



## The Experiences and Challenges of Women in Agricultural Trade within the SADC Region

The Case of Trade and Agriculture Sectors in Zambia,  
Zimbabwe and Malawi

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## Overview

The policy brief summarises the Southern Africa Trust research which focused on the challenges and experiences of women in the SADC region. The research assessed the extent of gender mainstreaming within Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) regional and national policies, within the trade and agricultural sectors in the southern African region. Secondly, the level of knowledge among women traders and farmers on the relevant policies impacting their respective economic activity.

The study findings have shown that women engaging in trade and agriculture have not been able to enjoy significant benefits because of several constraints such as access to finance, markets, land, agricultural inputs; as well as lack of information on cross border trade procedures and regulations, bureaucratic processes and burdensome taxation at the border posts.

The solutions to address these challenges are articulated in national and regional policies, but women traders and farmers either have no knowledge of the policies or of participating in dialogue involving their implementation. The policy brief is structured as follows: the introduction provides an overview of why trade and agriculture are important priorities for reducing poverty and facilitating region integration. The context section summarises the purpose of the study and finally the key findings are shared including policy recommendations for policymakers in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Trade and agriculture are considered to be integral sectors deriving economic benefits that can significantly determine the wealth of a nation in the SADC region. A considerable number of women play a key role in trade and agriculture in the region yet remain the most disadvantaged participants within these sectors, having to face challenges which continue to impede on the realisation of their full potential.

In an article produced by [The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD), it was estimated that the value of trade conducted by women

in the region amounts to approximately \$20 billion USD annually. Similarly, the [SADC Food and Nutrition Security Strategy](#) had estimated that women contribute at least 60% in total food production and provide the largest labour force within the agricultural sector. The critical assessment on the ownership of land and knowledge of agricultural policies is of paramount importance in the examination of gender mainstreaming, as these allow women to remain effective participants within the trade and agricultural sectors.

According to the [Food and Agriculture Organisation \(FAO\) of the United Nations report of 2017](#), of the 96% of land acquired under the land reform programme, only 10% of that land is owned by women. Women were found to only own five hectares of that land. Similarly, in the trade sector, the role of women remains significantly critical in the examination of incidents affecting informal cross border traders. With the limited amount of available data on women traders, it is estimated that more than 70% of informal cross border traders within the SADC region are women, with informal cross border trade accounting for 30 – 40% intra SADC trade. A study done by [Southern Africa Migration Programme](#) examined the overall character and significance of cross border trade in poverty alleviation, food security and household livelihoods covering eight countries and twenty borders within the SADC region. During the study period, governments in Southern Africa recorded R3.75 million in taxes from 1 780 traders at selected border posts.

**Because women represent the core of trade and agriculture, there is significant potential for these sectors to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. However, women trade under policies that do not respond to their immediate needs.**

Economic policies remain gender blind due to the lack of meaningful participation of women in policy making. Inherently, policies are perceived to maintain a top-down approach which very often neglects to address the specific concerns of women. The sectors of trade and agriculture have been incorrectly argued to embrace what is referred to as “gender blindness”, especially regarding the inclusion of women who are considered key participants within these sectors.

SADC has taken active steps to create an environment that is resistant to gender blindness. An example of this is the SADC Regional Agricultural Policy, which is geared towards supporting the mainstreaming of gender issues of relevance to agriculture, food and nutrition security into regional and national policies and strategies. Additionally, the [SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan \(RISDP\)](#) provides guidance and facilitates the development of the long-term social and economic goals of the SADC region over a period of 15 years. Through the RISDP, member states are committed to ensuring that gender is integrated into the activities that are aimed at sustainable development, which ultimately build the cornerstone of SADC economies and eradicate gender inequality.

It therefore becomes imperative to include women in conversations regarding the sectors of trade and agriculture, as the environment currently erodes the role of women as the face of socio-economic development within the SADC region.

## Context

This study assesses the extent of gender mainstreaming in the implementation of the existing comprehensive SADC regional trade and agricultural policies, while examining the experiences and challenges that women within the sector face.

This assessment was conducted in the following ways:

- Evaluating the ownership of land as well as the level of knowledge of agricultural policies both at regional and national levels
- Reviewing the level of participation in policy dialogue and investigating incidents of informal cross border traders
- Profiling women cross border traders.

## The Focus of this Study

The study focused on the countries of Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe; and made an analysis on the status of women involved in both or either agriculture and trade, as well as their level of knowledge of existing sector policies. Each of these countries are signatories to the [SADC Protocol on Trade](#) and subscribe to the [Regional Agricultural Policy \(RAP\)](#). The RAP was established to support effective gender mainstreaming on issues related to agriculture, food and nutrition security into the regional and national strategic policies. Essentially, RAP allows for the recognition of gender equality and empowerment as a regional priority.

There is an increasing need to develop and collect specific data on the involvement of women in trade and agriculture within the region. Due to the absence of adequate data, effective policy making is constrained, and decision makers are presented with an inaccurate reflection of the extent of problems and challenges faced by women participating in the sectors.

## Key Findings

The main challenges which affect women in the trade and agricultural sector are interrelated. Women in agriculture are subject to Gender Based Discrimination, as societies remain largely patriarchal, where men play dominant roles in decision making on behalf of their families. It is argued, men use these positions to gain access to information and prioritise their own produce. Inherently, women in agriculture were found to maintain very different roles from men. Although women are involved in all subsectors of agriculture, their main interest lies in livestock production, such as small stock farming of poultry and goats, leaving men to do cattle farming.

The land questions varied between countries. The study reveals that women own less than five hectares of land. In Malawi alone, it is found that 100% of women involved in this study owned less than five hectares of land. Therefore, women remain the largest group which the land reform programme continues to intentionally exclude, as only 10% of land acquired from such a programme was received by women. This means the promise of land reform was never fulfilled. In addition, women rarely identify with and

comprehend policies that significantly govern their field of expertise, as a result of high illiteracy levels.

Women interviewed in this study are not aware of any agricultural policies and programmes - an estimated 80 – 90 % of women lack knowledge on agricultural policies, as a result of low literacy levels, which create a barrier of entry for access to information. Despite the low literacy levels, there is a grave concern on the lack of initiative and political will by government and non-state actors to develop policies and create open dialogue on these policies. Mechanisms for coordination and participation of women that allow them to participate in policy dialogue, have witnessed an overwhelming increase throughout the international community as a result of the gender focus. These organisations and mechanisms foster the role of women through advocacy and lobbying for conducive environment, and continuously review the comprehensive legislature which is critical to promote business and advance the interests of women. The formation of organisations was found to include national farmers and trade associations/ unions and civil society organisations. It is argued that women who participate within these platforms tend to improve their literacy levels, as opposed to those who do not have access to policy dialogue platforms.

The barriers to information continue to be fostered by limited access to finance and inputs. Financial institutions are focused rather on commercial lending and low risk entities. Women are argued to lack surety and maintain a fluctuating income, which proposes difficulty because loans require regular payment, despite women being highly sought after by micro-financial institutions for lending. There is a lack of official statistics on the contribution of women to the trade sector, The Zimbabwe Cross Border Traders Association, [Common Market Eastern and Southern Africa \(COMESA\)](#) and the SADC Secretariat provide that at least 70 – 80% of cross border traders are women and make a living through buying good from neighboring countries and offer them for trade in the region. Some of the commodities traded include vegetables, fruits, maize, sorghum and beans. However, at least 90% of women ICBT's revenue is a contribution to government taxes. High tax rates at borders continue to reduce the potential of women operating profitable businesses.

The [COMESA Simplified Trade Regime](#) is another mechanism facilitating improved small-scale trading through simplifying customs procedures. Customs officials at the Chirundu border post in Zambia argued that there seemed to be a lack of commitment from women cross borders traders to use a formalised trade route, because many women undertaking cross border trade have been operating beyond 5-10 years.

The challenges faced by informal cross border traders are sometimes life threatening. Women indicate that corruption remains rampant at the border: officials offer bribes to smuggle goods; women experience harassment by customs officials, including sexual abuse and confiscation of goods; and the procedures at border posts remain lengthy and broadly inconsistent. Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure continues to impede on the availability of safe storage and adequate health facilities.

## Policy Recommendations

In order to ensure women continue to positively contribute to enhancing the economic and social development of the region, we must take pre-emptive steps to formulate strategic policies that intentionally interrupt an environment which continues to evidently foster gender blindness.

The following were the proposed policy recommendations from the research:

- Develop alternative streams for lending in an attempt to enable fixed investment and expose women to key tools in trade, agriculture and industrialisation.
- Encourage women traders and farmers to use information, communication and technology in an attempt to enable access to information. This will facilitate access to knowledge and information enabling them to reduce transaction costs, improving productivity and competitiveness within the trade and agricultural sectors.
- SADC member states should ensure that Trade policy accounts and continues to allow for gender mainstreaming at all stages of the policy processing, starting from the planning, development stage and implementation. Policies should embrace the intention to fight against gender inequality within trade and agriculture.
- Policymakers should address the need to ensure gender mainstreaming through a formalised and systematically addressed activity with pre-defined application of rules and procedures within the region.
- There must be Policy coherence between agriculture and trade policies, with relevant policies that exist to support trade and agriculture.

Land reform strategies and initiatives should be effectively implemented to create an enabling environment for agricultural production. Policymakers should develop and revisit the comprehensive legislative.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The Southern Africa Trust as part of its strategy, has prioritized empowering women across our thematic focus areas, which include Trade. Our intervention towards empowering women has been to ensure women have access to relevant information that will assist them to draw increased benefits from cross border trade. We have partnered with cross border traders' associations, particularly the Southern Africa Cross Border Traders Association.

With our partners, we have further facilitated dialogues between women traders and relevant policy institutions, to address the barriers they face during cross border trade. In 2020, the Southern Africa Trust produced information booklets for women traders on the Common Market Eastern and Southern Africa Simplified Trade Regime and non-tariff barrier system. We also organised awareness campaigns in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi for women traders that included the participation of customs authority, ministries of trade, immigration and police.

The Southern Africa Trust will continue to organise similar programmes for women traders in other SADC countries.

## References

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