as a vital sector in Africa and in particular across the EAC and COMESA regions. Studies show a positive relationship the availability of food and the informal trade exchangers since a lot of food products are made available to people and at cheap affordable prices (Little 2007; Ackello-Ogotu and Echessah 1997).

The trade openness model suggests benefits brought about by trade include increased economic growth, bringing more exposure to national economies, leads to improvements in the standards of living and reduction of poverty in developing nations (Anderson 2003; Cagatay 2001). Studies have shown that the trade in ICBT is generally on legitimate goods and services with few exceptions on illegal goods. It has been noted however that the more strict measures are implemented on those who opt for legitimate trade the greater the push into illegitimate trade which is viewed as risk and lucrative. Limited access to police and legal services is one of the problems women face, hence the improvement of access to redress mechanisms at border post is of great importance as much as the protection of female traders activities is concerned. One of the approaches of addressing the problem is border information centres. The centres should be a place where complaints reports on the problems at the border being encountered by the female traders are submitted. COMESA have trader information desks which are responsible in helping non-literate traders in accessing information and filing forms. These information centres helps the traders to get in touch with professionals or anonymously report abuse and harassment cases that occur at the border (Ityavyar 2013).

### **5.0 Theoretical framework**

The study adopts the feminist methodology on assessing the regional integration theory. the major assumption embraced is that there is gender inequality in regional trade and is skewed against women whom research has identified as comprising of the larger population in the informal cross-border trading sector. Up to 70% of informal cross-border traders in Africa are women, and they are the face of informal cross-border trade on the continent (Koroma et al 2017). Establishments of regional economic communities have spanned from the regional integration theory which assumes that integrating economies creates larger markets and result in economic development. According to Tanyanyiwa & Hakuna (2014) regional integration aims at the socio-economic and political transformation of all member states which agrees to form a grouping.

In the African context the idea of regional integration sometimes referred to as regionalism is about consolidating the decimated markets due to the colonial borders inherited and accepted by African leaders at independence. Regional integration is defined as amalgamation by different states accepting to shed off their sovereignty to a newly formed supranational authority given the mandate to oversee the socioeconomic and political development of all member states (Haas 1961). The establishment of regional blocs enhances the bargaining power of states as they now negotiate as a grouping rather than individuals on all international issues relating to socio economic and political challenges (Mapuwa & Munyengwa -Mapuwa 2014; Hartzenberg 2011). The paper adopts a gender position to assess if women as a distinctive gender benefits from these established RECs. This calls for the examination of the nexus of gender and regional trade to have sound literature contributing to the area of engendering trade which has remained tilted against the women.

The participation of women in cross-border trade gives Africa an expanded opportunity of initiatives for the alleviation of poverty and contributing to inclusive economic growth through sustainable means (Bangura 2014; McLeod 2011). COMESA is advanced in terms of regional integration as it has already implemented the customs union and has specific articles 154 and 155 of the COMESA treaty which seeks to address issues related to gender. The presupposition of the regional integration theory is that development through regional trade is gender neutral which has been proven otherwise by past studies. There is, in Africa, apparently a widening gap in the conceptualisation of the abstract ambitions towards regional economic integration and the realistic confirmation and practical reality of actual integration (Jiboku 2015). According to Gomes (2014) regional integration aims at lowering costs of producing and marketing goods and services as well as , encouraging migration of finances, labour and skills resulting in the growth of their competitive ability in global environment.

### **6.0 Methodology**

The paper made use of qualitative methods of gathering and analysing data. Desktop research and interviews were adopted and fifty women involved in cross-border trade were interviewed. The interviews were carried at Harare Road port Zimbabwe with traders to and from Malawi and Zambia. The two countries were chosen as they are both in COMESA and also had adopted the COMESA STR with Zimbabwe. The selection of women was random as the researcher had to identify if the person was a general traveller or involved into trade before requesting for further interviewing. Of the identified seventy women only fifty were comfortable to share their stories. Thematic analysis was used for analysis of the data as major themes were identified across the responses.

## 7.0 Findings

### 7.1 Recognition

The women are itching for recognition from both regional and national policy makers on their contributions to the regional trade and economic development. They have been working in most hostile environments but achieving results. Major concerns were raised on the discrimination experienced on both national and regional policies pertaining to trade which as affecting their operations. The issues to do with abrupt changes in border policies and procedures were singled out as rampant. The WICBT bemoaned lack of consultation by authorities who continue to proclaim policies and laws which were unfavourable to their operations resulting in them making unbearable losses. This calls for authorities to ride on the existing human capital which can aid in the intra- regional trade. The lack of recognition has resulted in the failure for establishment of linkages between the large corporates and informal cross-border traders. There have been efforts at national level to suppress the business activities of WICBT as their operations are criminalised in most African countries. This negative perception have resulted in them being looked down upon and resulting in harassment at borders and enroute to importing or exporting countries. The WICBT also highlighted because of not being recognised they end up using middle persons to access business with large corporates either as suppliers of raw materials or buyers of finished goods which is affecting their profit margins and increasing cost of production to the large corporates.

### 7.2 Openness and transparency

The COMESA STR has the capacity to turn around the regional trade landscape if implemented well and to then benefits of the industry and traders. The failure of the COMESA STR was attributed to the implementation of the whole strategy. The over reliance of the RECs on customs administrations have affected the effectiveness of the regional trade initiatives. There has been claims creation of unnecessary bottlenecks by border officials in both exporting and importing counties resulting in delays of clearances under the STR. This has resulted in WICBT being forced to opt for paying bribes for passage of their goods and this has been reported without any corrective measures being taken. WICBT complained about the powers these border officials have which result in them threatening them with seizure and appropriation of their goods to the state if they fail to comply with their demands. The respondents also point out that the border officials especially the customs officials work in cohorts with the crew members who on their behalf collect bribes. This makes the crew members harass any trader with goods for resale as they tend to benefit from the unofficial payments.

The WICBT also bemoaned the state of communication channels used by the customs authorities which portrays as if it's easy to deal with its officials at the point of entries. The borders are a menace to WICBT and there has been no efforts by responsible authorities to address complain raised by the traders. This has made the established COMESA Trade Information Desks (TIDs) more theoretical and paper commitment rather than useful for the traders. There is no link between what the official websites of both regional and national trade authorities say with what happens on the ground. Respondent's highlighted that they pay different rates of duty at the same border depending on who calculated the duties for all paying commodities. And those who have tried to raise complains have not received any positive response. It was also observed that there are no established policies and programs of increasing the transparency and predictability of taxes and fees applied at the border and rules and regulations governing trade is essential. There is no clear policy on valuations when these officers deny the invoices which are presented to them. Traders complained that they are just given arbitrary figures which they aren't explained to on how they arrived at them and this exposes WICBT to abuses harassment and corruption.

#### 1. Simplify documents and regulatory requirements

There have been various studies in the region pointing to the complexity and excessive documentary evidence required at both export and import. The implementation of the COMESA STR was to accommodate the ICBT in benefiting the tariff exemptions as with other large corporates who were taking advantage of the certificates of origin. the first challenge which has been experienced by the traders has been the failure by STR to address other regulatory requirements such as permits, licenses , phytosanitary and sanitary certificates which remained stumbling blocks to intra-trade in COMES. The traders claimed that the payments to these fees are impacting negatively to their operations. It was highlighted that in Zimbabwe despite the value of goods being imported, failure to produce license will be fined USD 2000.00. With these traders limited financially they end up losing their goods to the customs administrations. There has been an issue raised concerning requirements for the certificates of conformity without which entry is denied despite meeting all other requirements in countries such as Zimbabwe.

#### 2. Limited business organizational social capital.

WICBT have been instrumental in informal intraregional trade which has gone unnoticed by authorities and officials. They complained they have introduced products across borders which they buy from the large corporates. This has been observed on both food and non-food items which they start to move across as samples or gifts before people start demanding more of them. The challenge has been that the relationship between the WICBT and MNCs has been exploitative and skewed against these women. They highlighted that they faced resistance from customs and other border officials who were quick to confiscate their

goods as they try new markets and new products. They complained also against the financial institutions which have continued to turn a blind eye on their cross-border activities classifying them as high risk resulting in their financial incapacitation to formally engage with producers and wholesalers to supply their new markets. After establishing a new market the WICBT complained that the large formal businesses ultimately take over and they end up driven out of the business. Their major challenge has been restrictions which eventually are put in place by authorities on the exportation or importation of these goods which makes it totally impossible for WICBT to continue trading. MNCs and wholesalers were quick to establish branches and distribution channels with already established businesses at the expense of WICBT who would have faced serious challenges in the establishment of new markets. Due to their flexibility and nature of their transactions, it is easier for WICBT to create markets even for new products across borders and with proper resources and capacity building they have an added advantage to grow intra-regional trade in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Regional integration plays a crucial role in the creation of markets and opportunities. With the launch of the AfCFTA which seeks to increase Africa's intra-continental trade there so need to ride on the success stories of existing RECs in Africa. COMESA as one of the most advanced RECs has a lot to contribute to the newly formed AfCFTA to ensure the errors and challenges experienced in the journey of regional integration by these sub-regional RECs are ironed out and do not hinder the success of continental free trade area. One cross cutting issue which needs policy redress is the gender inequalities in African trade tilted against women. Supporting women through regional trade policies will result in increased chances of fighting against poverty as well as contributing to the transformation of their businesses operations into formal entities, bringing to closure a debate which has been intense for a long time. It is crucial to examine the benefits associated with regional integration with gender lenses and ensure that all populace benefit for achievement of sustainable development. As issues of gender are receiving much attention in the fields of international trade and development the paper make an assessment of WICBT under the COMESA customs union. The COMESA treaty identifies the need for gender equality with challenges being faced in practice on ensuring that the objectives are realised. Women have remained marginalised in the COMESA CU with efforts at regional level failing to benefit intended beneficiaries. The adopted COMESA Simplified Trade Regime (STR ) which was meant to cater the informal sector failed to bring about the much needed results because of the complexity of said simplified trading regime resulting in WICBT resorting to their old ways of surviving border controls and challenges. The paper highlights lack of openness and transparency, recognition, documentation and business social capital as major hindrances to WICBT realizing the benefits of regional integration as other large formal businesses. To have women contribute to intra- regional trade RECs have to include women in ICBT at policy design, formulation and implementation. This will enhance their chances of determining their future and contribute to the regional trade policy discourses and visibility to trade policy makers. This has to be adopted as well in all future regional and continental negotiations. For Africa to realize its dream of self-sustenance and self-reliance as espoused in the Africa Agenda 2063 gender inequality has to be eradicated first.

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