

Decolonising Feminist Foreign Policy for Economic Justice in Free Trade Agreements – Case of Africa Continental Free Trade Area

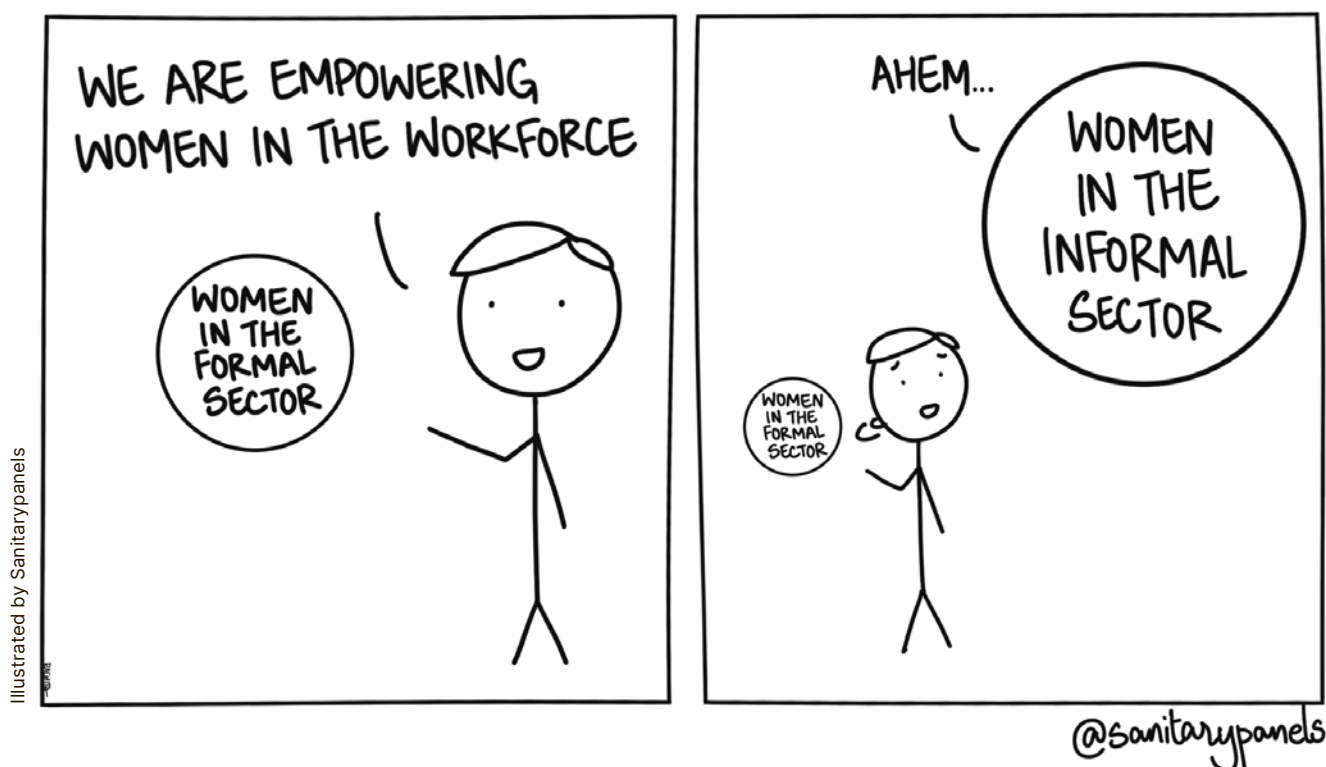
Memory Pamela Kadau

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Advocacy Summary

■ Background and Research Question/Objective

The paper investigates the necessity of a decolonial Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) framework to mitigate concerns about Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and enhance women's economic empowerment within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) context. Focusing on four Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries—Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe—the study critically examined existing FFP frameworks and how they interact with FTAs in the Majority World. The need to bridge the gap between feminist ideals and the lived realities of women in informal economies drives this inquiry.

■ Literature Review

Existing literature highlights the significant role of women in Africa's informal economies, contributing to local livelihoods and regional trade despite systemic barriers such as limited market access, lack of social protection, and discriminatory policies (Chen, 2012; ILO, 2018). Feminist frameworks often overlook these structural inequities, necessitating an intersectional and decolonial approach

to policy design (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2003). By addressing these gaps, AfCFTA has the potential to foster equitable economic participation for women in informal economies (UNECA, 2020).

■ Key Findings

1. The informal sector is the backbone of most African economies and is often women-dominated. However, trade frameworks often exclude women from this sector due to bureaucratic barriers, limited financial resources, and inadequate representation in policy-making processes. These systemic issues perpetuate economic disparities and hinder access to opportunities created by initiatives like AfCFTA.
2. Grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region have demonstrated the ability to advocate effectively for women's rights and economic inclusion. However, underfunding and limited access to strategic platforms hinder their influence in regional and international policy decision-making. Strengthening these movements through technical and financial support is crucial for amplifying their impact.

■ Key Recommendations

- **Specific recommendations to the European Governments and Institutions**
 - **Enhance collaboration** with feminist grassroots movements in Africa to understand particular challenges faced by women in informal economies.
 - **Create** dialogue and fair knowledge exchange platforms to share best practices in integrating gender perspectives into trade and foreign policy.
 - **Promote** fair trade practices that prioritise environmental justice,
 - Ensure that trade agreements do not undermine local economies or exploit vulnerable groups, particularly women in informal sectors.
- **Governments**
 - **Simplify** cross-border trade regulations and reduce bureaucratic barriers.
 - **Allocate** funding for capacity-improvement programs tailored to women in informal economies. These programs should address the structural barriers women face in informal economies, such as access to education, financial resources, and market opportunities. They should also address challenges such as digital literacy and access to technology, as these can enhance women in the informal economy's trade capabilities, increase their economic independence, and contribute to broader economic development.

- **Establish** consultative mechanisms to engage women's organisations in trade policy development. This participatory approach ensures that women's voices in informal economies are recognised and addressed.
- **Monitor and evaluate** gender inclusivity in trade policies and make necessary adjustments.

→ **Regional and Multilateral Institutions**

- **Harmonise** priorities across Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to address regional disparities.
- **Facilitate** accessible platforms for grassroots advocacy in policy discussions.
- **Provide** technical assistance to member states to engage women's movements in trade policy implementation.

→ **Private Philanthropy**

- **Fund** feminist movements to strengthen their advocacy capacity.
- **Invest** in research and training initiatives for women in informal economies.
- **Support** programs that address structural barriers to women's economic empowerment.

→ **Private Sector**

- **Partner** with governments and civil society for capacity-improvement initiatives.
- **Develop** innovative financial products tailored to the needs of informal sector participants.
- **Adopt** gender-responsive corporate policies to promote economic inclusion.

→ **Civil Society**

- **Strengthen** grassroots coalitions to advocate collectively for inclusive trade policies.
- **Use** narrative-driven advocacy to highlight women's contributions to regional trade.
- **Enhance** grassroots participation in policymaking through training and resource support.

Authors and Acknowledgements

Author Biography

Memory Kadau is a Pan-Africanist and Project Management Specialist with a background and over 17 years in grant-making, human rights, governance and democracy, gender justice, leadership, Early Childhood Education (ECD) and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), with a focus on sexual violence. Memory is pursuing an LLB with the University of London, United Kingdom, a Higher Diploma in Systemic Family Therapy (2022), Zimbabwe Institute for Systemic Therapy, Harare, Zimbabwe, a Postgraduate Diploma in Project Management (2017), Roehampton University, London and a Bachelor of Science Honors Degree in Journalism and Media Studies, National University of Science and Technology, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (2008).

Her research interests include leadership, human rights, gender justice, mental health, women's political participation and education. Additionally, she researches and writes extensively on reproductive justice and has published in [Health Times](#) and other media platforms. She has written a paper on Strengthening Victim-Friendly Systems: Case of Zimbabwe, in the quarterly issue of Africa Legal Aid under the theme '[A victim-centred and Gender-Sensitive Approach to Justice in Southern Africa: Shared Lessons.](#)' She recently contributed to a chapter titled [Gender, Elections, and Political Participation in the Age of Social Media in Zimbabwe](#) in the Social Media and Gender in Africa: Discourses on Power and Politics of Everyday Life, edited by Dr Kealeboga Aiseng and Prof. Shepherd Mpofu.

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To the women in the informal sector, your daily victories and struggles are acknowledged. The researcher hopes the paper's findings and recommendations will contribute to the fight for economic justice.

"I am because we are!"

Acronym List

AfCFTA African Continental Free Trade Area

AfDB African Development Bank

AU Africa Union

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

EAC East African Community

ECOWAS Economic Community of West African States

FDI Foreign Direct Investment

FFP Feminist Foreign Policy

FTAs Free Trade Agreements

GDP Gross Domestic Product

ODA Official Development Assistance

REC Regional Economic Communities

SADC Southern African Development Community

UN United Nations

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a monumental economic opportunity for Africa, uniting 54 countries with a collective GDP of approximately US\$3.4 trillion (World Bank, 2022; AfCFTA, 2024). A key objective of the AfCFTA is to lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty by 2035, contingent on implementing substantial policy reforms and trade facilitation measures that inclusively address marginalised groups, particularly women. With projected increases in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Official Development Assistance (ODA), the AfCFTA aims to elevate women's incomes by 11.2% by 2035 (World Bank, 2022). However, concerns persist about its impact on gender equality, especially for women in the informal sector (Oxfam, 2010). This research paper focused on Track four (4) - Changing the story - and specifically seeks to address the question: How do we build a decolonial framework for Feminist Foreign Policies? What lessons can be learned from diverse experiences around the world? The paper investigates the necessity of a decolonial feminist foreign policy (FFP) framework to mitigate concerns about FTAs and enhance women's economic empowerment within the AfCFTA context. Focusing on four Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries—Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe—the study critically examined existing FFP frameworks and how they interact with FTAs in the Majority World. Often, Western-centric frameworks fail to address the unique challenges faced by women in developing regions, potentially perpetuating colonial legacies and prioritising corporate interests over equitable labour practices and empowerment. This research aims to analyse how FTAs, such as the AfCFTA, may exacerbate gender inequalities by neglecting the significant contributions of women in informal economies. The proposed decolonial FFP framework, rooted in the lived realities of African women, will emphasise:

- Fairtrade agreements that incorporate social and environmental justice.
- Enhanced access to education and financial resources for women.
- Value chain linkages that benefit women in the informal sector.
- Secure land ownership rights for women.
- Recognition and support for unpaid care work by women.

Methodology

Research questions

The research sought answers to the following key research questions:

- To what extent do existing Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks influence the implementation of FTAs in Africa, particularly regarding their impact on women's informal work?
- How can equitable and decolonial feminist foreign policy frameworks shape AfCFTA to better address the needs of women working in the informal sector within the SADC region (Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe)?
- What advocacy initiatives and platforms can grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region most effectively leverage to influence the implementation of the AfCFTA for equitable and feminist outcomes?

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. Analyse the influence of existing Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks on implementing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) in Africa, focusing on their impact on women's informal work through a comprehensive review of policies and case studies in the SADC region by September 2024.
2. Conduct a comparative analysis of the AfCFTA's impact on women in the informal sector. By December 2024, identify necessary reforms within the AfCFTA framework guided by equitable and decolonial feminist principles in Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.
3. Identify and evaluate the effectiveness of at least three advocacy initiatives and platforms used by grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region to influence the implementation of the AfCFTA by December 2024. Use interviews and surveys to gather data on outcomes and impact.
4. Create a set of actionable recommendations for policymakers and feminist organisations on leveraging equitable and decolonial feminist frameworks in AfCFTA negotiations, tailored to the informal sector in the SADC countries, supported by data from field research and case studies by January 2025

Conceptual framework – This paper focuses on the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), an approach that integrates gender equality and the protection of women's rights across all areas of a country's foreign relations, including trade, defence,

diplomacy, and development cooperation (International Centre for Research on Women, 2021). The paper covers the core principles of FFP, which prioritise gender equality, actively challenging patriarchal structures, and ensure the inclusion and representation of women and marginalised groups in decision-making processes. In this study, the framework was applied to assess the extent to which it promotes gender equality as a fundamental objective and a strategic means to achieve broader foreign policy goals with a focus on trade agreements. The Swedish government pioneered the world's first explicitly feminist foreign policy in 2014, focusing on removing barriers to gender equality and incorporating a gender perspective in all policy development and decision-making processes (Government of Sweden, 2014). Sweden's comprehensive approach extends across all foreign policy domains, including national security, development cooperation, and trade promotion. "The four Rs": Rights, Resources, Representation and Reality underscore the Swedish framework.

- **Rights** – Protecting and promoting women's rights is a core objective.
- **Resources** – Allocating sufficient resources to achieve gender equality goals.
- **Representation** – Ensuring women's representation is at all levels of decision-making, particularly in foreign policy.
- **Reality** – Reflecting the lived experiences of women and the ongoing challenges they face.

These four "R's" provided part of the broader framework which informed the analysis of the findings of this paper.

Data collection approach – This study used a qualitative approach to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the topic. The research utilised desk review, interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies to gather in-depth insights, perspectives, and experiences from relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, government officials, civil society organisations (CSOs), and members of the feminist movement in the target countries. A total of 64 respondents were reached through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These qualitative data collection methods facilitated a deeper exploration of the existing FFP, economic, and political dynamics underlying the AfCTA's implementation, allowing for identifying key challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. Additionally, the study design prioritised ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights throughout the research process..

Data analysis approach –The data analysis was done by integrating quantitative and qualitative data to understand the research topics comprehensively. The

data gathered from interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies were analysed using thematic analysis, focusing on key aspects of the research questions. This involved coding the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to stakeholders' experiences and perceptions of FFP, trade policies, and the AfCFTA's impact on women in the informal economy. The data was then organised and interpreted to produce a working transcript. This phase enabled an in-depth understanding of the socio-political and economic dynamics that quantitative data from document review could not capture. Findings were then written based on the analysis of the data.

Literature Review

FFP frameworks and principles

The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) defines Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) as a state's policy that guides interactions with other states and movements, prioritising gender equality and the rights of marginalised groups. FFPs integrate gender equality and the protection of women's rights across all areas of a country's foreign relations, including trade, defence, diplomacy, and development cooperation (International Centre for Research on Women, 2021). The overarching goal of FFP is to prioritise gender equality, actively dismantle patriarchal structures, and ensure the inclusion and representation of women and marginalised groups in decision-making processes. Since Sweden adopted FFP in 2014, over 15 other countries and the Latin American region have developed their versions, each bringing unique elements to their policies while still sharing a common focus on gender equality and human rights (Whipkey et al., 2024). Although the number of countries adopting FFP frameworks has grown, there is still significant room for improvement, particularly as the space for gender equality continues to shrink. A review of the existing policies highlights several key areas for development. Feminist organisations argue that countries need to apply a feminist approach consistently across all elements of foreign policy, including aid, trade, defence, and diplomacy, rather than limiting it to development cooperation alone (CFFP, 2021). UN Women (2018), ICRW (2020), and World Bank (2021) concur that there is a need for countries to allocate more resources specifically toward gender equality as a principal and fully funded goal rather than as a secondary or symbolic objective. Investing more resources in women closes the gender gap, which is a key step towards a strong FFP framework. CFFP (2022) notes that many existing FFP frameworks lack rigorous, independent mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning tied to their intended outcomes.

They argue that effective FFPs should include ongoing assessments to measure impact and make evidence-based adjustments.

The discourse on FFP often takes place within a global system marked by the exclusion and oppression of marginalised groups. Recently, there has been growing recognition of the gendered nature of inequality, leading to an interrogation of sexism and patriarchy and creating space for feminism to intersect with foreign policy processes and debates (ICRW, 2023). However, focusing solely on gender is insufficient for addressing the root causes of structural inequality. According to the theory of intersectionality advanced by Crenshaw (1989), gender interacts with multiple social categories, such as race, class, age, disability, and sexual orientation, forming complex layers of discrimination (Gouws, 2017). Colonial legacies in policymaking have historically prioritised the interests of dominant racial and economic groups, leaving African women at the intersection of racial and gender-based discrimination (CFFP, 2021). This aggravates their exclusion and intensifies their experiences of injustice and oppression. African women, much like other Black and Indigenous women of colour, often challenge patriarchal norms and systems of domination. However, they continue to face structural retaliation and discrimination for defying these norms.

In Africa, the adoption of FFP principles remains limited. Most efforts are tied to international instruments and conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, as well as regional frameworks like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Guidelines on Gender Equality (UN Women, 2020 and Chingarande, 2020). While these instruments provide some basis for integrating gender perspectives, they do not explicitly embody the comprehensive, transformative approach envisioned by FFP. Many African governments have yet to integrate feminist principles into their trade policies fully, and their commitments to gender equality remain largely rhetorical, with limited tangible outcomes (Vhumbunu, 2022). A practical FFP framework should disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures across all aspects of foreign policy (aid, trade, defence, and diplomacy) and be informed by the voices and activism of feminist groups and movements (ICRW, 2022).

FFPs in Trade and gender provisions

In analysing the application of FFP frameworks to trade policies, it is evident that while countries like Canada and Sweden have made strides in integrating gender perspectives into trade agreements, many policies remain limited in scope. Most focus on improving conditions for women entrepreneurs or workers but overlook the more profound structural inequalities women face in informal sectors (see below section), particularly in developing regions like Africa (Vhumbunu, 2022). Understanding these gaps is crucial for shaping more inclusive and impactful frameworks, such as the AfCFTA, through a feminist and decolonial lens.

AfCFTA includes provisions to promote women's empowerment and gender equality (AfCTA, 2021). While AfCFTA protocols on women and trade are significant, they often prioritise gender inclusion over transformation. The mechanisms for implementing gender equity are insufficient. The protocols acknowledge the need for a more inclusive trade environment for women but do not obligate governments to facilitate access to capital or education. These provisions often exist within broader policy frameworks that remain skewed against feminist ideals. For instance, while the AfCFTA aims to create economic opportunities and facilitate trade for women, it operates within a neoliberal paradigm that may not adequately address the specific needs and challenges women face in the informal sector (Randriamaro, 2012). The policy's approach to gender equality tends to be instrumental, viewing women's empowerment as a means to economic growth rather than a fundamental objective in its own right. As a result, the AfCFTA's provisions, though progressive on paper, lack the transformative focus needed to rebalance deeply ingrained power structures and inequalities within the continent.

Women in the informal sector

The informal economy is a vital source of income for many African women, who face structural barriers like limited education, discrimination, and restrictive legal frameworks (Chen et al., 2012). Engaged in activities such as street vending, small-scale trading, and domestic work, these women sustain local economies while navigating precarious conditions, including the absence of social protection and market access. However, policies often marginalised their contributions. FFP frameworks lack the localised strategies necessary to address these challenges, as they prioritise formal economic structures (Thompson, 2019; Molyneux et al., 2020). This disconnect underscores the need for tailored, intersectional approaches.

Intersectionality reveals how overlapping identities, such as class and race, shape women's experiences in the informal sector, compounding exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989). Policies informed by intersectional feminism can better address these diverse realities, ensuring inclusivity for marginalised groups, including rural women and those with disabilities (Chant & Pedwell, 2008; Davis, 2008). AfCFTA presents opportunities to boost economic empowerment but often lacks actionable measures for women in informal economies (ILO, 2018; UNECA, 2020). Integrating intersectional and decolonial feminist principles into AfCFTA can enhance social protection and market access, fostering equitable growth (Kebede, 2021).

Decolonial feminism highlights the systemic inequalities stemming from colonial legacies, advocating for trade policies rooted in African women's lived realities (Mohanty, 2003; Lugones, 2010). This paper builds on Lugones's (2007) theory of coloniality of gender, which argues that colonialism imposed a rigid, Eurocentric gender system that continues to shape socioeconomic inequalities for women in the Majority World. Equitable feminist approaches, expanding beyond gender equality to address systemic injustices, have successfully empowered women in informal economies (Thompson, 2019; Molyneux et al., 2020). Grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region are pivotal in bridging policy and practice, using advocacy and regional collaboration to amplify women's voices (Phiri et al., 2024). However, these movements require substantial financial and structural support to maximise their impact (Mama Cash, 2018).

The literature review shows the urgent need for adapting FFP frameworks and trade policies to the realities of African women in the informal sector, ensuring inclusivity and empowerment through decolonial and intersectional approaches.

Findings

AfCTA, FFP and national policies

The AfCFTA holds significant promise for enhancing intra-African trade and promoting economic growth. However, national policies, which can either facilitate or hinder AfCFTA's gender equality objectives, shape its impact on women's participation in informal economies. FFP frameworks provide a valuable lens for analysing these dynamics, as they advocate for inclusive economic policies that prioritise gender justice and address structural barriers. Findings from the target countries demonstrate that national policies play a crucial role in shaping how trade agreements impact women. All four countries are signatories to progressive policies such as the Maputo Protocol, which align with FFP principles of gender-responsive governance. However, translating these commitments into lived realities requires deliberate national policy interventions. This section examines individual country experiences to assess the interplay between trade agreements, national policies, and FFP principles in advancing gender-equitable trade.

The data table below provides an overview of the economic and demographic profiles of the four countries: Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. It highlights each country's estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in billions of US dollars, reflecting the size and performance of their economies and their respective population sizes, illustrating their demographic significance. These combined statistics give insights into these nations' collective economic output and population, emphasising their regional importance to the continent.

Table 1: GDP and population breakdown – Source: WHO and World Bank

Country	GDP (Billions USD)	Total population (Millions)	Male population (Millions)	Female population (Millions)
Angola	113.29	32.87	16.43	16.44
South Africa	403.05	64.01	31.60	32.41
Tanzania	79.87	68.56	34.28	34.28
Zimbabwe	35.92	18.38	8.73	9.65

Total GDP: US\$632.13 billion

Total population: 183.82 million

Total male population: 91.04 million

Total female population: 92.78 million

Angola

The extractive industry sector, particularly oil, predominantly drives the Angolan economy, constituting a substantial portion of its GDP. As of December 2023, Angola's GDP was approximately \$84 billion (Trading Economics, 2023). Despite this wealth, the informal sector employs a significant segment of the population, with women playing a crucial role. However, national policies have historically prioritised the formal mining industry, which is male-dominated, while neglecting the informal economy where many women operate. This policy bias contradicts key FFP principles, which advocate for economic frameworks that actively dismantle structural inequalities and ensure inclusive development. Although Angola passed a National Gender Equality and Equity Policy in 2023, its practical implementation remains limited. A respondent from Angola highlighted this disconnect, stating,

“National policies exist, but in reality, there is disproportionate support towards big industry, which men dominate. Women continue working in the informal sector with limited support, despite many gender equality national policies.”

This gap shows the need for FFP-aligned trade and economic policies that go beyond symbolic commitments to redistribute resources and opportunities and actively ensure that women in the informal sector thrive in Angola's economic development.

Tanzania

Tanzania is a central import hub with bustling ports facilitating the influx of goods from countries like China and Türkiye. As of December 2023, Tanzania's GDP was \$79 billion (Trading Economics, 2023). However, the dominance of inexpensive imports has placed immense pressure on local small SMEs, which predominantly employ women. These SMEs struggle to compete with the low prices of imported goods, reducing market shares and profits. This economic imbalance provides insights into a critical challenge in trade policy. At the same time, liberalisation creates growth opportunities, but its benefits are not equitably distributed, particularly for women in informal and small-scale trade. A student from the University of Dar es Salaam, currently studying at the University of Agder, Norway, observed, “Tanzania has a sprawling SMEs sector which accounts for over 80% of employment of women, which is a good opportunity to grow the sector under this agreement, at least on paper.” However, while national policies

formally recognise women's rights, representation, and access to resources, the realities of open market economics produce different outcomes. This gap between policy intent and actual economic impact reflects a broader failure to incorporate FFP principles into trade governance. A feminist approach to trade policy would require mechanisms that mitigate the disproportionate burden on women-led SMEs, such as targeted financial support, fair competition policies, and strengthened regional value chains that prioritise gender equity. This means national policies must complement the AfCTA's provisions to realise its implementation targets effectively.

South Africa

As the region's largest economy, South Africa had a GDP of approximately \$400 billion in December 2023 (Trading Economics, 2023). It shares the Beitbridge border with Zimbabwe, one of the busiest cross-border trading points in Southern Africa. However, despite its economic strength, South Africa's national policies on immigration and border control have increasingly become restrictive, creating barriers for informal cross-border traders, many of whom are women. These policies, often shaped by security concerns and economic protectionism, limit women traders' mobility and economic opportunities, undermining the inclusive aspirations of the AfCFTA. A respondent noted, "South Africa is open for global business and white capital, but it is increasingly closing for women cross-border traders in the region. The consistency exposes how national policies connect with aspirations of trade agreements." This statement highlights the contradictions within South Africa's trade and economic policies; while the country champions regional economic integration on paper, its inward-looking policies disproportionately impact women in the informal sector. From an FFP perspective, the design of trade policies should include dismantling structural barriers that marginalise women in cross-border trade. This requires shifting from rigid border policies towards gender-responsive trade facilitation measures, including simplified customs procedures, accessible financial instruments for informal traders, and legal protections against harassment and exploitation at border posts. By aligning national policies with feminist trade principles, South Africa can ensure that AfCFTA's commitments to gender equality translate into tangible economic benefits for women across the region.

Zimbabwe

A substantial informal sector characterises Zimbabwe's economy. As of December 2023, the sector contributed approximately \$26 billion to the GDP (Trading Economics, 2023). Despite national policies and organisations advocating for women's economic rights, there remains a significant gap between policy and practice. The desire to expand the tax base in this multi-billion-dollar sector drives the government's push to regulate the informal sector. However, this approach fails to account for the gendered dimensions of informality, where women, who make up the majority of informal workers, face structural barriers such as limited access to credit, exclusion from decision-making, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation. While Zimbabwe has progressive gender equality policies, their implementation remains inconsistent, limiting women's ability to participate fully in national and regional trade. An FFP lens would advocate for policy reforms prioritising economic justice for women in the informal sector, including adopting gender-responsive taxation policies, ensuring that there is reinvestment of revenue from the informal sector into social protections for women traders, and fostering participatory policymaking processes where informal women traders have a voice. Without such an approach, the aspirations of the AfCFTA risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than dismantling them.

In summary, while AfCFTA provides a framework for enhancing trade and promoting gender equality, the actual impact on women in informal economies is heavily influenced by national policies. To fully realise AfCFTA's potential, member states must align their national policies with the agreement's objectives, ensuring that the needs of women in informal sectors are adequately addressed and supported.

Minimal direct impact on informal economies

Findings from this study indicate that while feminist foreign policy (FFP) frameworks have influenced gender discourse around rights, representation, and resources for women on the continent, trade agreements remain heavily patriarchal and neoliberal in orientation. The negotiation of the AfCFTA involved various stakeholders, including government representatives, regional economic communities (RECs), business entities, international trade organisations, financial institutions, and sections of civil society. However, male voices dominated these negotiations, representing neoliberal ideals of free markets and patriarchal institutions of capital.

The AfCFTA Protocol on Women, Youth and Trade is significant, yet it often prioritises inclusion over transformative change. The Preamble and Article 3(e) recognise gender equality, aiming to “promote and attain sustainable and inclusive socioeconomic development, gender equality, and structural transformation of the State Parties.” Furthermore, Article 27(2)(d) of the Protocol on Trade in Services emphasises “improving the export capacity of informal service suppliers, with particular attention to micro, small, and medium-sized women and youth service suppliers.” These provisions acknowledge the importance of gender equality; however, their integration into actionable policies is still lacking. While the protocols highlight the need for a more inclusive trade environment for women and youth, they do not compel governments to facilitate access to capital or education. Gender-responsive policies should extend beyond mere inclusion; they must fundamentally transform power structures in trade to ensure equal participation for women in both formal and informal economies. Influential theorists stress the necessity of redistribution and recognition of women’s contributions.

Provisions in the AfCFTA related to customs cooperation, trade facilitation, elimination of tariffs, and management of sanitary and phytosanitary measures theoretically hold the potential to empower women in trade. Women-owned SMEs and informal businesses are crucial players in the production of goods, identification of markets, and clearance of imports and exports. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2015) and UNECA (2020a) highlight women’s significant contributions in agriculture, manufacturing, and services sectors that stand to benefit from increased intra-African trade under the AfCFTA. According to UNECA, the agreement could increase intra-African exports of agricultural and food products by 20-35% (US\$ 10-17 billion), particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as dairy, vegetables, and rice, where women dominate.

However, despite these theoretical benefits, the AfCFTA and SADC trade policies have had minimal tangible impact on the informal economy, which employs over 60% of women in the region. Women in cross-border trading continue to face significant barriers, including restrictive movement regulations, cumbersome border clearance processes, and prohibitive costs. Additionally, women in SME manufacturing struggle to compete with cheap imports from countries such as China and Türkiye that benefit from low or zero tariffs. As a respondent from Tanzania highlighted, “Cultural products and artefacts once dominated by women are now mass-produced by foreign manufacturers, eroding local industries and appropriating cultural identities.”

In Zimbabwe, initiatives such as women’s banks and gender-responsive financing have had limited reach in addressing the financial challenges faced by women

in the informal sector. According to a respondent, “The policy white papers and subsequent structures created are all good, but the implementation is lacking. The informal sector remains largely unsupported and criminalised.” Similarly, in Angola, respondents noted that trade agreements prioritise mainstream sectors like mining and imports, marginalising informal women traders. South Africa has not fared any better, with local SMEs struggling to keep up with cheap imports and women in the informal sector not receiving policy, financial and institutional support to grow their economic activities.

Ultimately, while the AfCFTA has the potential to address gender inequalities and promote women’s economic empowerment, its current design and implementation remain insufficient to overcome systemic barriers faced by women in informal economies. To achieve meaningful change, intentional policy reforms that integrate gender-responsive measures and amplify women’s voices in trade negotiations and implementation processes are needed.

Disconnect between FFP and African realities

Existing FFP frameworks are predominantly steeped in globalised Western paradigms, which significantly limit their resonance with and applicability to women’s lived experiences and struggles in the SADC region. This misalignment arises because these frameworks are informed by international and multilateral agreements deeply influenced by Western conceptualisations of work, entrepreneurship, and economic participation. As a result, FFPs fail to adequately address the nuanced realities of women in Africa’s informal economies.

FFPs, in their current iteration, place a significant emphasis on issues such as equal pay, closing the gender pay gap, and workplace rights—concepts that are undoubtedly crucial. However, these priorities are framed within formal economic structures typical of the Minority World. In contrast, the informal economy dominates the landscape in much of Africa, including SADC, employing over 70% of the region’s workforce, with women comprising a significant majority. Focusing on formal-sector issues often neglects women’s distinctive challenges in informal economies, such as cross-border traders, street vendors, and small-scale producers. A South African respondent observed, “Moving away from a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model towards approaches grounded in localised experiences and solutions is important. We are not seeking to reinvent the wheel, but frameworks for feminist foreign policy also need to reflect our own experiences and lived realities.” This statement stresses the need for FFPs to

shift their focus from universalised frameworks to ones rooted in decolonial and context-specific perspectives.

Angola, Tanzania, South Africa, and Zimbabwe share histories shaped by colonialism and, in the case of South Africa, apartheid. These systems entrenched inequalities, shaping today's political, economic, and social structures. For example, colonial and apartheid policies disproportionately excluded black and coloured women from access to land, capital, and formal employment opportunities, forcing many into precarious roles in the informal sector. Despite these historical injustices, existing FFP frameworks often fail to account for these structural inequities, reinforcing their marginalisation. A decolonial feminist approach offers a pathway to address these shortcomings by acknowledging and addressing African women's historical and socio-political contexts. This involves recognising the informal sector as a legitimate economic arena and understanding how it intersects with global trade policies such as the AfCFTA.

Rights, representation, resources and reality, the cornerstone concepts of FFP, are often narrowly interpreted within formal decision-making platforms. However, SADC's grassroots organisations and civil society actors highlight these concepts' interconnectedness in informal networks and value chains. Findings reveal that many women in the informal sector, particularly cross-border traders, have their own associations and systems of cooperation. However, formal trade policy discussions frequently exclude these networks. A key informant emphasised,

“Women from informal sector networks and value chains are underrepresented, and their voices often go unheard in existing frameworks of feminist foreign policy. It is important to deconstruct this and have frameworks which better reflect their lived realities and experiences.”

Funding models employed by donors and philanthropic foundations further exacerbate the disconnect between FFPs and the realities of African women. These models often operate within rigid interpretations of rights, representation, and resources, focusing on measurable outcomes tied to formal platforms rather than the more diffuse, community-based impacts of informal economic participation. This narrow focus limits the ability of grassroots movements to engage meaningfully in policy-making processes and to amplify their struggles for economic emancipation. Moreover, it perpetuates a hierarchical approach to development, sidelining local knowledge and agency.

Bureaucratic bottlenecks in trade policy implementation

Developing and implementing trade policies across the target countries is highly technical and bureaucratic. It involves coordinating multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, private sector representatives, international financial institutions (IFIs), and think tanks. While these stakeholders play critical roles, the complexity of aligning the objectives of trade agreements with national and regional priorities creates significant bureaucratic bottlenecks. These bottlenecks, in turn, marginalise key actors in the informal economy, particularly women. Implementing trade agreements like the AfCFTA relies on a range of legislative reforms and regulatory alignments at the national level. However, by their very nature, bureaucracies engage primarily with organisations and institutions operating at similar formality and structure levels. This dynamic disproportionately favours the formal sector and more prominent private sector players, excluding informal sector actors like women traders who lack the institutional capacity and resources to navigate these processes effectively.

A historical example of this challenge is evident in the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), adopted by the African Union (AU) in Lusaka in 2001. NEPAD was a bold initiative to eradicate poverty, foster sustainable development, and empower women through inclusive economic growth. While these objectives were commendable, the initiative encountered significant bureaucratic bottlenecks that hindered its execution. For instance, NEPAD's institutional framework relied heavily on centralised decision-making processes dominated by state actors and large development agencies. This structure limited the involvement of grassroots organisations and women's groups, whose perspectives and experiences were crucial to addressing the localised realities of poverty and gender inequality. According to Bostan (2011), NEPAD failed to effectively integrate women into its programs or provide adequate platforms for their participation in decision-making. This exclusion perpetuated systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment and undermined the initiative's ability to achieve its stated goals.

Lessons from NEPAD's shortcomings are particularly relevant for the AfCFTA. Despite its potential to transform trade dynamics across Africa, the AfCFTA risks replicating similar patterns of exclusion if it fails to address the inherent biases and inefficiencies of bureaucratic systems. Meaningful participation of informal sector actors, particularly women traders, must be prioritised through targeted interventions that simplify bureaucratic processes, enhance accessibility, and incorporate the voices of marginalised groups into policy design and implementation. Without such measures, the transformative promises of initiatives

like NEPAD and the AfCFTA may remain unrealised. Evidence from the study reveals that women's engagement in the informal sector during trade policy development often serves more as a symbolic gesture than a genuine effort to promote their economic empowerment. These token engagements are primarily designed to "tick the boxes," presenting a facade of inclusivity that aligns with international obligations for gender equality. A respondent observed, "Many of these engagements are performative. Women's voices are acknowledged but not integrated meaningfully into the decision-making process. The focus remains on meeting international compliance standards rather than addressing local realities."

The bureaucratic management of the AfCFTA further compounds these challenges. The AfCFTA Secretariat, based in Accra, Ghana, collaborates with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to facilitate implementation. However, each REC operates with distinct priorities, creating a fragmented approach that limits the pace and coherence of implementation. Additionally, the technical nature of trade policy engagements and the financial and human resources required to participate mean that only governments and large businesses can effectively influence the process. Women's grassroots organisations and feminist civil society groups cannot often follow the intricate details of these negotiations and policy rollouts. Respondents from across the four countries studied noted that despite public celebrations of the AfCFTA's launch on July 7, 2019, its implementation remains confined to bureaucratic channels. These channels often exclude CSOs and women's grassroots movements, leaving them on the periphery of critical discussions. "Real power lies in the bureaucracy," an expert noted, "and it is not easy to engage or follow up with the technical details of implementing trade agreements like the AfCFTA. Most CSOs and women's organisations have barely scratched the surface of what is being proposed and operationalised in SADC. Governments, the SADC Secretariat, and big business run the show."

Moreover, the financial and logistical barriers to engagement cannot be overlooked. Women in the informal sector, who make significant contributions to regional trade, are often constrained by limited resources and capacity, preventing them from participating in bureaucratic processes. This exclusion perpetuates systemic inequalities, as the informal economy remains underrepresented in trade policy implementation. For the AfCFTA to achieve its stated goals of inclusivity and gender equity, deliberate efforts must be made to simplify bureaucratic processes and lower the barriers to participation for informal sector actors. This includes creating more accessible platforms for dialogue, providing technical support to grassroots organisations, and ensuring that trade policy frameworks reflect the lived realities of those they aim to empower. Without such interventions, the

AfCFTA risks becoming another initiative that benefits the formal sector and entrenched power structures while leaving behind the groups it aims to uplift.

Opportunities from existing FFP frameworks and trade policies

Findings reveal that while FFP frameworks are often criticised for being Western-centric, they also offer critical windows of opportunity for women in Africa's informal sector to engage meaningfully with trade agreements like the AfCFTA. These frameworks challenge dominant narratives and create platforms for advancing African women's economic participation and addressing entrenched inequalities. Importantly, this opening allows grassroots feminist movements to build more substantial, cohesive advocacy efforts in the SADC region and across the continent, fostering inclusion in trade policy processes traditionally reserved for elites.

Leveraging rights frameworks

Instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol establish women's economic, social, and political rights. . These frameworks mandate state parties and regional bodies to uphold women's rights, including access to information, freedom of assembly and movement, non-discrimination, and socioeconomic opportunities. These rights are foundational for women's full citizenship and participation in the public sphere. Respondents highlighted the importance of these instruments as tools for advocacy and transformation. A Tanzanian respondent emphasised,

"The existence of international instruments to which governments in SADC are party is a significant step. Women in the informal sector and CSOs can leverage these rights to push for changes in how FFP frameworks are constructed. Rights are fundamental because they empower advocacy and demand accountability."

Recognising these rights within FFP discussions also informs the broader discourse on decolonising trade agreements, ensuring that they reflect the lived realities of women in the informal economy. These frameworks provide the legal and moral foundation for advocacy efforts to ensure women benefit equitably from economic integration initiatives like AfCFTA.

Representation and gender equality

Political representation is key in amplifying women's voices in decision-making spaces. While the SADC region has made progress, with the proportion of women in political leadership increasing over the last two decades, the regional average remains at 24%, below the global average of 30% (SADC Parliamentary Forum, 2023). This underrepresentation limits the potential for women's issues, particularly those in the informal sector, to be prioritised in trade agreements and other economic policies. Respondents from the study underscored the importance of representation.

"The increase in the number of women in public leadership over the last 20 years is important for challenging existing power structures. It creates a platform to redefine how FFP is constructed, ensuring it aligns with the lived realities of African women, particularly in the informal economy."

Representation in parliaments, cabinets, and key government agencies helps shape narratives around FFP, ensuring that policies address women's specific challenges in the region.

Access to resources and economic empowerment

Trade agreements like AfCFTA are fundamentally about improving access to resources, markets, and raw materials. Historically, women in the informal sector have faced significant barriers to accessing capital, land, and other critical resources. However, evidence shows that access to these resources improves economic outcomes, reduces poverty, and promotes social progress.

Existing FFP frameworks highlight the importance of these issues, and AfCFTA's objectives provide an opportunity to integrate women's participation into the economic benefits of trade agreements. As one respondent pointed out,

"Access to resources is critical. When women are empowered with capital or land, the ripple effects on economic growth and poverty alleviation are undeniable. FFP frameworks should prioritise this as a core objective."

However, barriers persist. Grassroots feminist movements face challenges accessing funding, networks, and platforms to engage effectively with these trade agreements. Findings indicate that addressing these systemic issues is key to leveraging FFP and AfCFTA's opportunities for African women.

Capacity-building and philanthropic support for grassroots movements

Findings underscore the critical role of capacity-building initiatives and philanthropic support in bridging the gaps within feminist foreign policy (FFP) frameworks. Transformative strategies include strengthening women's financial literacy, enhancing business acumen, and creating pathways to transition from subsistence-level enterprises to commercial ventures. Empowering women to engage effectively in policy discussions through targeted support can drive significant changes in trade policy outcomes.

Capacity-building efforts

Existing capacity-building programs equip women in informal sectors with the tools to understand and engage with trade agreements like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). These programs combine skills training with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure their impact and amplify advocacy efforts. A key informant noted,

“Training programs are giving women the knowledge to understand trade agreements and how they can be leveraged for economic benefit. This is critical for their inclusion in spaces traditionally dominated by men and big business.”

At the national level, organisations such as WALPE in Zimbabwe and Mwana Pwo in Angola are leading efforts to elevate women's participation in leadership and policymaking. They work closely with women in the informal sector, encouraging their active involvement in policy dialogues and leadership roles. A respondent highlighted the importance of political engagement, stating,

“Politics is where priorities are brokered and defined. Women must actively and effectively participate to challenge and change the status quo.”

Role of philanthropic support

Philanthropic organisations are pivotal in advancing economic justice for women in the informal sector. Mama Cash, a feminist funder, exemplifies this support with a focus on capacity building and advocacy. In a recent report, Mama Cash noted,

“We have distributed €21.5 million in more than 1,100 grants to organisations advancing economic justice in 120 countries. With this support, feminist

activists have won labour protections and social security, reformed land, property, and inheritance rights, secured minimum wages, fought employment and housing discrimination against trans and intersex individuals, and protested the gendered impact of trade policies.”

Mainstream donors such as the European Commission (EC), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) have supported training programs, advocacy initiatives, and grassroots coalitions. These partnerships have enabled grassroots feminist movements to form regional coalitions, engage civil society organisations, and use tools like documentaries and narrative-driven campaigns to highlight women’s contributions to trade and economic justice.

Regional and national advocacy

Regional umbrella organisations, including FEMNET and Gender Links, provide sub-granting services to grassroots associations, strengthening the feminist movement’s capacity to influence economic and trade policies. These organisations support local networks in conducting campaigns and dialogues with policymakers, ensuring women’s voices from the informal economy are heard.

Governments collaborate with development partners and civil society organisations at the national level to align trade policies with FFP principles. They aim to engage marginalised women directly in policy formulation, adapt policies to diverse local contexts, and implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress. While these efforts are progressive, bureaucratic bottlenecks remain a significant challenge. A respondent observed, *“Engagement with government structures is important for women to reform cross-border regulations and trade policies. Governments may not always listen or act, but sustained engagement ensures these issues remain in policymaking corridors.”*

Grassroots impact

These initiatives enable grassroots movements to leverage international platforms like the UN Commission on the Status of Women to amplify women’s voices and influence global policy discussions. Despite their limitations, respondents acknowledged that these platforms provide opportunities to challenge existing narratives and advocate for inclusive trade policies.

Addressing systemic barriers, building capacity, and fostering partnerships enable women in the informal sector to shape trade policies and actively leverage

opportunities like AfCFTA. As one respondent aptly summarised, *“Grassroots capacity-building and engagement are key to ensuring women in the informal economy not only benefit from trade policies but also have a hand in shaping them to reflect their realities and aspirations.”*

Recommendations

Specific recommendations to the European Government and Institutions

- **Support capacity strengthening:** Invest in capacity-strengthening initiatives for women-led organisations and African grassroots movements. This support should enhance their advocacy skills, enabling them to engage effectively in trade policy discussions and negotiations. It should also help women in the informal sector strengthen their value chain networks and advocate for changes to rigid colonial trade policy institutions and practices.
- **Promote fair trade practices:** Encourage fair trade practices that prioritise social and environmental justice and address structural inequalities created by historical injustices like colonialism and apartheid. This includes ensuring that trade agreements do not undermine local economies or exploit vulnerable groups, particularly women in informal sectors. Also, it supports solidarity economies, which characterise the informal sector in Africa.
- **Facilitate knowledge exchange:** Create platforms for knowledge exchange between European and African countries and civil society to share best practices in integrating gender perspectives into trade and foreign policy. It is also important to support localised research and development of economic value chains that can grow trade in the informal sector and transition them into SMEs.
- **Commit to transparent practices:** Foster transparency in trade negotiations and agreements. Make the processes accessible to civil society and stakeholders, allowing for informed public engagement and scrutiny.
- **Enhance collaboration with grassroots movements:** European Governments should actively engage with grassroots feminist organisations in Africa to understand the specific challenges faced by women in informal economies. This involves creating platforms for dialogue that allow these organisations to influence trade policy discussions. By prioritising the perspectives and expertise of local women’s groups, governments can ensure that trade agreements, including those under the AfCFTA, are designed to promote economic inclusion and address the unique barriers faced by women.
- **Integrate gender-responsive economic policies:** European governments should advocate for and implement gender-responsive policies within their

trade agreements with African countries. This includes establishing frameworks that ensure women's economic contributions are recognised and supported, particularly in the informal sector. By aligning trade policies with gender equality objectives, such as access to financial resources, capacity-building programs, and protection against discrimination

National governments

- **Integrate informal sector perspectives into trade policy design:** Ensure that women's voices in the informal sector are incorporated into trade policy development, including AfCFTA implementation. Establish consultative mechanisms that engage grassroots women's organisations and informal trader associations as key national policy development and implementation stakeholders.
- **Simplify cross-border trade regulations:** Reform onerous border procedures and reduce bureaucratic barriers disproportionately affecting women traders. Provide streamlined processes for small-scale traders to access regional markets and feed into export value chains.
- **Allocate funding for capacity building:** Dedicate national budgets to support training programs for women in financial literacy, business development, and understanding trade agreements. Establish gender-responsive budgeting practices to ensure resources reach women in informal economies and improve the infrastructure for the informal sector. Address challenges such as digital literacy and access to technology, as these can enhance women's trade capabilities in the informal economy, increase their economic independence, and contribute to broader economic development.
- **Monitor and evaluate gender inclusivity in trade policies:** Develop robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track the gendered impacts of trade policies. Use these evaluations to inform future policy adjustments and ensure continuous policy improvement.

Regional and Multilateral Institutions

- **Harmonise priorities across Regional Economic Communities (RECs):** Align the implementation of AfCFTA with the specific needs of women in different regions by ensuring that RECs collaborate effectively through shared platforms. Create interlinked gender-focused working groups within RECs to address women's economic participation.
- **Provide technical assistance for grassroots engagement:** Support member states with resources and expertise to engage women's grassroots movements

in trade policy implementation. Develop toolkits and guidelines tailored for informal sector inclusion.

- **Facilitate accessible platforms for advocacy:** Use regional and global forums to amplify women's voices in informal economies. Provide platforms for grassroots representatives to present their priorities directly to policymakers.

Private philanthropy

- **Fund feminist movements:** Establish flexible funding mechanisms for grassroots feminist organisations to strengthen their capacity for advocacy and engagement in trade policy—Prioritise long-term funding commitments to ensure sustainable impact and support internal resource mobilisation initiatives.
- **Support economic justice initiatives:** Channel resources into programs that advance women's access to capital, land, and markets. Focus on addressing structural barriers that hinder women's economic empowerment so they are independent.
- **Invest in training and research:** Fund initiatives that help women understand trade agreements and their economic implications. Support research highlighting women's contributions to regional trade in informal economies.

Private sector

- **Engage in public-private partnerships for capacity building:** Partner with governments and civil society to train women traders on business development, digital skills, and financial literacy.
- **Facilitate access to credit and markets:** Develop innovative financial products tailored to the needs of women in informal economies. Create supply chain programs integrating informal sector goods and services into formal markets.
- **Adopt gender-responsive corporate policies:** Ensure corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives explicitly address gender equity. Support policies that promote women's economic empowerment, such as equal pay, parental leave, and anti-discrimination measures.

Civil society

- **Strengthen grassroots coalitions:** Build networks of women's organisations across SADC to advocate collectively for inclusive trade policies. Facilitate cross-border collaborations to amplify advocacy efforts.
- **Use narrative-driven advocacy:** Develop and disseminate documentaries, case studies, and storytelling initiatives highlighting women's lived realities

and contributions to informal economies. Use these narratives to influence policy discussions at the national and regional levels.

- **Enhance participation in policymaking:** Train grassroots leaders to effectively engage with policymakers and participate in trade negotiations. Provide resources and platforms for continuous advocacy at local, national, and regional levels.
- **Monitor government commitments:** Hold governments accountable for gender and trade commitments under AfCFTA and other frameworks. Publish periodic reports evaluating progress and highlighting gaps in implementation.

Conclusions and Way Forward

This research highlights the critical importance of integrating women's perspectives, particularly those from the informal sector, into Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks and trade agreements like the AfCFTA. The findings reveal the challenges and opportunities inherent in this process, emphasising that genuine inclusivity requires dismantling structural barriers, amplifying grassroots voices, and aligning policies with the lived realities of African women.

Stakeholders have a unique opportunity to use this research as a roadmap for action. Governments can lead the way by reviewing and reforming bureaucratic processes and ensuring that trade policies are accessible and beneficial to women in informal economies. Regional and multilateral institutions can play a pivotal role in harmonising priorities and providing technical assistance to grassroots organisations. Private philanthropy can drive long-term change by funding feminist movements and investing in capacity-building initiatives. Meanwhile, the private sector can foster economic inclusion through innovative partnerships and gender-responsive policies. Civil society remains a cornerstone for advocacy and monitoring, holding all actors accountable to their commitments.

The way forward involves fostering collaboration across these sectors and ensuring that trade agreements and FFP frameworks are theoretical constructs and practical tools for economic justice. Findings show that by prioritising the voices and needs of women in informal economies, stakeholders can create a more equitable and sustainable future in which trade and foreign policy truly empower and uplift marginalised communities.

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