Cross-border Women Shuttle Traders Operating within the Frameworks of AfCTA in West Africa

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Introduction

Trade within African nations has been low due to factors such as lack of product diversification, high trade costs, poor transport and communication infrastructure, and unreliable power supply (Africa Renewal, 2023: 14). These challenges are further compounded by differing internal migration patterns, which influence the distribution of labour, the movement of goods, and economic activities within and across borders. Additionally, intra-African regional trade agreements (RTAs) have not been fully implemented by member states, with substantial tariffs on goods persisting. These impediments unduly impact internal migration in Africa, particularly of women involved in cross-border trading as small business entrepreneurs, limiting their ability to fully benefit from regional integration potentials. The African Union (AU) introduced the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as part of its flagship project, titled "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want." The AfCFTA seeks to enhance intra-regional trading within Africa, allowing Africans, to move and to conduct trade freely across borders. This initiative has the potential to expand markets, foster competition, reduce prices, improve product quality, and stimulate entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, particularly for economically mobile populations such as migrant traders (Acheampong, 2023: 14).

About 70-80 % of informal traders in West Africa are women who seek economic opportunities across borders. These women face gender-based barriers that significantly hinder their potential for inclusive growth (Mudzingwa, 2022: 14). For many internal migrants in Africa, cross-border trading is not just about making a living, but a critical means of demonstrating their migratory capabilities within the limits of the continent. However, these traders encounter numerous challenges at border posts, including limited access to trade rules and customs procedures, delays due to complex regulations, porous borders with unauthorized personnel, outdated infrastructure, unreliable electricity, inadequate lighting at night, and poor sanitary conditions.

Cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa often lack local support networks, face discrimination, and experience vulnerabilities associated with their

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mobility. These factors exacerbate gender-based barriers to trade, limiting the ability of migrant women to fully participate in and benefit from cross-border commerce (OECD, 2019: 14). This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by examining how internal migration shapes the experiences of women in cross-border trading in West Africa. It aims to facilitate inter-regional trade for these women, addressing security and gender-based challenges, and promoting policies that are both trade-friendly and migration-sensitive. By highlighting the interplay between migratory intentions and cross-border outcomes (Adeniran, 2012; 2015a and 2015b: 14).

Overview of the AfCTA initiative

AfCFTA is the world's largest free trade area, uniting 55 African countries and eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) into a single continental market. Trading under the AfCFTA officially began on January 1, 2021, presenting an opportunity to harness the economic contributions of internal migrants and cross-border traders in West Africa (Brookings, 2021).

The AfCFTA agreement aims to create a single market of 1.3 billion people, potentially boosting sustainable markets and a combined GDP of $3.4 trillion. More than a free trade agreement, it serves as a vehicle for Africa's economic transformation, facilitating the movement of people, labour, competition, investment, and intellectual property. Internal migration within West Africa is critical to realizing these goals, as the mobility of individuals within and across borders contributes to labour market diversification, regional integration, and the expansion of trade networks. The agreement also prioritizes the inclusivity of women and youth, the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and the promotion of industrialization across the continent.

Informal cross-border trade (ICBT), a sector significantly shaped by internal migration patterns, involves unauthorized commercialization of activities between neighbouring countries by vulnerable, small, unregistered traders. This trade, often dominated by mobile populations seeking economic opportunities, typically involves the movement of goods between border markets, providing income to approximately 43 % of Africa's population (UNCTAD, 2023: 14). Internal migrants, especially women, form a substantial portion of this demographic, relying on ICBT to sustain livelihoods and alleviate poverty. ICBT's macroeconomic and social implications are far-reaching, as it promotes food security, income creation, and economic participation for rural and low-income populations. For internal migrants, ICBT reduces social exclusion by offering access to trade opportunities and networks that might otherwise be inaccessible. By addressing barriers to mobility and formalizing trade practices, AfCFTA has the potential to transform ICBT into a catalyst for economic growth, empowering mobile populations and fostering inclusive development across West Africa.

Aims and Objectives

This study primarily solicits information on the experiences of cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa by exploring how their migratory statuses influence their access to resources, challenges, and empowerment across the borders.

Other objectives of this study are:

i. To explore the knowledge of cross-border women shuttle traders on AfCFTA and how it has impacted their economic activities.

ii. To understand the kind of security challenges faced by cross-border women shuttle traders, particularly those arising from vulnerabilities linked to their migratory statuses and mobility.

iii. To examine gender-based issues inherent in cross-border trading.

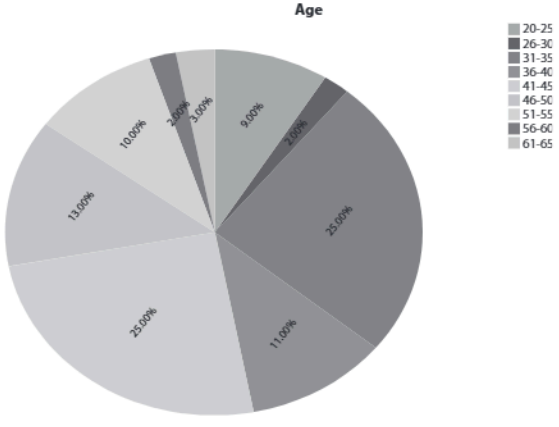
iv. How often do you experience difficulties in accessing social infrastructures, provisions or amenities that hinder your cross-border trade activities?

Methodology

The methodology adopted both qualitative and quantitative research methods, designed to capture the multifaceted experiences of women involved in cross-border trade, many of whom are internal migrants navigating economic opportunities in border communities. The qualitative research component involved asking open-ended questions to facilitate in-depth conversations with respondents, enabling the elicitation of detailed data about their migratory backgrounds, trading activities, and challenges. This study was conducted at key West African border locations, focusing on the Seme and Aflao borders, which connect Nigeria, Benin Republic, and Togo. These locations were selected due to their strategic significance as hubs of economic activity and migration. Specific border town communities included Ilarra, a border town between Nigeria and Benin Republic; Missebo, Illa Condji, and Cotonou; as well as Ketou, Porto-Novo, Tokpa, Akpakpa, Godomey, and Ila-Condji, border communities between Benin Republic and Togo. These areas are characterized by a high concentration of internal migrants whose mobility and trading activities significantly influence cross-border commerce and regional integration.

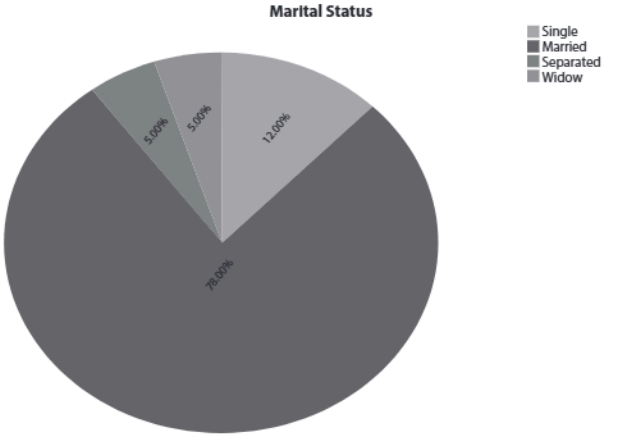
Data Analysis and Results

Gráfico 01 - Age Distribution of Respondents



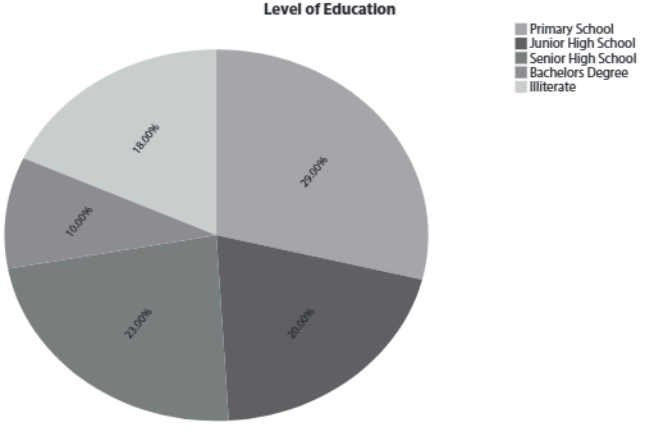
From the age distribution, this survey had more Cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa within the ages of 31-35 and 41-45 which both had a total of 25 respondents each in a total sample of 100 respondents. This is indicative that a lot of these migrants are closer to their middle age with families to fend for.

Gráfico 02 - Marital Status of Respondents



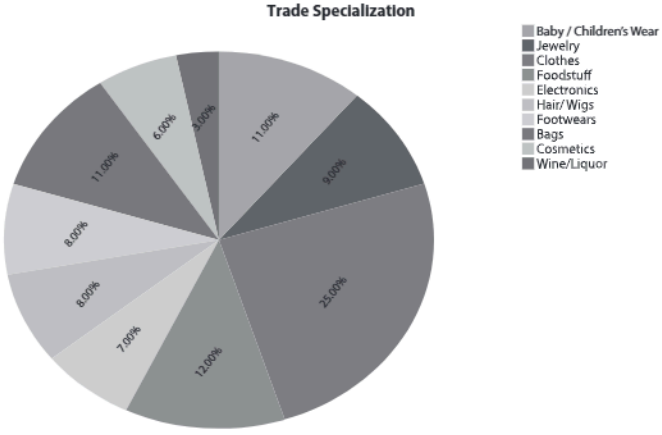
From the dataset, 78 % of the cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa are married, 12 % single and the other 10 % equally divided amongst the separated and widowed traders. This emphasizes the need for more attention in all ramifications; security, economic policies, safety, transportation among others as they have dependants who could significantly be affected by their overall wellbeing.

Gráfico 03 - Level of Education of Respondents



From the results, the data identified that 29 % of the respondents attended primary school and did not continue. This percent of respondents however composed the largest number in the category. This is explained that education for the larger number of the respondents ended at the preliminary stage. This calls for an all-inclusive policy void of favour for academic qualifications.

Gráfico 04 - Trade Specialization of Respondents



From the analysis, 10 major areas of trade were observed which include; Baby/ Children's wear, Jewelleries, Clothes, Bags, Footwears, Foodstuffs, Hair/Wigs, Electronics, Cosmetics and Wines/Liquor. From the distribution, the dataset revealed that a larger percent of internal migrants who are traders engaged in Clothes Trading (25 %) along border areas while very few engaged in Wine/Liquor sales (3 %).

Gráfico 05 - Trading Location of Respondents

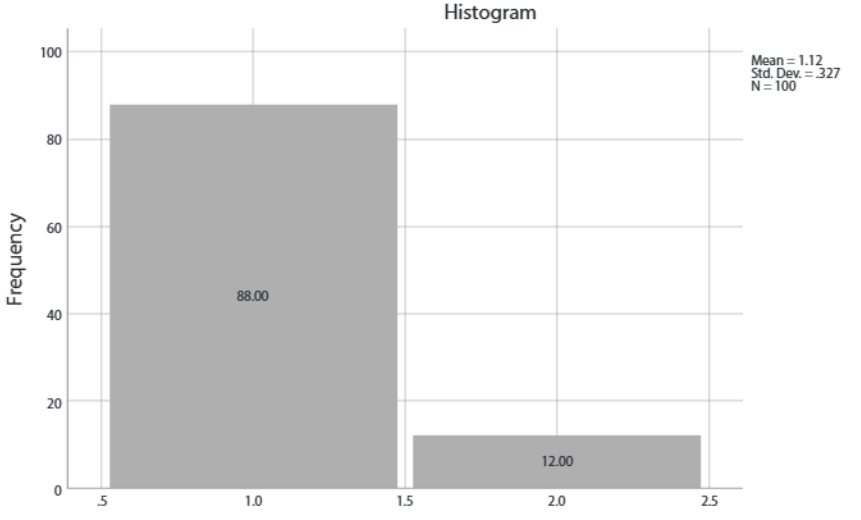
The selected locations for survey included; Tokpa, Missebo, Ila Condji, Ketou, Akpakpa, Porto Novo, Cotonou, Ilarra, and Godomey. From these locations, the study recorded more responses from Tokpa and Missebo 21 % respectively which are major trade areas for cross-border women shuttle traders of West African origin, foreign traders and international marketers.

Tabela 01 – Objective 1
What you know about the Africa Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCTA)?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	24	24.0	24.0	24.0
	No	71	71.0	71.0	71.0
	Partial	5	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

From the responses as shown above, 71 % of cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa do not have any knowledge of existence of the AfCFTA agreement, while 24 % have full knowledge of it and 5 % have partial knowledge or have heard about it before. This portends great impediment to the wheel of productive cross-border trade expedition, especially among cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa.

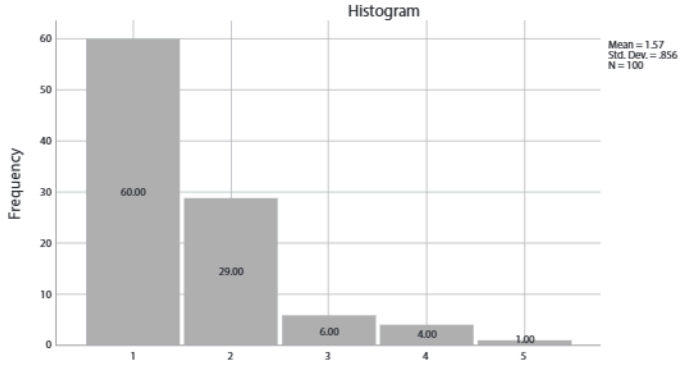
Gráfico 06 - Objective 2
Have you ever faced any security challenges while engaging in cross-border trade as a woman?



Yes: 1, No: 2.

From their responses recorded on a Likert scale with two parameters (Yes: 1 and No: 2), 88 % of the respondents expressed their challenges with security while engaging in cross border trade while 12 % have not experienced any security challenge. This calls for urgent intervention to ensure the safety cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa and all people navigating between countries in West Africa.

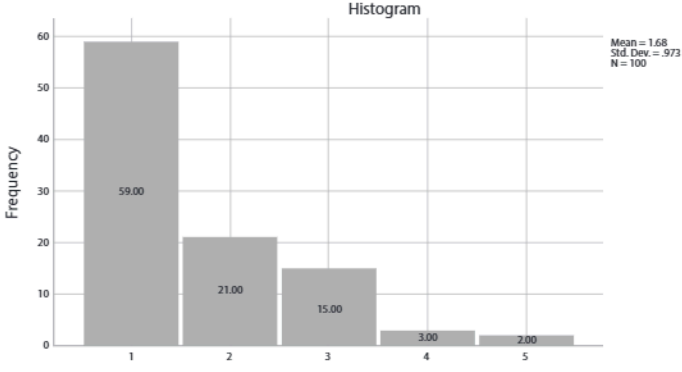
Gráfico 07 – Objective 3
Do you agree that gender-based discrimination affects the economic opportunities and outcomes for women involved in cross-border trade?



Strongly Agree: 1, Agree: 2, Neutral: 3, Disagree: 4, Strongly Disagree: 5

The data above revealed that 89 % of the entire population accept that gender-based discrimination affects economic opportunities and, particularly outcomes for cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa. This is an indicator for stronger gender-based policies that would oversee the protection and security of women engaged in trading activities within the West African sub-region.

Gráfico 08 – Objective 4
How often do you experience difficulties in accessing social infrastructures, provisions or amenities that hinder your cross-border trade activities?



Always: 1, Very Often: 2, Sometimes: 3, Rarely: 4, Not at All: 5

From the data shown in the table above, 59 % of cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa always face difficulties while accessing relevant social infrastructures, amenities and provisions and these hinder their cross-border trading activities a great deal.

Responses from qualitative in-depth interviews

Security challenges:

• ***IDI, Female, 44 years old, Tokpa market***

Often, we are intercepted by armed robbers and at such point, it becomes a case of every man for himself. Nobody remembers his/her goods, nobody remembers whether the driver was nice to them or not. In fact, the risk associated with cross-border trade is too much I can't bear it again, my children are still tender I don't want to die anytime soon.

• ***IDI, Female, 44years old, Ilarra Market, Nigeria)***.

I am educated although just at the primary school level, married at the age of twenty (20) with six children. My spouse is a businessman with a primary school level certificate and in the clothing business too.

Discussion of findings

Majority of the respondents (89 %) accept that gender-based discrimination affect economic opportunities and outcomes for women in cross-border trade and internal migrants. 68% of female traders agreed that there are differences in access to trade-related infrastructure between men and women. 86 % of the respondents believe that there are disparities in access to financial resources and capital for men and women while 93 % of them agree that changes in exchange rates affect their profitability and the viability of their ventures. All of these reflect daily de-motivations faced by cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa.

In '**objective 1**', it is so apparent that a substantial percentage (71 %) of cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa do not know of the existence AfCFTA and this has had a significant impact on sustainability of cross-border trading within the sub-region. Women traders often face exploitation and extortion due to lack of awareness about the unrestricted movement of people and trade at borders. This lack of awareness leads to economic decline, trade barriers, and difficulties in accessing necessary amenities and infrastructures for trade promotion, emphasizing the need for effective communication and sensitization along border routes.

For 'o**bjective 2**', findings have shown that security challenges in the forms of theft, seizure of goods, armed robbery are part of the challenges, as stated in the qualitative report from the respondents. 88 % of internal migrants and cross-border traders affirmed having faced security challenges at one time or the other. The implication of this is an urgent need to make the borders safe from security challenges on the lives, properties and from security personnel- for ease of trading along the borders.

From the findings of '**objective 3**', all the respondents affirmed that being a woman poses some sorts of discriminatory tendencies as they are often delayed in accessing financial aid; experience difficulty in getting infrastructural support, as well as difficulties in acquiring legal documents and papers as regards to their business. Fifty-nine (59 %) of them agree that they always find it difficult to access social infrastructure, amenities and finance that would have promoted their business.

The implication here is that gender discrimination against women who are cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa can reduce women's participation in trans-border trading, which will in turn have negative effects on upkeep of their families since they are, in most cases, the bread winners of their respective families.

Of course, national and regional economic growth will also be impacted.

From '**Objective 4**', ninety-three percent (93 %) of surveyed women in cross-border trade in West Africa believed prevalence of multiple exchange regimes have unduly affected the profitability or viability of their cross-border trading engagements. Essentially, most the financial losses they experience during their businesses are attributable to existence of such multiple exchange regimes within the sub-region.

Policy implications

• Policy and Regulation: Legislators and relevant agencies should prioritize the development and enforcement of regulations that safeguard internal migrants and women involved in cross-border economic operations.

• Training and Awareness: Educating internal migrants and women traders on safety precautions and self-defense skills will help them avoid risks and make sound choices.

• Support Networks: Creating support networks and forums for internal migrants to share their experiences as well as security recommendations helps promote a feeling of community and solidarity, which can aid in addressing safety problems.

• Policy Advocacy: Policymakers, NGOs, and international organizations can work together to push for laws that address safety issues and encourage gender equality in internal migration.

Concluding comments

Though the AfCFTA initiative was adopted in 2019, its specific impacts on cross-border trading in West Africa has quite abysmal, particularly as it pertains to the situation with cross-border women shuttle traders in West Africa. Imperative information and communication on the usefulness of the AfCFTA initiative has been generally low and the potential primary beneficiaries of the provisions are mostly not aware of the contents and benefits, coupled with subsisting security and gender discrimination challenges across the border spaces within the sub-region (Adeniran, 2014a: 14).

In spite of such inherent impediments, women in shuttle cross-border trading in West Africa have remained resolute and have not allowed themselves to be crowded out of cross-border businesses. As a case reference, border crossings between Nigeria, Benin Republic, and Togo have continued to witness frequent movement of products, services, and people with the womenfolk playing significant roles in related processes. Women have emerged as essential players in cross-border trade and migration, making substantial contributions to economic growth and social improvement at both national and regional levels (Adeniran, 2014b; Olutayo and Adeniran, 2015: 14).

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