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SUBJECT: - AfCFTA Framework Policy Brief Series



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Topic:

**CENTERING PAN-AFRICAN GENDER ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN THE
AfCFTA IMPLEMENTATION: AN EVIDENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT OF
THE AfCFTA PROTOCOL ON WOMEN AND YOUTH IN TRADE: LEGAL,
INSTITUTIONAL, AND PROGRAMMATIC REALITIES IN NIGERIA, SOUTH
AFRICA, KENYA, AND SENEGAL**

POLICY BRIEF: CENTERING PAN-AFRICAN GENDER ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN THE AfCFTA IMPLEMENTATION: AN EVIDENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT OF THE AfCFTA PROTOCOL ON WOMEN AND YOUTH IN TRADE: LEGAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND PROGRAMMATIC REALITIES IN NIGERIA, SOUTH AFRICA, KENYA, AND SENEGAL

By

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Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) spans a market of 1.4 billion people with a combined GDP of over \$3.4 trillion. Macroeconomic trade policies are not gender-neutral. Recognizing that trade liberalization can exacerbate structural disparities, the African Union adopted the **Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade**. This brief evaluates the rollout of this Protocol across four regional hubs: Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Senegal. Crucially, it integrates the latest mandates from the **HerAfCFTA Regional Conference held in Abuja on 29 June 2026**, which officially shifted the continental focus from policy commitments to aggressive, field-level implementation roadmaps.

Justification

Women comprise approximately 70% of informal cross-border traders (ICBT) across Africa, acting as the foundational drivers of intra-African commerce. Despite their economic dominance, they remain structurally marginalized. The **June 2026 HerAfCFTA Conference** issued a stark warning: Africa's ambition to build the world's largest single market will remain entirely unrealized unless governments urgently dismantle structural barriers limiting female entrepreneurs. CSOs must leverage these newest high-level commitments to transform the AfCFTA from an elite corporate treaty into a grassroots vehicle for gender economic justice.

Objectives

1. Pinpoint explicit policy, legal, institutional, and programmatic gaps in national AfCFTA rollouts.
2. Interrogate the implementation of the Women and Youth Protocol using country case studies.
3. Integrate the operational outcomes and roadmaps established at the **June 2026 HerAfCFTA Regional Conference**.
4. Equip gender and trade CSOs with an actionable, pan-African advocacy strategy to influence state machinery.

Methodology & Scope

This assessment employs a comparative macro-policy review alongside field data from the **International Trade Centre's SheTrades Outlook**, the **UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)**, and the official ministerial resolutions of the **June 2026 HerAfCFTA Conference in Abuja**. The scope is strictly bounded to the legal, programmatic, and institutional mechanisms of four distinct economic anchors: Nigeria (West African engine), South Africa (Southern African industrial giant), Kenya (East African tech and logistics leader), and Senegal (Francophone West African hub).

Global & National Gaps Identified

Despite the progressive language of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, a critical execution gap persists between regional treaty texts and national enforcement:



- **The De-domestication Gap:** While the Protocol has achieved political consensus, it lacks legal teeth because it has not been systematically integrated into municipal (domestic) laws across member states.

- **The Fiscal Blindspot:** National AfCFTA Implementation Strategies rarely feature dedicated, ring-fenced budgets for gender-transformative trade infrastructure or micro-trader protections.
- **Data Invisibility:** National customs authorities fail to collect gender-disaggregated data on cross-border trade flows, rendering the specific economic contributions and losses of women invisible to fiscal planners.

Key Outcomes & Roadmaps: The June 2026 HerAfCFTA Conference (Abuja)

Convened jointly by the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**, the **AfCFTA Secretariat**, and **Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment (FMITI)** on 29 June 2026, the HerAfCFTA Regional Conference brought together African Trade Ministers and heads of state in Abuja to formalize an operational roadmap.

Under the theme *“Women Advancing Africa's Economic Transformation through Intra-African Trade: Scaling Impact,”* the conference established three core continental roadmaps designed to move women **“From Margins to Markets”**:

1. The Productive Capacity & Scaling Roadmap

- **The Mandate:** Shifting emphasis entirely away from basic “participation” toward building actual market share and scaling the size of women-led enterprises.
- **Action Plan:** Member states are directed to set up regional supply chain incubators that aggregate micro-consignments from women traders, enabling them to meet the strict quantity and quality standards of large-scale intra-African trade.

2. The Capital & Investment Mobilization Roadmap

- **The Mandate:** Eradicating the structural credit exclusions that bar women from securing trade financing.
- **Action Plan:** Reaffirming the push to operationalize the **AfCFTA Adjustment Fund** for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The roadmap demands that national central banks partner with development financial institutions to

derisk commercial lending for women-led businesses, bypassing traditional collateral requirements like land titles.

3. The Market Access & Simplified Logistics Roadmap

- **The Mandate:** Streamlining transport corridors to ensure women-led businesses are not priced out by logistics monopolies.
- **Action Plan:** Expanding dedicated corridors—modeled after Nigeria’s recent air cargo partnerships with Uganda Airlines and RwandAir—specifically tailored to transport high-value, perishable goods processed by women entrepreneurs at subsidized regional tariffs.

Case-Study Country Review: Policy, Legal, Institutional & Programmatic Measures

An analysis of the four case-study nations highlights how local frameworks stack up against the newly minted 2026 HerAfCFTA roadmaps:

1. Policy & Legal Measures

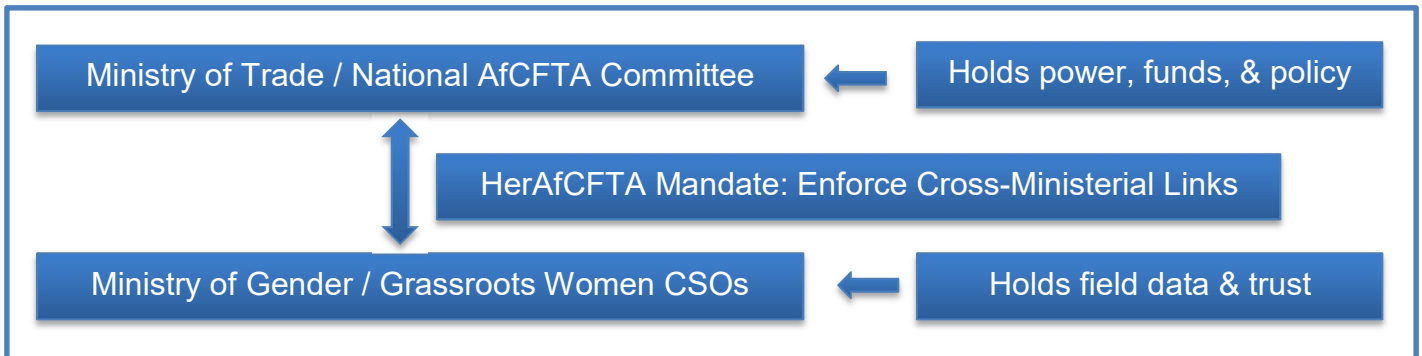
- **Nigeria:** The *National AfCFTA Implementation Strategy* recognizes women and youth, but it conflicts with deep-seated structural barriers. Under the *Land Use Act of 1978*, women struggle to secure land titles, which severely limits their ability to access formal banking collateral for cross-border trade credit. At HerAfCFTA 2026, Nigeria committed to placing its high percentage of women entrepreneurs (83%, well above the continental 51% average) at the center of domestic trade legislation.
- **South Africa:** Features strong legal alignment through *Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE)* frameworks. However, these focus on domestic corporate transformation rather than removing physical borders for grassroots, small-scale female exporters trying to enter SADC markets.
- **Kenya:** The *National Trade Policy* actively promotes export-led growth, and Kenya was among the first to design an explicit *AfCFTA National Implementation Strategy*. Yet, these documents fail to integrate the specific protections outlined in the AfCFTA Protocol into Kenya’s statutory customs law.

- **Senegal:** The *Plan Sénégal Émergent (PSE)* highlights women's empowerment in agriculture and fisheries. However, the legal frameworks governing export procedures remain highly complex, bureaucratic, and written in French, creating an immediate barrier for Wolof-speaking cross-border merchants.

2. Institutional Measures

- **Nigeria:** Governed by the *National Action Committee on AfCFTA (NAC-AfCFTA)*. Following the June 2026 Abuja ministerial meetings, Nigeria's AfCFTA Coordination Office pledged to institutionalize the HerAfCFTA mandates across federal and state levels (including sub-national export frameworks in states like Lagos).
- **South South Africa:** The *Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC)* runs the country's AfCFTA portfolio. It lacks formal, institutionalized communication channels with grassroots civil society and informal trade associations, leading to top-heavy policy design.
- **Kenya:** Utilizes the *State Department for Trade* alongside the *Kenya Export Promotion and Branding Agency (KEPROBA)*. Although institutional capacity is strong, there is minimal cross-ministerial coordination with the Ministry of Gender, leaving gender initiatives isolated from mainstream trade negotiations.
- **Senegal:** The *Comité National de Négociations Commerciales (CNNC)* manages trade policy. Grassroots women's cooperatives (*Groupements d'Intérêt Économique - GIE*) are highly organized locally but lack formal, voting representation on the national AfCFTA steering board.

REFORMED AfCFTA INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE (POST-2026)



3. Programmatic Measures

- **Nigeria:** Launched the *Guided Trade Initiative (GTI)*, introducing women-led export flights carrying agricultural and cosmetic goods. However, these programs are run as isolated pilot projects rather than accessible, nationwide public services.
- **South Africa:** Runs targeted financial programs through the *Industrial Development Corporation (IDC)* for women in manufacturing. However, high application thresholds and complex compliance requirements effectively shut out small and medium enterprises (SMEs).
- **Kenya:** Leverages its advanced digital ecosystem by linking women to e-commerce and mobile financial services (like M-Pesa). Despite this, program implementation is limited by the gender digital divide: rural women lack access to smartphones, stable internet, and digital literacy.
- **Senegal:** Cooperatives receive targeted support from international partners, including the *International Trade Centre (ITC) SheTrades* initiative. However, once these donor-funded projects wrap up, state agencies rarely step in with the funding needed to sustain them.

Production and Governance Contexts in Africa

Africa's trading landscape is characterized by a structural disconnect between the **extractive economy** and the **reproductive/informal economy**. While state resources fund infrastructure for high-value mineral and oil extractions (sectors dominated by men), the everyday cross-border trade of agricultural products, textiles, and processed food (sectors dominated by women) is left with broken infrastructure, unpaved border roads, and inadequate cold-chain storage solutions.

Gender-Transformative Outcomes

To deliver genuine gender economic justice, national implementations must achieve three transformative shifts:

1. **Dignity at the Border:** Transforming border posts from sites of harassment into secure, safe, and transparent trading hubs equipped with lit border crossings and functional accountability desks.
2. **Financial Sovereignty:** Replacing collateral-heavy banking models with flexible, state-backed trade insurances and simplified, digital multi-currency payment platforms tailored for micro-consignments.
3. **Democratized Trade Governance:** Shifting trade policy formulation from closed-door ministerial suites to participatory town halls that include informal traders.

Recommendations to Key Stakeholders

1. To National Governments & Line Ministries:

- **Legislate and Codify:** Pass explicit domestic laws that integrate the protections of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth directly into national customs and trade statutes.
- **Implement a Simplified Trade Regime (STR):** Create a uniform, continent-wide Simplified Trade Regime with a high threshold (e.g., up to \$2,000 per consignment) to allow small-scale traders to clear goods duty-free with minimal paperwork.

- **Enforce Abuja Financial Commitments:** Restructure national banking guidelines to match the **HerAfCFTA June 2026 Roadmap**, opening direct access routes to the AfCFTA Adjustment Fund for verified women-led SMEs.

2. To the AfCFTA Secretariat:

- **Establish Independent Monitoring Desk:** Create an independent, regional ombudsperson desk under the *Committee on Women and Youth in Trade* to track, investigate, and report border harassment and corruption.
- **Enforce Gender Trade Dashboards:** Mandate that all member states report quarterly, gender-disaggregated trade metrics as a core condition for participating in preferential tariff trading.

3. To Gender and Trade CSOs:

- **Deploy Parallel Monitoring Systems:** Launch localized text-message and mobile apps for women traders to report border wait times, corruption, and safety issues in real time.
- **Run Legal and Trade Literacy Campaigns:** Translate complex AfCFTA rules of origin and tariff structures into local languages (such as Hausa, Yoruba, Zulu, Swahili, and Wolof) through radio programs and market-square workshops.

Annex: Advocacy Brief for Gender and Trade CSOs

Campaign Slogan: *“Democratize the Borders: Realize the Abuja HerAfCFTA Roadmaps!”*

The Problem: Governments celebrate high-level regional resolutions on the international stage while continuing to neglect, underfund, and over-regulate the everyday realities of women cross-border traders at home.

THE CSO ADVOCACY PATH
1. LITIGATE: File strategic cases on border abuse.
2. MONITOR: Publish annual shadow reports on states.
3. MOBILIZE: Form cross-border trader coalitions.

Core CSO Advocacy Demands:

1. **Immediate Access to Information:** We demand that National AfCFTA Committees release all tariff schedules, rules of origin guides, and trade procedures in simplified formats and local languages.
2. **Guaranteed Seats at the Table:** We demand a mandatory 40% representation quota for women-led trade associations, youth entrepreneur networks, and gender CSOs on all National AfCFTA Implementation Committees.
3. **An End to Financial Exclusion:** We demand the immediate implementation of the **HerAfCFTA 2026 Capital Roadmap**, granting direct credit access to women-owned MSMEs without requiring land titles as collateral.

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