

Challenges women traders face at border posts and what can be done to address these challenges

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Surveys indicate that about [70-80 percent](#) of informal traders are women. Women traders face gender based barriers at borders affecting potential for [inclusive growth](#). It has also been established that cross border trade is the only source of income for the majority of these [women](#). Therefore to attain sustainable economic empowerment of women traders, it is key to promote their trade efforts by the removal of the barriers they encounter when moving goods across the borders.

Challenges that women traders encounter at border posts, include:

- Lack of access to information on trade rules and customs procedures and as a result, some may resort to the use of illegal crossing points which have negative consequences if caught by border authorities. If caught by border authorities, women traders may end up paying high penalties, bribes or they may have their goods confiscated. This can put their businesses at risk.
- Delays at the borders due to complex customs procedures as well as the presence of multiple border agencies compromise efficiency leading to low compliance levels and delays in clearance of goods.
- Although borders are restricted areas, most remain porous as unauthorised personnel illegally gain access to swindle unsuspecting traders and travellers, most of whom are women.
- Infrastructure at most border posts remains outdated and inadequate to handle current demands of increased trade volumes. Lack of reliable electricity results in poor lighting at night creating insecurity among women traders. Improper sanitary conditions and lack of overnight accommodation may expose women traders to greater risks of violence creating more gender based barriers to trade.

- Most border posts are not friendly environments for women traders as the ratio of male to female staff is disproportionate. They may feel intimidated at border posts where almost all staff in position of authority is men. The author has personal experience with this imbalance as at one time she was assigned to work at a border for three years and out of a staff establishment of 10 for those in position of authority, was the only female.
- Woman traders may also face discriminatory treatment at the border posts which is not reported and hence the offenders go unpunished. They may [face verbal, physical abuse and sexual harassment](#) at the hands of customs officials, border police, the military, and other (unauthorised) persons at the border, including forced strip searches and sometimes even rape. Due to the absence of information on appeals and a review mechanism, such incidents go unreported. Most women traders are not sure how and where to lodge complaints.

As the key stakeholder in trade facilitation, the role of customs authorities in rights-based approaches towards trade facilitation remains crucial. Customs in collaboration with other government agencies should continuously find ways to address challenges faced by women traders at the border. The barriers encountered can be eliminated through implementation of gender responsive trade facilitation measures.

The following are some of the approaches that can be taken to resolve the challenges:

- Translation of trade regulations and procedures into indigenous languages and making them available to all. This is essential as studies have shown that skills, business size and literacy level amongst women involved in cross border trade is [not homogeneous](#). Hence having procedures in local languages understood by many will have a widespread impact. Trade procedures should also be made more accessible to women traders by displaying them on screens or posters at entry and exit points at border posts.
- Gender sensitive policies should be put in place in order to create a safe working environment where women traders are not taken advantage of by male personnel. There is also need to set up a reporting mechanism for gender based discrimination at the borders, which women traders can make use of as a way to reduce discriminatory encounters.

- Make border posts a more women friendly environment by increasing the proportion of women officials within their ranks.
- Governments should invest in border infrastructure upgrades to enhance the smooth flow of trade as well as provide amenities for women to keep them safe from diseases and harassment.
- Awareness workshops for women traders on trade-related issues and education on use of simplified trade regime (STR) where this is available. Regions not yet implementing STR should strive to do so, and those already implementing STRs could further refine STR conditions to better respond to [the specific needs](#) of informal traders.

The narrative of women traders can be changed through taking a holistic approach as well as sincere commitment by all parties responsible for removal of trade barriers that are confronted at the borders. With other important initiatives coming to fruition, one of them being negotiations of the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade by African member states in the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement. All these measures will [provide answers](#) to the challenges faced by women traders on the continent.
