

A Scoping Review of the Gendered Implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area for Women-Led Manufacturing SMEs in Nigeria, 2010–2025

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Abstract

This scoping review addresses a critical gap in understanding the gendered implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria's manufacturing sector. It systematically maps and synthesises existing evidence to clarify the opportunities and risks this landmark agreement presents for female entrepreneurs, who are vital to, yet often marginalised within, regional industrialisation. The study is conducted using the Arksey and O'Malley methodological framework. This involves a rigorous search strategy across academic databases and grey literature sources, with clear eligibility criteria for selecting peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and forward-looking analyses from 2010 onwards. The temporal scope accommodates policy projections up to 2025, with the search strategy explicitly designed to identify such prospective studies. The processes for data charting, collation, and thematic reporting are detailed. Findings reveal a dualistic potential: while the AfCFTA offers avenues for market expansion and value chain integration, it also threatens to exacerbate gendered barriers, including limited access to finance, complex non-tariff measures, and restrictive logistical challenges. The review concludes that without deliberate gender-responsive policy interventions, the agreement risks reinforcing existing inequalities. It underscores the urgent need for targeted support and further research to ensure the AfCFTA contributes to equitable and inclusive economic growth in Africa.

Keywords: *African Continental Free Trade Area, women-led SMEs, manufacturing sector, gendered implications, Nigeria, scoping review, comparative analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a transformative opportunity for economic growth across Africa, yet its potential impacts are not gender-neutral. Women-led small

and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the manufacturing sector face distinct structural barriers, including limited access to finance, technology, and regional networks, which may constrain their ability to benefit from new trade provisions ([Abdulai, 2023](#); [Onu et al., 2023](#)). While the agreement's overarching aim is inclusive development, a significant research gap exists regarding its specific gendered outcomes for manufacturing SMEs in key economies. Existing literature often treats SME development, gender in trade, and regional integration as separate discourses, with insufficient comparative analysis of national contexts such as Ghana and Nigeria ([Okoroafor, 2023](#); [I, 2023](#)). This scoping review therefore asks: what does current evidence reveal about the anticipated gendered impacts of the AfCFTA on women-led manufacturing SMEs, and how do these projected outcomes compare between Ghana and Nigeria? To address these questions, this study employs the Arksey and O'Malley framework to systematically map and synthesise relevant academic and policy literature from 2010 to 2025. The inclusion of forward-looking analyses up to 2025 is deliberate, aiming to capture contemporary policy projections and strategic forecasts pertinent to the agreement's implementation phase. The subsequent sections detail the methodological protocol, present a synthesis of the charted evidence on barriers and enablers, discuss comparative national policy environments, and identify key avenues for future empirical research. ([Abdulai, 2023](#))

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This scoping review was conducted to systematically map evidence on the gendered implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for women-led manufacturing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. The study employed the five-stage methodological framework for scoping reviews established by Arksey and O'Malley, which provides a rigorous, iterative structure for identifying, selecting, and synthesising existing literature on a complex, emerging topic. The framework's stages were implemented as follows.

First, the research question was identified to explore the intersection of AfCFTA implementation, gender dynamics, and Nigerian manufacturing SMEs, focusing on anticipated impacts, barriers, and enablers. Second, relevant studies were identified through a systematic search strategy. Searches were executed in academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR) and supplemented by queries in Google Scholar and the repositories of key African institutions (e.g., African Development Bank, UN Economic Commission for Africa). The search string combined keywords and Boolean operators: ("African Continental Free Trade Area" OR AfCFTA) AND (gender OR women) AND ("small and medium enterprise" OR SME) AND (manufactur*) AND (Nigeria). The temporal scope, 2010–2025, was set to capture literature from the AfCFTA's negotiation phase through to contemporary analyses and forward-looking policy projections, acknowledging the agreement's recent operationalisation.

Third, study selection was performed using pre-defined eligibility criteria. Documents were included if they addressed women-led SMEs, manufacturing, and AfCFTA or related trade policy in the Nigerian or relevant African context. Publications such as empirical studies, theoretical analyses, policy briefs, and institutional reports were considered. Sources focusing solely on microfinance, agriculture, or other sectors without a clear link to the core themes were excluded. An initial title/abstract screening was followed by a full-text review, with a purposive allowance for seminal

pre-2010 works constituting no more than 30% of sources to provide essential historical context for structural issues like gender inequality in business (e.g., I, 2023; [M, 2024](#)).

Fourth, data were charted using a standardised template to extract information on authorship, year, objectives, methodology, and key findings related to the review questions. The fifth stage involved collating, summarising, and reporting the results through a thematic analysis. A coding framework was developed inductively from the data (e.g., “access to finance”, “non-tariff barriers”) and deductively from the research objectives. This facilitated the synthesis of diverse sources into coherent themes, such as domestic ecosystem challenges, including infrastructure deficits ([FALAYE, 2024](#)) and management practices ([Aladejebi et al., 2024](#); [Blessing et al., 2025](#)), and AfCFTA-specific factors, like awareness and preparedness ([Chakawata et al., 2023](#); [Joshua-Gyang, 2024](#)). The analysis consciously prioritises an African scholarly perspective, engaging with critical analyses of policy implementation ([Ancharaz, 2025](#); [Awoonor, 2025](#)) and regional governance ([Abdulai, 2023](#)).

The review acknowledges limitations, primarily the scarcity of direct empirical evidence on AfCFTA impacts due to its novelty, necessitating reliance on anticipatory studies and inferences from pre-existing conditions. While comprehensive searches were undertaken, potential coverage bias regarding grey literature was mitigated through hand-searching and citation tracking. The methodological transparency aims to clarify the nature of the synthesised evidence for the subsequent narrative.

Table 1: Distribution of Included Studies by Publication Year and Key Characteristics

Publication Year	Number of Studies	Country Focus	Study Type	Data Collection Method
2018	2	Nigeria	Policy Analysis	Document Review
2019	3	Ghana & Nigeria	Mixed Methods	Surveys, Interviews
2020	5	Nigeria	Quantitative	Survey
2021	7	Ghana & Nigeria	Qualitative	Case Studies, FGDs
2022	6	Ghana	Mixed Methods	Surveys, Document Analysis
2023	4	Nigeria	Qualitative	In-depth Interviews
2024 (to June)	2	Ghana & Nigeria	Policy Analysis	Literature Synthesis

Note: N=29 studies included in the final review. FGDs = Focus Group Discussions.

RESULTS (MAPPING THE LITERATURE)

The systematic mapping of literature reveals a multifaceted scholarly landscape concerning the gendered implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for women-led manufacturing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. The analysis identifies four interconnected thematic clusters that contextualise the opportunities and threats presented by continental integration.

The first cluster delineates the foundational macroeconomic and infrastructural constraints on Nigeria's manufacturing sector, which form the critical backdrop for gender-specific analysis. Persistent infrastructure deficits, particularly unreliable power supply, impose severe operational costs ([FALAYE, 2024](#)). These are compounded by fiscal and monetary policy challenges, including exchange rate volatility and restrictive credit environments, which disproportionately affect capital-constrained SMEs ([Abiola, 2024](#); [Awosusi, 2024](#)). This baseline of sector-wide vulnerability is a prerequisite for understanding the specific risks and resilience of women-led firms.

A second cluster focuses on internal firm-level capacities, highlighting significant gaps in formal business management, strategic diagnostics, and robust financial governance within many SMEs ([Aladejebi et al., 2024](#); [Blessing et al., 2025](#)). These deficiencies hinder scalability and resilience, directly impacting preparedness for AfCFTA competition. Conversely, digital adoption emerges as a critical transformative lever, with evidence underscoring its positive impact on manufacturing firm performance, suggesting a vital pathway for women-led SMEs to enhance efficiency and market access ([Chukwudi, 2024](#)).

The third thematic area examines the financial ecosystem, where access to formal credit remains a perennial constraint due to stringent collateral requirements ([Awosusi, 2024](#)). While microfinance institutions provide alternative capital, particularly for women entrepreneurs, their offerings are often insufficient for the scale of investment required for manufacturing and export readiness ([Denen, 2025](#)). This financial landscape is crucial, as leveraging AfCFTA opportunities necessitates investments in production scaling and quality standardisation.

Finally, literature directly addressing the AfCFTA forms a nascent but growing cluster. Analyses emphasise that benefits are contingent on policy, institutional capacities, and actor capabilities ([Ancharaz, 2025](#)), shifting focus from theoretical potential to practical enablers. Stakeholder awareness is identified as a critical driver of engagement ([Chakawata et al., 2023](#)), while studies on public financial management and regulatory frameworks provide insight into the institutional environment for trade facilitation ([Abdulai, 2023](#); [Awoonor, 2025](#)).

Synthesising these clusters reveals a significant research gap. While the constituent challenges—infrastructure, finance, capacity, policy—are documented, their gendered configuration and intersection with specific AfCFTA provisions remain underexplored. The literature provides essential scaffolding but calls for targeted analysis centring women-led manufacturing SMEs within regional trade liberalisation, moving beyond their treatment as a subset of broader SME studies ([Oyeniran et al., 2024](#); [Osasere & Omoregbee, 2025](#)). This mapping precisely charts the terrain where further research is required to inform inclusive AfCFTA implementation.

DISCUSSION

The evidence synthesised in this review reveals that the gendered impact of the AfCFTA on women-led manufacturing SMEs is not a uniform phenomenon but is profoundly shaped by intersecting contextual factors in Ghana and Nigeria. A primary finding is the critical role of sector-specific constraints and pre-existing structural inequalities. Studies indicate that women-led SMEs in manufacturing often face disproportionate barriers in accessing the productive resources—such as

finance, technology, and reliable infrastructure—necessary to compete in an integrated market ([Awosusi, 2024](#); [Chukwudi, 2024](#); [Ganiyu & Esther, 2024](#)). For instance, while digitalisation and improved credit access are broadly beneficial, their impact is mediated by gendered disparities in asset ownership and digital literacy, potentially leaving women-led firms behind ([Ogbari et al., 2024](#); [Aladejebi et al., 2024](#)). This suggests that without targeted interventions, the AfCFTA could reinforce existing disparities rather than mitigate them.

Furthermore, the policy and institutional environment emerges as a decisive factor in determining outcomes. Comparative analysis highlights divergence between the two nations, rooted in differing implementation capacities and the gender-responsiveness of national industrial policies ([Ancharaz, 2025](#)). Research on fiscal and trade policies underscores that macroeconomic stability and supportive regulatory frameworks are prerequisites for SME growth, yet these are often not designed with a gender lens ([Abiola, 2024](#); [M, 2024](#)). Consequently, the potential benefits of the AfCFTA for women entrepreneurs are not automatic but contingent upon complementary domestic policies that address gendered constraints in manufacturing. ([Abiola, 2024](#); [Abiola, 2024](#))

The review also identifies a significant gap in the literature regarding direct, empirical studies on the AfCFTA's gendered effects, necessitating inferences from related evidence on SME performance, trade inclusivity, and manufacturing sector dynamics ([Maliakal, 2025](#); [Osasere & Omoregbee, 2025](#)). This scarcity points to an urgent need for focused research. Ultimately, the trajectory for women-led manufacturing SMEs under the AfCFTA will be determined by the interplay between continental trade policy and national-level actions to ensure equitable access to opportunities and mitigate the risks of increased competition ([Onu et al., 2023](#); [Oyeniran et al., 2024](#)). ([Aladejebi et al., 2024](#))

CONCLUSION

This scoping review has systematically mapped the literature concerning the gendered implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for women-led manufacturing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. The synthesis, conducted via the Arksey and O'Malley framework, consolidates a fragmented evidence base to reveal a critical paradox: while the AfCFTA presents a historic opportunity for growth and empowerment, its benefits are profoundly mediated by entrenched structural and gender-specific constraints, risking the further marginalisation of women entrepreneurs without deliberate policy action ([Ancharaz, 2025](#)). The review's primary contribution is this coherent narrative of concurrent opportunity and vulnerability, establishing an essential evidence base for stakeholders.

The significance of this work is anchored in the pivotal role of manufacturing for job creation and value addition within the AfCFTA's agenda, and the recognised importance of women's economic participation for inclusive growth. However, as consolidated here, women-led SMEs operate from a disadvantaged position. They face a business environment hampered by foundational challenges such as inadequate infrastructure ([FALAYE, 2024](#)), severely constrained access to formal credit ([Awosusi, 2024](#)), and macroeconomic instability, where exchange rate volatility disproportionately affects smaller firms ([Abiola, 2024](#)). These domestic constraints form the

essential backdrop for assessing the AfCFTA's gendered implications, underscoring that trade policy cannot be divorced from broader economic governance.

The practical implications demand an integrated policy approach. First, stabilising the macroeconomic environment and improving sector-specific fiscal support are prerequisites ([Abiola, 2024](#)). Second, enhancing SME capabilities is essential to convert market access into market presence, requiring scaled business development services ([Aladejebi et al., 2024](#)), promotion of digitalisation ([Chukwudi, 2024](#)), and improved access to tailored finance ([Denen, 2025](#); [Awosusi, 2024](#)). Third, and most critically, a gender lens must be explicitly applied to AfCFTA implementation, designing interventions that address women-specific barriers, supported by transparent public financial management ([Awoonor, 2025](#)).

The review also identifies salient research gaps, charting a clear agenda. There is a pressing need for empirical, firm-level studies measuring the early effects of AfCFTA implementation on women-led manufacturing SMEs, alongside comparative research across African jurisdictions. Future work must explore sectoral nuances within manufacturing and investigate the role of non-state actors in facilitating trade ([Chakawata et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, analysis of the political economy shaping gender-inclusive trade policy implementation is required ([Abdulai, 2023](#)).

In conclusion, the path to inclusive prosperity under the AfCFTA is not automatic. It requires a conscious effort to dismantle the barriers constraining women's economic participation. This review underscores that without targeted interventions to bolster competitiveness, resource access, and robust business practices ([Blessing et al., 2025](#)), the agreement risks exacerbating inequalities. The AfCFTA's promise will only be realised when its implementation is guided by an unwavering commitment to gender equity, ensuring women entrepreneurs are primary architects of Africa's new era of trade.

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