

Empowerment Through Trade? A Critical Analysis of Gender-Sensitive Trade Policy Implementation in South-South Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study critically interrogates the implementation of gender-sensitive external trade policies in South-South Nigeria and their implications for women's empowerment. While global frameworks such as AfCFTA increasingly acknowledge gender equity as a developmental imperative, their translation into subnational realities remains uneven. Using a strengthened mixed-methods design—combining interviews (n=32), focus group discussions, case studies of 25 women traders, and complementary secondary trade data from NBS, UNCTAD, and ITC (2018–2024)—the paper provides both qualitative narratives and quantitative insights into women's participation in trade. Findings across all six South-South states (Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Edo) reveal persistent barriers: unequal access to finance and information, institutional bottlenecks, and systemic exclusion from formal markets. Yet, emergent women-led cooperatives and digital trade networks demonstrate pathways of resilience. The study concludes that empowerment requires not only policy presence but institutionalized resources, agency, and achievements. Beyond policy implications, this paper contributes theoretically to feminist political economy by illustrating how gendered trade governance both reproduces and can transform structural inequalities in Africa's largest economy.

Keywords: Trade policy, Women empowerment, AfCFTA, Gender-sensitive governance, South-South Nigeria.

JEL Codes: F13, J16, O17, O55

INTRODUCTION

International trade has long been positioned as a powerful engine for economic development, structural transformation, and poverty reduction. In recent decades, the emphasis on making trade inclusive and equitable has gained traction, particularly with the growing recognition that trade policies have differentiated impacts on men and women. While trade liberalization can expand opportunities, it can also deepen pre-existing gender inequalities when policy design and implementation ignore gender-specific constraints and roles.

In Nigeria, the South-South region—comprising states such as Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, and Edo—is endowed with significant natural resources and serves as a vital gateway for external trade due to its strategic coastal location. Women in this region play critical roles in agriculture, fisheries, petty trading, and cross-border commerce. Despite this, their participation in formal trade processes remains largely marginalized and under-supported, particularly in relation to policy engagement and institutional access.

The Nigerian government, in alignment with regional and international frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), has increasingly emphasized gender mainstreaming in trade. Policies such as the National Trade Policy (2012) and the revised National Gender Policy (2021) acknowledge women's roles in trade and call for more inclusive mechanisms. However, a persistent gap remains between policy aspirations and implementation realities, especially at the sub-national level.

This research interrogates the extent to which gender-sensitive trade policies have translated into meaningful empowerment for women in South-South Nigeria. Empowerment, in this context, is understood as not merely increased participation in trade but enhanced agency, access to resources, voice in decision-making, and improved socio-economic outcomes.

Key questions guiding the study include:

How do current external trade policies address gender concerns in South-South Nigeria?

What institutional mechanisms exist to facilitate women's inclusion in trade governance?

To what extent have these policies impacted women's empowerment in practice?

The paper argues that without deliberate and well-resourced implementation strategies, even the most progressive trade policies risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Through a multi-level analysis—encompassing policy texts, institutional practices, and trader experiences—this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equity in trade governance and the practical challenges of implementing inclusive economic policies in developing contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender-Sensitive Trade Policy

Gender-sensitive trade policies refer to trade-related laws, regulations, and institutional practices that are deliberately designed to recognize and address the differential needs, roles, and constraints faced by women and men in economic systems. These policies aim to ensure that trade liberalization and integration do not exacerbate existing gender inequalities but instead promote equitable opportunities and outcomes (UNCTAD, 2014; Fontana, 2016).

Key dimensions include:

Access and Participation: Are women able to participate meaningfully in trade activities (formal or informal)?

Benefit Distribution: Do women benefit equitably from trade-related growth and market access?

Institutional Responsiveness: Are trade institutions designed or reformed to be inclusive and accountable to gendered needs?

Trade liberalization in many developing countries has often been gender-neutral in design but gender-biased in effect, disproportionately favoring male-dominated sectors or large-scale exporters while marginalizing women-led micro-enterprises (Elson, 1999). Therefore, policies must not only be inclusive in language but also in practical execution.

Global Policy Developments on Gender and Trade (2022–2024)

Since 2022, gender provisions in trade regimes have accelerated in both scope and specificity. Within Africa, the AfCFTA has moved beyond high-level commitments to adopt the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade (2023), which foregrounds participation, capability-building, access to finance, and market connectivity for women-led MSMEs. Complementary guidance from the African Union Commission and the AfCFTA Secretariat details operational mechanisms—gender-responsive public procurement, targeted export-readiness programs, and data systems to track outcomes. Outside Africa, recent preferential trade agreements continue to include gender chapters or cooperation provisions, consolidating a norm of gender-aware trade governance. WTO discussions on trade and gender have also expanded the evidence base through the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender, while ITC-SheTrades has scaled tools for institutional gender mainstreaming in trade facilitation agencies (2022–2024).

Women's Empowerment in the Context of Trade

Following Kabeer's (1999) model, this paper conceptualizes empowerment as the process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. In trade-related terms, this implies:

Access to Resources: Economic capital (loans, assets), trade knowledge, technology, and legal rights.

Agency: The capacity to act independently in trade negotiations, business decisions, and regulatory environments.

Achievements: Measurable outcomes such as increased income, expanded business scale, or improved social status.

Empowerment, then, is not simply about participation in trade, but the transformation of power relations that enable women to influence and benefit from trade systems in a sustained way.

Feminist Political Economy Perspective

A feminist political economy lens underscores the structural inequalities embedded in trade systems, institutions, and macroeconomic policies. It emphasizes that economic policies are not gender-neutral and that the global trade regime often undervalues unpaid care work and informal economic activities dominated by women (Razavi, 2009).

In the South-South Nigerian context, this perspective helps analyze:

The intersectionality of gender with class, geography (urban-rural), and sector (formal-informal);

The power relations between male-dominated trade institutions and female traders;

The ways in which trade liberalization can simultaneously enable and constrain women, depending on policy design and enforcement.

Recent feminist political economy scholarship underscores that trade liberalization is embedded in social reproduction regimes and power relations. Kabeer (2023) revisits empowerment as a multidimensional process—resources, agency, achievements—arguing for redistributive policies that recognize care burdens and intersecting inequalities. Mezzadri and Newman (2022) and allied scholars critique 'add-women-and-stir' approaches, warning that gender chapters without resource transfers, enforcement, and grievance mechanisms risk symbolic compliance. Newer contributions (2022–2024) also stress macro–micro linkages: how exchange rate policy, logistics costs, non-tariff measures, and certification regimes shape women's market entry and upgrading

Evidence from Africa and Nigeria's South-South

Regional studies since 2022 document uneven implementation of gender-responsive trade interventions across West and Central Africa. ITC and UNCTAD reports show persistent constraints—limited collateral, information asymmetries, certification costs, and harassment along corridors—but also highlight promising pilots: cooperative export models, women-focused credit windows, and public–private partnerships for standards compliance. For Nigeria, emerging analyses note the strategic role of port-adjacent states (Rivers, Delta) and border-linked markets (Cross River), yet find weak subnational institutionalization of national commitments. Women-owned firms are overrepresented in microenterprise segments with low export survival rates; where clusters receive targeted logistics and standards support, graduation into formal export channels improves.

Measurement Challenges and Data Innovations

A key gap in 2022–2024 literature is the limited availability of sex-disaggregated trade and firm-level data at subnational scales. Recent toolkits advocate combining administrative records (registries, customs, export

promotion enrollments) with enterprise surveys and cooperative rosters to estimate women's participation and outcomes. SheTrades Outlook, OECD dashboards, and 'Women, Business and the Law 2024' provide cross-country indicators but rarely capture state-level granularity. New efforts in Africa experiment with light-touch digital surveys (via mobile platforms) and geospatially tagged market data to track access to finance, certification, and corridor-level frictions.

Conceptual Anchors for this Study

Synthesizing these debates, this paper adopts a framework that links policy design and institutional practice to women's outcomes through three pathways: resources, agency, and achievements. The 2022–2024 literature suggests that progress depends on decentralizing trade support, embedding accountability (gender desks with enforcement power), and financing the fixed costs of formalization and standards. This study contributes by providing a comparative, six-state analysis that pairs qualitative narratives with indicative quantitative metrics to address the evidence gaps identified above.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture both institutional perspectives and lived experiences of women traders across South-South Nigeria. A concurrent triangulation strategy was employed to allow qualitative narratives and quantitative evidence to complement and validate each other. The methodological approach was anchored in the conceptual framework of resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999), ensuring that each stage of data collection and analysis systematically mapped onto these dimensions.

Study Area

The research was conducted in the six states of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria—Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, and Edo. The region is strategically significant due to its coastal ports, agro-export corridors, and cross-border markets, making it a vital hub for both formal and informal trade. Women in this region are highly engaged in small-scale agriculture, fisheries, petty trade, and informal cross-border commerce, but face systemic exclusion from institutionalized trade processes. Examining the six states comparatively allowed for an assessment of subnational variations in policy implementation and empowerment outcomes.

Data Sources

Data were drawn from both **primary** and **secondary** sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of trade–gender dynamics.

Primary Data

Structured Survey: A survey of 180 women traders (30 per state) was conducted to generate quantitative insights into women's access to resources, institutional interactions, and trade outcomes. The survey included modules on finance, information access, trade facilitation experiences, and household decision-making.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 36 interviews were conducted with trade policymakers (national and state levels), port administrators, customs officers, leaders of women's cooperatives, and NGO representatives.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Six FGDs (one per state, with 8–10 participants each) were organized to capture collective experiences and resilience strategies of women traders.

Case Studies: 30 in-depth case studies of women entrepreneurs and cross-border traders documented trajectories of empowerment, disempowerment, and adaptation to trade policy regimes.

Secondary Data

Trade and Gender Statistics: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigerian Ports Authority, and UNCTAD data (2018–2024) were used to analyze women’s participation in formal trade.

Policy Documents: National Trade Policy (2012), National Gender Policy (2021), AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade (2023), ECOWAS gender and trade frameworks.

Scholarly Literature (2022–2024): Updated feminist political economy and trade scholarship informed both instrument design and analytical framing.

Sampling Strategy

A multi-stage sampling strategy was applied:

Purposive selection of states within the South-South region to capture diversity of port-based, border-based, and inland trade contexts.

Stratified sampling of women traders by sector (agriculture, fisheries, textiles, processed foods), mode of trade (formal vs informal), and enterprise size (micro, small, medium).

Snowball sampling for case studies, identifying women with distinct experiences of policy engagement or institutional barriers.

This approach ensured both breadth and depth, while also centering marginalized voices often excluded from official trade policy dialogues.

Data Collection Procedures

Surveys were administered in English, Pidgin, and local languages with trained enumerators, ensuring accessibility.

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide organized around three themes: (i) awareness and perception of trade policies, (ii) access to institutional support, and (iii) empowerment outcomes.

FGDs were facilitated using participatory tools such as problem-ranking and empowerment mapping.

Case studies involved multiple visits, narrative storytelling, and documentation of trade practices.

Ethical clearance was obtained, and participants gave informed consent, with anonymity maintained.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Survey data were coded and analyzed using SPSS and Excel. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, cross-tabulations) were used to highlight trends, while inferential tests (chi-square, t-tests) compared differences across states.

Qualitative Analysis: NVivo software was used for thematic coding. Themes were aligned to the empowerment framework: resources (finance, information), agency (decision-making, institutional navigation), and achievements (income growth, status, household voice).

Comparative Analysis: Findings were compared across states to identify similarities, divergences, and structural patterns in trade–gender dynamics.

Triangulation: Cross-validation between survey results, interview narratives, and secondary data enhanced robustness.

Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

Several strategies enhanced the study's rigor:

Triangulation across data sources and methods.

Member checks with selected respondents to validate findings.

Peer debriefing with trade policy experts to refine interpretation.

Nonetheless, some limitations exist:

Survey data relied on self-reported income and trade volumes, which may be under- or over-estimated.

Coverage, though extended to all six states, was limited to select local government areas due to time and resource constraints.

Informality and mistrust of government sometimes limited disclosure.

Despite these challenges, the methodology provides a credible, context-sensitive, and comparative basis for analyzing how gender-sensitive trade policies influence women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of fieldwork, survey analysis, and secondary trade data, interpreted through the resources–agency–achievements framework. Comparative analysis across Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, and Edo States highlights both convergences and divergences in women's empowerment trajectories under trade policy regimes.

Resources: Finance, Information, and Capacity

Access to Finance

Survey data reveal that only **22% of women traders across the South-South** reported accessing formal export credit between 2020–2024. Access varied significantly:

Rivers (31%) and Delta (28%) had higher uptake, largely due to urban banking access.

Bayelsa (12%) and Cross River (15%) lagged behind due to weak financial infrastructure and distrust of institutions.

Interviews highlighted collateral requirements, bureaucratic delays, and exclusion from export credit facilities as major barriers:

“They said I must bring land documents to access a small loan. Which woman in my community owns land in her name?” — Trader, Bayelsa.

Access to Market Information

Awareness of AfCFTA and export promotion programs was uneven. Only **35% of surveyed women** had heard of AfCFTA trade opportunities. Information campaigns were heavily urban-centered (Port Harcourt, Uyo, Asaba), leaving rural and border communities uninformed.

Capacity Building

Training initiatives were available in Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Edo, but **70% of respondents in Bayelsa and Cross River** reported never receiving formal trade training. Cooperatives that received NGO-supported export-readiness training in Akwa Ibom were more likely to attempt product certification and packaging upgrades.

Agency: Institutional Barriers and Gendered Power Relations

Institutional Practices

Across all states, women reported bureaucratic bottlenecks, harassment, and extortion at customs and standards agencies. Lack of gender desks at ports (except at NEPC headquarters in Abuja) limited institutional responsiveness.

In Cross River, women traders described reliance on male intermediaries to “speak for them” at border posts.

In Edo, harassment and unofficial fees discouraged small exporters from formalizing trade.

Household and Community Agency

Although 40% of respondents reported income increases, fewer than 25% reported having greater voice in household decision-making. Cultural norms continue to limit women’s independent agency, especially in rural Bayelsa and Cross River.

Achievements: Economic and Social Outcomes

Income and Business Growth

40% of respondents reported some income growth from trade, particularly in Rivers and Delta, where urban export clusters exist.

However, only **15% expanded business scale** beyond micro-level operations.

Social Empowerment Outcomes

FGDs revealed that income increases did not always translate into greater autonomy:

“Yes, my sales improved, but my husband still makes all the big financial decisions.” — Trader, Delta.

In contrast, women’s cooperatives in Akwa Ibom and Bayelsa demonstrated “positive deviance”: pooling resources to formalize exports and negotiate collectively, resulting in improved bargaining power and social recognition.

Comparative Insights Across States

Rivers & Delta: Greater institutional presence and urban concentration enabled better access to finance and markets, but agency remained constrained by bureaucracy.

Akwa Ibom: Strong cooperative structures fostered collective empowerment, though limited outreach left many rural women excluded.

Bayelsa & Cross River: Weak financial infrastructure and geographic isolation perpetuated exclusion, though grassroots innovation (digital WhatsApp groups) filled gaps.

Edo: Moderate institutional support but high informal trade reliance due to bureaucratic frustrations.

Theoretical Implications

Findings affirm that empowerment cannot be reduced to policy presence but must be assessed across **resources, agency, and achievements**. Trade policies that lack localized implementation risk reinforcing inequalities. However, grassroots innovations (cooperatives, digital networks) highlight agency-building pathways within structurally unequal systems. This validates feminist political economy critiques of “gender-neutral” trade regimes while showing how women’s networks can reconfigure trade governance from below.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study reveals a persistent gap between **policy aspirations** and **empowerment outcomes**. To bridge this, recommendations are framed at **institutional, subnational, and grassroots levels**.

Institutional Reforms

Establish **gender desks** in customs offices, ports, and state trade ministries with authority to resolve women traders' grievances.

Mandate **gender impact assessments** for all trade facilitation programs and export schemes.

Build institutional capacity through gender-sensitivity training for customs, SON, and NEPC officers.

Decentralizing Trade Support

Create **local trade facilitation centers** in border and rural markets to extend access beyond urban hubs.

Translate export guidelines into local languages and disseminate via radio, women's groups, and mobile platforms.

Deploy **mobile outreach units** to deliver export training directly in rural areas.

Financing Women in Trade

Develop **women-focused export credit windows** with simplified requirements, flexible collateral, and low interest.

Link women's cooperatives with microfinance banks and development finance institutions.

Expand **financial literacy programs** to help women navigate credit and formalization processes.

Formalization Incentives

Simplify business registration for women-led microenterprises, including **group-based cooperative registration**.

Offer **tax incentives or subsidies** for first-time women exporters.

Provide technical support for product certification and compliance with ECOWAS and AfCFTA standards.

Strengthening Women's Networks

Recognize and partner with **women-led cooperatives and associations** as intermediaries in trade facilitation.

Support digital platforms (WhatsApp, e-market hubs) that disseminate real-time trade information.

Institutionalize women's participation in **trade policy consultations** at national and regional levels.

Broader Policy Implications

Empowerment requires not just participation but **redistribution of resources, reconfiguration of institutional agency, and recognition of women as agents of trade governance**.

Without structural reforms, gender-sensitive trade policies risk remaining rhetorical.

Nigeria's success in AfCFTA will depend on whether women—who form the backbone of informal trade—are positioned as central actors in formal trade processes

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