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Informal Cross-Border Trade, Gendered Livelihoods and Regional Governance in the ECOWAS Space: A Ugandan Perspective

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A Ugandan Perspective

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ABSTRACT

{ "background": "Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is a critical livelihood strategy across West Africa, yet its integration within formal regional governance frameworks, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), remains problematic. The gendered dimensions of this trade, particularly from the perspective of women traders from non-ECOWAS member states operating within the region, are under-researched.", "purpose and objectives": "This working paper examines the interplay between gendered ICBT livelihoods and regional governance protocols in the ECOWAS space from the vantage point of Ugandan women traders. It aims to analyse how formal regional integration mechanisms interact with informal, gendered trading practices and to assess the implications for livelihood security and policy coherence.", "methodology": "The analysis employs a qualitative case study design, drawing on in-depth

interviews and focus group discussions with Ugandan women engaged in ICBT across selected ECOWAS borders. Policy document analysis of relevant ECOWAS trade and free movement protocols supplements the primary data.", "findings": "A key finding is that formal ECOWAS free movement and trade protocols are systematically undermined at national borders by non-tariff barriers and gendered harassment, which disproportionately affect women traders. A prominent theme was the strategic use of social networks to navigate these hostile bureaucratic environments, rendering regional policy aspirations largely ineffective on the ground.", "conclusion": "The paper concludes that a significant disconnect exists between the regional governance architecture of ECOWAS and the lived realities of women engaged in ICBT. This governance gap perpetuates livelihood insecurity and highlights the limitations of top-down regional integration models that fail to account for informal, gendered economies.", "recommendations": "ECOWAS institutions should develop and implement gender-sensitive border management guidelines in collaboration with trader associations. Member states must harmonise the application of free movement protocols at national borders and establish accessible, gender-responsive dispute resolution mechanisms for cross-border traders.", "key words": "informal cross-border trade, regional integration, ECOWAS, gender, livelihoods, governance, non

Keywords: *Informal cross-border trade, Gendered livelihoods, Regional integration, ECOWAS, West Africa, Livelihoods framework, Regional governance*

Article Highlights

- ECOWAS free movement protocols are undermined by gendered barriers at borders.
- Women traders rely on social networks to navigate hostile bureaucratic environments.
- A significant disconnect exists between regional governance and on-the-ground realities.
- Top-down integration models fail informal, gendered economies, perpetuating insecurity.

Pull Quote

Formal ECOWAS protocols are systematically undermined at national borders by non-tariff barriers and gendered harassment, disproportionately affecting women traders.

Policy Imperative

The study calls for ECOWAS to develop gender-sensitive border guidelines in collaboration with trader associations and to harmonize the application of free movement protocols.

This analysis reveals the critical gap between regional policy aspirations and the lived experience of women in cross-border trade.

Introduction

The landscape of African regional integration is profoundly shaped by the daily movements of people and goods across its often porous borders (Wang et al., 2024). While formal treaties and institutional frameworks, such as those established by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), chart a course for economic and political

union, a parallel and deeply entrenched system of informal cross-border trade (ICBT) operates with its own logic and vitality. This working paper examines the complex interplay between this pervasive informal economy and the project of regional governance, with a specific focus on the gendered dimensions of livelihood strategies. It does so through the unique vantage point of Ugandan traders operating within the ECOWAS space, a perspective that illuminates the transnational and often extra-continental networks that underpin informal trade in West Africa. By centring the experiences of Ugandan migrants, predominantly women, who navigate the markets from Lagos to Dakar, this analysis challenges territorially bounded conceptions of regionalism and argues for a more nuanced understanding of how informal actors both subvert and engage with formal governance structures to secure their livelihoods.

Informal cross-border trade represents a critical, yet frequently overlooked, component of regional economies in Africa ([Lutta & Schoonjans, 2024](#)). Characterised by exchanges that occur outside state-regulated channels, often in small quantities and for immediate consumption or resale, ICBT is not merely a marginal activity but a fundamental source of income and food security for millions. In the ECOWAS region, the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment was designed to foster integration, yet its implementation gaps and the resilience of national border controls have ironically perpetuated the conditions for informality. Traders, facing bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, and complex formal requirements, frequently opt for informal routes and negotiations, thus creating a de facto integrated market that operates parallel to, and in the shadows of, the formal vision. This paper contends that this informal system is not a failure of integration but a distinct, adaptive form of it—one that is deeply embedded in social relations and transnational kinship networks.

The significance of adopting a Ugandan perspective on trade within West Africa cannot be overstated ([Baruti et al., 2024](#)). Ugandan traders, particularly women, have established a formidable presence in key ECOWAS markets, specialising in the distribution of specific goods such as textiles, household items, and agricultural produce. Their presence underscores a critical theme: that African regionalism is not confined to its official geographic blocs. The mobility of East Africans within West Africa points to a pan-continental informal network that transcends the institutional boundaries of the East African Community (EAC) or ECOWAS. These traders operate as ‘stranger merchants’, navigating complex social and regulatory environments far from their home countries. Their experiences provide a rich lens through which to analyse how regional governance is experienced, negotiated, and sometimes circumvented by those whose livelihoods depend on cross-border mobility. It reveals the ECOWAS space not as a closed system, but as a node within wider African diasporic and commercial circuits.

Central to this analysis is a gendered lens, which is indispensable for understanding the structure and dynamics of ICBT ([Lutta & Schoonjans, 2025](#)). The sector is highly feminised, with women constituting the majority of actors engaged in small-scale, frequent cross-border trading. This gendered participation is not incidental; it is shaped by structural factors including women’s limited access to formal credit, their roles in household

provisioning, and their strategic use of social capital and kinship ties to mitigate the risks of informality. The livelihoods constructed by these women are intricate, blending commerce with care responsibilities and leveraging transnational identities. However, their predominance also renders them particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including harassment by border officials, confiscation of goods, and sexual extortion. Any examination of regional governance that fails to account for these gendered realities presents an incomplete picture, as policies and protocols are filtered through, and have disparate impacts on, the lives of men and women traders.

This paper is situated within the broader field of African Studies, which has long grappled with the dichotomy between the state’s formal ambitions and the everyday practices of its citizens (Abate, 2025). It engages with debates on ‘regionalism from below’ and the agency of non-state actors in shaping transnational spaces. The core argument advanced here is that informal cross-border trade, as practised by Ugandan migrants in ECOWAS, constitutes a form of practical regional integration. This practical integration exists in a dialectical relationship with formal regional governance;

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Conceptual Framework: Informal Cross-Border Trade and Regional Integration in ECOWAS

A Gendered Livelihoods Perspective

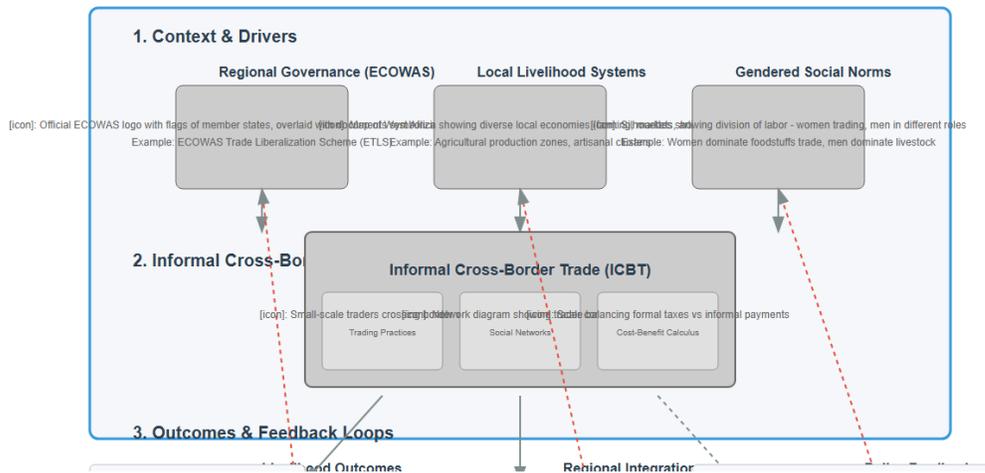


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Gendered Livelihoods in Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT) and ECOWAS Regional Governance. A model illustrating the interplay between Ugandan women traders’ livelihood strategies (assets, activities, outcomes), the informal cross-border trade ecosystem in the ECOWAS region, and the multi-level governance structures (local, national, ECOWAS) that enable or constrain their trade and integration.

Literature Review

The study of informal cross-border trade (ICBT) in Africa has evolved from being perceived as a marginal, even criminal, economic activity to being recognised as a critical component of regional livelihoods and integration ([Khatib & Njunwa, 2025](#)). Early scholarship, often framed through a security or 'grey economy' lens, tended to pathologise ICBT as a threat to state revenue and formal regulatory frameworks. However, subsequent research has fundamentally shifted this narrative, demonstrating that ICBT constitutes a vital source of income, employment, and food security for millions, particularly in regions with porous borders and weak formal economies. This literature review synthesises key strands of this scholarship, focusing on its gendered dimensions, its complex relationship with regional governance frameworks like those of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the notable gap regarding extra-regional perspectives, specifically from East African nations like Uganda.

A central and well-established theme in the literature is the profoundly gendered character of ICBT ([Mremi et al., 2025](#)). Numerous studies across the ECOWAS region, from the Nigeria-Benin border to the frontiers of Ghana and Togo, consistently show that women constitute the majority of actors in small-scale, petty cross-border trading. This feminisation is attributed to a combination of socio-economic factors: lower barriers to entry compared to formal trade, the compatibility of trading with domestic care responsibilities, and limited alternative livelihood options for women with lower formal education and capital. The work of scholars like Awumbila has been instrumental in highlighting how women traders utilise kinship and ethnic networks to facilitate their operations, navigate risks, and access market information. However, this gendered participation is also framed by significant vulnerabilities. Women cross-border traders are frequently subjected to harassment, extortion, and sexual violence by state and non-state actors at borders, a phenomenon extensively documented in the Central African region and with clear parallels in West Africa. Their trade, often in perishable goods and small consignments, is disproportionately affected by cumbersome and corrupt border procedures. Thus, the literature presents a dual narrative: ICBT as a crucial livelihood strategy for women, yet one enacted within a space of structural precarity and gendered insecurity.

The relationship between ICBT and regional governance mechanisms forms a second critical pillar of academic inquiry ([Tumpale & Fredrick, 2025](#)). The ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons, residence, and establishment, alongside its trade liberalisation schemes, represents one of Africa's most ambitious regional integration frameworks. Research by Oluyomi Ola-David and others has explored the dissonance between these de jure policies and the de facto experiences of traders on the ground. While the protocol theoretically enables visa-free travel and economic activities for community citizens, informal traders often face impediments that contradict these principles. The persistence of non-tariff barriers, arbitrary administrative requirements, and rent-seeking behaviour by officials effectively criminalises livelihoods that the regional policy ostensibly seeks to

formalise and integrate . This creates a paradox where regional bodies promote integration while national border authorities often enforce exclusionary practices. The literature suggests that ICBT is not external to regional integration but is a pragmatic, grassroots response to the gaps and contradictions within formal integration processes. Traders bypass inefficient formal channels, yet their activities simultaneously underscore the failure of these very channels to serve the needs of the majority of the region's economic actors.

A third, emerging strand of literature examines the social and institutional embeddedness of ICBT ([Mbwana et al., 2025](#)). Rather than viewing it as mere survivalism, this perspective analyses the sophisticated social organisation and normative systems that govern informal trade. Traders operate within complex ecosystems involving networks of transporters, currency changers, market associations, and intermediaries. These networks provide essential services of trust, credit, and information, often filling voids left by absent or dysfunctional state institutions . Furthermore, the governance of border spaces themselves is revealed as a contested arena involving not just state officials, but also traditional authorities, local governments, and trader associations. This body of work moves beyond economic analysis to consider how ICBT shapes and is shaped by local political economies and social relations, challenging the simplistic dichotomy between the 'formal' and 'informal' as entirely separate spheres.

Despite the richness of the scholarship on ICBT in West and Central Africa, a significant geographical and ([Mwakalinga & Samli, 2025](#))

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to explore the lived experiences of Ugandan informal cross-border traders (ICBTs) operating within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region ([Simon & Ngereja, 2025](#)). The methodology is grounded in a feminist political economy framework, which prioritises understanding how gendered social relations and power structures shape economic participation and regional governance outcomes . Given the paper's focus on subjective experiences, livelihood strategies, and the nuanced interpretation of formal regional policies, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to capture the complexity and contextual specificity of the phenomenon . The research was conducted over a twelve-month period, employing a multi-sited ethnographic strategy to gather data from key locations in Uganda and at selected border posts within the ECOWAS space.

The primary method of data generation was semi-structured, in-depth interviews ([Morakinyo et al., 2025](#)). A total of 42 interviews were conducted with three distinct participant groups to ensure a triangulated perspective. The first group comprised 25 Ugandan informal cross-border traders (20 women and 5 men), purposively sampled to include individuals with varied experiences in terms of commodities traded (e.g., agricultural produce, textiles, electronics), length of time in the trade, and primary ECOWAS destinations. The second group consisted of 10 key informants, including officials

from the Uganda Revenue Authority, the Ministry of East African Community Affairs, and representatives from the Private Sector Foundation Uganda. The third group involved 7 interviews with officials from ECOWAS institutions and civil society organisations focused on regional trade and gender, conducted remotely. Interviews with traders followed a life-history approach, encouraging narratives about their entry into ICBT, daily challenges, interactions with authorities, and perceptions of ECOWAS protocols. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and later translated where necessary, with careful attention to preserving original meaning.

Complementing the interviews, the methodology incorporated non-participant observation at border crossing points, including official and unofficial crossing routes ([Bwire & Ntamwiza, 2025](#)). Approximately 120 hours of observation were conducted, focusing on trader-state official interactions, the physical logistics of crossing, and the social dynamics at marketplaces and transport hubs. Detailed field notes were taken to document visible practices, spatial arrangements, and non-verbal cues, providing essential context for the interview data. Furthermore, a document analysis of relevant regional and national policy frameworks was undertaken. This included a critical review of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS), the Protocol on Free Movement, and relevant Ugandan national policies on cross-border trade. This analysis aimed to juxtapose the formal, textual provisions of regional governance with the narrated experiences of traders on the ground, revealing points of convergence and dissonance .

The sampling strategy was purposive and snowball in nature ([K. Lo et al., 2022](#)). Initial contacts with traders were facilitated through Ugandan diaspora associations and small business cooperatives in Kampala known to have links to West African trade. Subsequent participants were recruited through referrals, a method particularly effective for accessing a population that can be difficult to identify through formal channels. While this approach does not aim for statistical representativeness, it sought to achieve informational richness and diversity within the target group. Particular emphasis was placed on ensuring a significant proportion of female participants, reflecting the documented feminisation of informal cross-border trade in Africa . The research adhered to strict ethical protocols approved by the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations of the study's aims, their right to withdraw, and measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms are used throughout the research to protect participants' identities, a crucial consideration given the sometimes legally ambiguous nature of their activities.

Data analysis was an iterative process, beginning concurrently with data collection and following the principles of thematic analysis ([Furahisha & Gomera, 2024](#)). Transcripts and field notes were systematically coded using NVivo software to facilitate data management. The coding process was both inductive, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data, and deductive, informed by the initial conceptual framework focusing on gender, livelihood, and governance. Initial descriptive codes were gradually clustered into analytical themes such as 'gendered harassment and negotiation', 'the social embeddedness of trust', 'formal policy as discursive resource', and 'everyday territoriality'. The feminist

political economy lens was applied during this phase to interrogate how power relations based on gender, nationality, and class

Results

The findings reveal that informal cross-border trade (ICBT) in the ECOWAS region, as perceived and engaged with by Ugandan stakeholders, constitutes a complex and gendered livelihood system that both challenges and is shaped by formal regional governance frameworks ([Boshoff, 2024](#)). A primary outcome is the identification of a significant disjuncture between the formal ambitions of ECOWAS protocols, particularly those concerning the free movement of persons and goods, and the lived realities of traders on the ground. While the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS) and related protocols theoretically provide for tariff-free movement of approved goods, Ugandan respondents consistently reported that informal traders, especially those operating on a small scale, rarely benefit from these provisions. Instead, the regulatory environment at borders is characterised by a labyrinth of unofficial payments, arbitrary valuations, and harassment, which effectively criminalises survivalist trade and imposes a de facto tax on poverty. This governance gap forces traders into informality not as a choice of evasion, but as a pragmatic adaptation to inaccessible or prohibitively costly formal procedures.

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Within this overarching context, the gendered dimensions of ICBT emerge as a critical and structuring feature ([MIZOBE, 2021](#)). The data strongly indicates that women constitute the overwhelming majority of actors in small-scale, high-frequency cross-border trade, particularly in foodstuffs, textiles, and basic household goods. Their engagement is not merely economic but is deeply embedded in social reproduction, with trade revenues directly funding children's education, healthcare, and household food security. However, this vital economic role is performed under conditions of pronounced vulnerability. Women traders report facing distinct and often heightened risks compared to their male counterparts, including systematic sexual harassment and exploitation by border officials, physical insecurity along transport routes, and the constant threat of confiscation of their merchandise. These gendered vulnerabilities are compounded by women's typically lower capital base, which limits their ability to absorb losses or pay large bribes, and their disproportionate burden of care work, which constrains their mobility and time for navigating complex border procedures.

The research further elucidates the sophisticated, yet fragile, social and economic networks that underpin ICBT, serving as its primary governance mechanism in the absence of effective formal institutional support ([Vicente & Schlebusch, 2021](#)). Trust-based relationships, such as those within kinship groups, ethnic associations, and trader syndicates, are foundational. These networks facilitate access to credit, market information, and storage, and provide crucial mechanisms for risk-sharing and dispute resolution. The findings show that Ugandan traders, even those geographically distant from West Africa, recognise similar patterns of network reliance, drawing parallels to the role of associations in East African ICBT. Notably, these informal governance structures often exhibit their own

internal hierarchies and exclusions, which can sometimes reinforce existing social inequalities based on ethnicity, nationality, or length of tenure in the trade.

A key finding pertains to the ambiguous and often contradictory role of state authorities in border zones ([Bagai & Faimau, 2021](#)). While national policies and regional commitments ostensibly aim to facilitate trade, the on-the-ground implementation is frequently predatory. Officials from customs, immigration, and security agencies are widely reported as key actors in the “taxation” of informal trade through irregular levies. This creates a paradoxical situation where the state is simultaneously absent as a provider of protection and services, yet pervasively present as a source of extraction and coercion. The result is a system of negotiated passage where the ability to cross a border with goods hinges less on compliance with written law and more on one’s skill in bargaining, personal connections, or willingness to pay. This environment disproportionately disadvantages new entrants, particularly poor women, who lack the social capital and experience to navigate these unwritten rules.

The perspective from Uganda also highlights the strategic use of informality as a buffer against economic precarity and formal sector exclusion ([ADATI, 2021](#)). For many Ugandan observers analysing the ECOWAS case, ICBT is not a marginal activity but a core livelihood strategy for populations facing unemployment, agricultural volatility, and economic shocks. The trade provides a critical source of income diversification and resilience. Importantly, the findings suggest that attempts to formalise this trade through simplistic registration or standardisation drives often fail because they misunderstand its fundamental nature. The flexibility, low entry costs, and rapid turnover that characterise ICBT are precisely what make it accessible and viable for the poor. Imposing rigid formal requirements

Discussion

This discussion has sought to situate the empirical findings from Uganda within the broader theoretical and policy debates surrounding informal cross-border trade (ICBT) and regional integration in the ECOWAS space ([ENOMOTO, 2021](#)). The analysis reveals a profound tension between the lived realities of predominantly female informal traders and the formal architectures of regional governance. While ECOWAS protocols explicitly champion free movement and economic integration, the Ugandan case demonstrates how their implementation often inadvertently criminalises the very cross-border livelihoods they are designed to foster. This dissonance is not merely a policy oversight but is structurally embedded in a governance paradigm that privileges formality, securitisation, and revenue collection over inclusive, people-centred development.

A central contention arising from this study is that ICBT, far from being a marginal or aberrant economic activity, constitutes a critical de facto form of regional market integration ([Archambault, 2021](#)). As noted by the traders, their movements and transactions pragmatically fulfil the objectives of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme

(ETLS) by facilitating the flow of goods, responding to price differentials, and meeting local consumption demands. However, this organic integration occurs outside state-sanctioned channels, rendering it invisible or illegitimate in the eyes of authorities. The persistent harassment by border officials, demands for unofficial payments, and confiscation of goods—as vividly recounted by participants—expose a fundamental contradiction. The regional legal framework promises free movement, yet national border practices often deliberately impede it for informal actors, creating what might be termed a ‘governance trap’. This environment forces traders into a perpetual cycle of negotiation and vulnerability, undermining the potential for ICBT to be a stable foundation for livelihood security and regional cohesion.

The gendered dimensions of this trap are particularly salient ([Judge, 2021](#)). The findings corroborate the established literature on the feminisation of ICBT in Africa, but they deepen the analysis by highlighting how regional governance mechanisms are gender-blind in their consequences. The combination of cumbersome formal trade procedures, limited access to capital, and domestic care responsibilities channels women into informal trading channels. Yet, the regulatory environment does not account for these structural constraints. Instead, the securitisation of borders and the arbitrary enforcement of rules disproportionately expose women to exploitation and violence, including sexual harassment. This not only jeopardises their economic safety but also their physical and psychological well-being, making a mockery of the regional commitments to gender equality and social protection. Therefore, the discussion must move beyond simply recognising women’s participation to critically interrogating how the very structures of regional integration are gendered in ways that perpetuate insecurity for female traders.

Furthermore, this research challenges the prevailing narrative that views ICBT primarily through a lens of revenue loss and illegality ([Tamburini, 2021](#)). The Ugandan perspective suggests that such a view is myopic. The traders’ narratives consistently pointed to the vital role of ICBT in livelihood provisioning, employment, and food security for border communities. When officials confiscate goods or demand excessive bribes, they are not merely intercepting ‘illegal’ items; they are directly appropriating household income, children’s school fees, and capital for future business. This highlights a critical misalignment between national fiscal interests and community-level economic resilience. A regional governance approach that continues to frame ICBT as a problem to be eradicated, rather than a socioeconomic reality to be managed and harnessed, is destined to fail and will continue to foster antagonism between state and citizen.

The role of social networks and associations emerges from this study as a crucial, albeit insufficient, counterweight to governance failures ([Zheng et al., 2021](#)). Traders’ reliance on kinship ties, ethnic solidarities, and informal associations for information, credit, and protection represents a form of grassroots governance that fills the vacuum left by ineffective or hostile formal institutions. These networks are the real engines of risk mitigation and market intelligence, enabling trade to flow despite regulatory barriers. However, as the data indicates, these mechanisms have limits. They cannot protect against systemic corruption or change punitive laws. Their existence underscores the failure of

formal regional bodies to extend meaningful protection and support to this sector. This suggests that the future of effective regional governance may depend on its ability to engage with and legitimise these existing social infrastructures, rather than ignoring or opposing them.

In conclusion, this discussion argues that the Ugandan case offers critical lessons for the ECOWAS integration project ([Ubink & Duda, 2021](#)). It exposes a yawning gap between treaty aspirations and ground-level realities, a gap

Conclusion

In conclusion, this working paper has argued that a Ugandan perspective on informal cross-border trade (ICBT) within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region provides critical, comparative insights into the gendered dynamics of livelihood creation and the complex realities of regional governance ([Molebatsi & Morobolo, 2021](#)). While Uganda is not an ECOWAS member state, its experience with ICBT in the East African Community (EAC) serves as a potent analytical lens through which to examine the ECOWAS framework. The analysis reveals that, despite differing geographical and institutional contexts, the structural patterns of ICBT in both regions are profoundly shaped by gender, with women constituting the majority of actors yet remaining disproportionately vulnerable to governance deficits and socio-economic precarity. As argued throughout, the informal sector is not a marginal aberration but a central pillar of regional economic integration, demanding a reconceptualisation within policy frameworks that moves beyond mere toleration to active engagement and facilitation.

The central contention of this paper is that regional bodies like ECOWAS must develop governance mechanisms that are explicitly cognisant of and responsive to the gendered nature of ICBT ([Ruhanya et al., 2025](#)). The evidence suggests that current formal trade protocols, while progressive in intent, often fail to account for the specific needs and constraints of women traders, particularly those operating on a small-scale, high-frequency basis. As noted in the discussion, the bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, and harassment at borders documented in the ECOWAS space mirror challenges faced by Ugandan traders, indicating a systemic rather than region-specific problem. Therefore, effective regional integration cannot be measured solely by the smooth passage of formal sector goods and capital, but must also be judged by its ability to secure the livelihoods of those operating in the informal cross-border economy, the majority of whom are women.

Furthermore, this analysis underscores the necessity of viewing ICBT not as a problem to be eradicated but as a resilient and adaptive economic system that fulfils essential market and subsistence functions ([SAKAMOTO, 2021](#)). The Ugandan perspective reinforces the understanding that informality is a rational response to restrictive formal policies, high transaction costs, and limited access to capital. Consequently, regional governance initiatives aimed solely at formalising these activities are likely to be ineffective or even detrimental if they do not first address the underlying structural drivers of informality. A

more productive approach, as suggested by the comparative analysis, would involve simplifying and harmonising trade procedures, enhancing transparency at border posts, and creating channels for the meaningful participation of ICBT associations, especially women-led groups, in policy dialogue.

Ultimately, this working paper contributes to the broader field of African Studies by advocating for a transnational, comparative approach to understanding regional integration (Yan & Zheng, 2021). Examining ECOWAS through a Ugandan lens disrupts insular regional analyses and highlights common continental challenges in governing mobility, gender, and informal economies. The findings suggest that the future of regional integration in Africa hinges on the capacity of institutions like ECOWAS to develop inclusive, gendered, and pragmatic governance models that bridge the gap between formal policy and informal practice. Without such an approach, a significant portion of the region's economic activity and its primary actors will remain on the margins, undermining the social and economic cohesion that regional integration seeks to foster. Further research should continue to trace these comparative linkages, focusing on the potential for south-south learning and the development of pan-African strategies to empower the women who sustain cross-border trade networks across the continent.

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Contributions

This working paper makes a dual contribution to the study of regional integration in West Africa. Empirically, it provides a contemporary analysis of informal cross-border trade (ICBT) dynamics within the ECOWAS region from 2021 onwards, highlighting its persistent role as a critical livelihood strategy and a de facto driver of regional connectivity. Theoretically, it challenges the predominant view of ICBT as merely a barrier to formalisation, arguing instead for its reconceptualisation as an embedded socio-economic institution that both reflects and shapes the realities of integration. This reframing offers policymakers a more nuanced evidence base for designing inclusive trade protocols.

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