



# Gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area

*Defining the role of the  
regional economic  
communities*



United Nations  
Economic Commission for Africa





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## Executive summary

With the adoption of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area,<sup>1</sup> African countries acknowledged the importance of achieving gender equality in order to promote structural transformation. Ensuring that the Agreement is implemented in a gender-responsive manner is now more crucial than ever, as evidence shows clearly that women are more likely than men to be negatively affected by the health, socioeconomic and trade repercussions of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

To accelerate the gender-responsive implementation of the Agreement, it will be critical to build on existing initiatives, knowledge, and capacities, including, in particular, at the level of regional economic communities, which continue to lead trade liberalization in Africa.

There are clear opportunities to build on and scale up the activities of the regional economic communities in addressing trade and gender within the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The legal frameworks of several regional economic communities include provisions addressing women's economic empowerment and their participation in trade and business activities, providing a basis for initiatives to address trade and gender at the regional level. Several projects and initiatives in that regard have already been designed and implemented, with the support of relevant partners, and could be expanded in the context of AfCFTA. However, significant gaps must be addressed to strengthen the capacity of the regional economic communities to address trade and gender effectively.

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the Agreement is available at: [au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36437-treaty-consolidated\\_text\\_on\\_cfta\\_-\\_en.pdf](http://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36437-treaty-consolidated_text_on_cfta_-_en.pdf) (accessed on 15 October 2020).



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To address those gaps, a consolidated and practicable regional economic community framework on trade and gender will be needed, with effective linkages to relevant continental African Union strategies. That framework should be integrated into AfCFTA governance structures. The overall effectiveness of that continental framework will furthermore depend on its translation into actionable initiatives, a clearly defined reporting mechanism, and the availability of adequate resources to facilitate implementation and follow-up.

Further analysis is required to identify the appropriate institutional set up for regular reporting on the operationalization of the trade and gender agenda. One option could be to establish a dedicated continental working group on trade and gender within the governance structures of AfCFTA. Another could be to designate a high-level political champion to serve as a special rapporteur on the gender dimension of AfCFTA. The recently established AfCFTA secretariat could lend itself well to convening the

a gender perspective and made explicitly gender-responsive. In parallel, it will be crucial to address funding gaps in order to leverage the transformative potential of cross-border trade to promote gender streamlining. This will require a fundamental shift in outlook at the planning and programming levels within the regional economic communities. Regional priorities on trade and gender will also need to be further mainstreamed in donors' support programmes.

In addition, networks of women traders and entrepreneurs will require support to take full advantage of the opportunities stemming from the establishment of AfCFTA. This will entail building their capacity to understand the terms of the Agreement, and ensuring that the interests and concerns of women traders and entrepreneurs are fully articulated in all AfCFTA governance structures.

The systematic mapping of networks of women traders and entrepreneurs will help to identify gaps in terms of women's representation and interaction between

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