

**HARNESSING GENDER FOR INCLUSIVE TRADE:  
How more gender-sensitive trade policies and outcomes can drive economic  
transformation in Africa**

“Africa is so wealthy when it comes to land and natural resources, but it is also so underdeveloped, poor and needy. If women enjoyed the same access to resources as men, the continent would be able to produce 20-30% more than it currently does. This would significantly improve prospects for household income, poverty reduction, investment and trade.”

This was one of the central messages in the keynote address delivered by trade expert and gender activist, Janah Ncube, at a workshop titled ‘Harnessing Gender for Inclusive Trade’ in Johannesburg on 9 December 2016. The workshop, hosted by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the University of Adelaide’s Institute for International Trade (IIT), provided an excellent platform for trade and gender experts from across Africa and representatives of international organisations, including the World Bank, to exchange views on the complex medley of factors that has created deep socio-economic divisions between men and women on the continent.

“Feminine and masculine traits are learned from a young age,” said Janah, “with culture, education, experience, race, ethnicity, class and geography all shaping people’s views about acceptable roles for men and women in society. But by looking through a different ‘lens’, it is possible to see things differently.” Janah emphasised the need for African countries to break down socially-constructed gender barriers in the interests of greater economic teamwork. She made reference to the growing interest throughout the world in gender mainstreaming which advocates a policy-driven approach that welcomes and accommodates gender diversity. Mainstreaming implies that policy decisions, legislation and practical interventions need to be continuously sensitive to the implications for men and women, respectively.

Although many countries in Africa are overhauling their economic, industrial, labour and trade policies to ensure greater gender equity, the implementation of such policies at a legislative and procedural level is often a problem. This is because entrenched biases persist, with ideological clashes between modern and customary laws being a complicating factor. Deprived of a proper education, and with limited access to finance, market information and other forms of support to start up and run viable businesses, many African women play bit parts in their countries’ economies. As a result, economic efficiency is often sacrificed and trade potential suppressed.

The issue of informal cross-border trade (ICBT) in Africa received much attention at the workshop, with several speakers highlighting how women traders in particular are vulnerable to harassment and exploitation. About 70-75% of informal cross-border traders in Africa are women but they are a far-from-homogeneous group, which makes it difficult to

arrive at a policy formula that caters to their needs. ICBT is largely unregulated, with most traders running unregistered businesses whose economic activities are not reflected in countries' official trade figures. Thus, the economic impact of ICBT — though unquestionably significant — cannot be properly quantified. Informal traders have little protection or recourse against unscrupulous customs agents, police officers or other border officials. Yet most prefer to remain under the radar than go the onerous route of formal registration, which would create additional obligations that they would be hard-pressed to meet.

A promising development, however, is the introduction of the COMESA Simplified Trade Regime (STR). According to Dr Ulrich Klins, Private-Public Partnership Manager at the Southern Africa Trust, the STR is designed to streamline customs clearance procedures for small cross-border traders operating in the COMESA bloc as it simplifies documentation and clarifies clearance costs and procedures. A similar STR is mooted for SADC.

Ali Parry, Extraordinary Research Scientist at the North-West University and director of Trade Matters (Pty) Ltd, spoke about the crucial role played by agriculture in Africa — as a contributor to economic growth and food security on the continent, and as an employer (particularly of women). Yet agricultural productivity and yields are among the lowest in the world, and the value of agricultural exports trails that of agricultural imports.

“Agriculture is one of the least globally-integrated sectors in Africa,” Ali remarked, adding that while the continent is a major supplier of agricultural commodities, African countries' involvement in high value-added downstream activities is limited. “Women typically occupy low-level (and often unremunerated) jobs in agricultural value chains as they lack the money, skills, connections, time and social clout to move into more rewarding and economically-significant work.”

The textile and clothing sector is another important source of income and economic opportunity for several African countries, but it has been buffeted by strong headwinds in recent years. Moroosi Akhionbare, an independent development consultant from Lesotho, gave a poignant account of the precarious existence of female workers in Lesotho's garment industry, many of whom have to travel long distances from the rural areas to factories in Maseru. Although Lesotho's garment workers earn meagre wages, the industry has been a source of economic empowerment for women (who represent about 85% of the workforce) in an economy that is generally bereft of jobs.

Lesotho's textile industry was given a shot in the arm in the 2000s when Taiwanese investors flocked to the country to take advantage of the trade preferences under AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act). However, Lesotho's continued membership of AGOA currently hangs in the balance in the face of concerns among US government officials about the political fallout in Lesotho following the attempted coup in 2014. The loss of Lesotho's preferential access into the US market would deliver a deadly blow to the country's garment

industry, highlighting how risky unilateral trade agreements are and why progressive diversification is an economic imperative.

Mauritius used to be very dependent on its textiles and clothing sector, but over the past 20 years has succeeded in diversifying into more value-added sectors. “Whereas the contribution of textiles and clothing to the Mauritian economy was 80% in 1995, it had dropped to 34% by 2015,” said Rooma Narrainen, Manager of the Trade Division at the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Rooma explained that the country’s economic diversification strategy has been characterised by a coordinated and gender-sensitive overhaul of industrial, trade, education, social and labour policies, with the aim of creating opportunities higher up the value chain.

“The tertiary sector in Mauritius has really taken off, with women from the textile and clothing sector moving increasingly into services,” said Rooma. “Women also tend to be more educated than men and many women occupy high positions in government.” However, she added that women still tend to earn less than men and are more likely to be employees than business owners.

Workshop delegates agreed that overcoming gender biases in Africa and ensuring more equitable roles for women and men in regional and global trade would not be an easy task. Nevertheless, the issue needs to move to centre stage when policies are debated and strategies are formulated — particularly in the trade arena which is brimming with opportunities. Some of the practical measures recommended by delegates included relaxing visa requirements for informal cross-border traders, creating women-appropriate storage facilities at borders, and making more micro-finance facilities available to marginalised groups in rural areas. Stronger and more reliable information flows were seen to be the cornerstone of these and other practical initiatives.

“Women need to be given a voice and the opportunity to tell their own stories,” said Talitha Bertelsmann-Scott, head of SAIIA’s Economic Diplomacy Programme, adding that different barriers affect women in different ways. “All too often, women find themselves at the bottom of the value chain.” Clearly, the gender gap in Africa needs to be better understood, with more research and ongoing cooperation needed among different interest groups and strategic partners.

A comprehensive report will be compiled on the SAIIA-IIT workshop proceedings, which will be circulated to the Australian Government (the workshop sponsor), as well as regional and international partners such as COMESA, ECOWAS, the World Bank, UNCTAD and the WTO. This will help to give power to the global conversation about how to use gender dynamics as a positive catalyst for trade and development.