

THE CONSTRAINTS OF WOMEN TRANS-BORDER TRADERS WITHIN THE CAMEROON-NIGERIA MAMFE-EKOK-IKOM CORRIDOR, 1988-2016

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Abstract: Women trans-border traders along the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor have been ostensibly constraint despite the numerous trading opportunities offered by the natural and human milieu. A few scholars have examined trade in this corridor; paying less attention to the enormous barriers that undermined the efforts of women trans-border traders. It is in this regard that this paper explores the social, economic and politico-strategic constraints faced by women trans-border traders thereof. The paper opines that the intermittent decline in women's trading activities in the said corridor can be attributed to the constraints discussed. The study has made ample use of primary sources- oral interviews using interview guides, theses and dissertations; and secondary sources- published books, journals and the internet. It adopts the historical mode, largely qualitative analysis, presented in a thematic manner. The findings reveal that women involved in the Cameroon-Nigeria trans-border trade within the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor were hindered by socio-economic and politico-strategic constraints, which contributed to sporadic decline in female trade and the overall trade along the corridor in general. Women were however the most affected because they were vulnerable to risks and other conditions that limited their efforts, participation and profits. Based on these findings, the paper concludes that women trans-border traders are a key resource that need to be encouraged by eliminating the constraints they faced. Gender-based trade policies would certainly facilitate female trade in the said corridor and enable the attainment of full trade potentials by Cameroon and Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

Keywords: Women, Constraints, Trans-border Trade, Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom Corridor.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor stretches from Manyu Division in Southwest-Cameroon towards the Cross River State of Southeastern Nigeria. [56] The custom border check points for Cameroon and Nigeria were and are still located at both ends of the Mfum Bridge that crosses over the Cross River linking both countries. This was meant to thwart any illegal crossing of goods and persons. [57] Despite wide trading opportunities offered by the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom Corridor, women trans-border traders of the era under review encountered numerous constraints that limited their exploits in terms of efforts, participation and profits. The natural milieu and historical linkages of the area predisposed women into agriculture, trade and movements across borders giving the proximity and socio-cultural ties of the border communities. [1] In the years under review, women dominated the production and supply of *garri*, melon seeds (*egusi*), yams, *akpu* fufu; *eru* (*gnectum*), bush mango seeds (*ogbono*) besides trading in light manufactures and contrabans across the delineated border. [2]. The widely acclaimed rational Choice theory posits that individuals act rationally and with specific constraints that are based on the information they have and the conditions under which they are acting. [3] This is valid giving its emphasises on the constraints involved in achieving goals.[4] The Probability Theory of Hackling which points

to the prevalence of risk and uncertainty in ventures is also valid in this case because the issues of risk and uncertainty are similar to the exigencies faced by the women trans-border traders under review.[5] These exigencies have been identified and analyzed under the social, economic and politico-strategic constraints.

II. SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS

A. Stigmatisation and Opposition from Male Partners

Information from both the married and divorcees indicates that some male partners did not accept their wives to search for money by getting involved in such a long distance trade. This pre-colonial and colonial mentality lingered on. Men complained of the abandonment of household duties for trade along the Cameroon/Nigeria borders. The women trans-border traders were labelled as prostitutes, probably because of the presence of retired prostitutes and the pervasive harassments from border officials that some of the women noted. Some men complained of the way these women abandoned children and household duties for days and sometimes weeks for such a long distance trade. [6].

The above explanation indicates that women trans-border traders in the Mamfe-Ekok- Ikom corridor, faced stigmatisation from some male partners, relations and friends. They were generally regarded as “loose women” because it is a known fact that they faced immense pressure from border agents and officials to yield to their sexual advances. They constantly faced physical sexual exploitation and lacked the means to enforce their rights. They were only respected for what they could offer in cash and kind or their changing roles in households but not as a person. [7].

Women’s household responsibilities had been a demotivating factor to any long distance trade most often rebuked by their male partners. In fact, Men acted as producers and traders only but women got involved in production and trade plus home management, child bearing and care for family members. The bad roads that existed before 2016, the numerous check points and the transport constraints explained herein delayed women traders for many days than was expected. The number of days spent increased whenever the Ekok borders are closed for security reasons. Consequently, when the women finally succeed to return they realised both the immediate and external families looked up to them especially the sick, the children in school, the old mothers and fathers etc.[8] At the Mamfe town market it was observed that some of the *Ikom-line* women (contrary to former expectations and belief) were married. This development was explained by the fact that retrenchment, retirement and economic hardship left some married men with no option than to accept any form of income generating activities carried out by their wives. One of the *Ikom-line* women, Tiku Marceline said:

... my husband never wanted me to do any form of trade that makes me stay out of my home for long hours. Unfortunately, he lost his job in 1993. We managed like that for four years and by 1997 when things became very hard a friend introduced me to the Ikom-line business. I raised my capital from the sales of Bush Mango bought from the Ejagham villages of Ewelle, Kembong, Ajayukndip and Ogomoko. When I started following my friend to Ikom for business, my husband had no option than to accept. [9]

The above response reflects the plight of the *Ikom-line* women living with their husbands. It indicates the force with which women operated entrepreneurial activities to attenuate the impact of the economic crisis and structural adjustments that affected the Mamfe-Ekok border communities.

B. Stress and Prevalent Diseases

Women trans-border traders of the period under review complained of stress during time of departure, in the course of the business trip, in the course of selling and during the return journey. Before departure women traders spent a whole day to arrange and package the trading items. They also spent sleepless nights on the roads giving the deplorable state of the roads and the delays at numerous check points and at the Ekok border post. They ate roadside food even if it was not of their taste. At the market places, women traders strained to reach agreements with loaders and customers alike. Upon return the same stressful conditions were observed. Esther Makia a part-time trans-border trader in palm oil made the following observations:

The Ikom-line business is profitable but stressful too. Packaging goods for departure, the delays of road transport, the number of hours spent during checks at the border post can make someone sick. We go through sleepless nights. While at the Ikom market we talk loud with loaders who give us headache. The food we eat hardly goes with our taste. [10]

This stressful condition is perhaps one of the reasons why many men within the Mamfe-Ekok corridor detested women involvements in the *Ikom-line* business.

Many diseases emerged and re-emerged with more deadly consequences in the Mamfe-Ekok corridor as in other African regions. Women suffered from the ravaging effects of diseases such as diabetes, breast cancer and even malaria, cholera and HIV/AIDS due to ignorance. Unfortunately, sensitization campaigns carried out by some women groups did not reach some of the interior villages and women trans-border traders. Moreover, they were vulnerable to the HIV/AIDS because of the sexual embarrassments from border officials and others. This was especially the case with those who juggled commercial sex and trans-border trade, many of whom lost their lives, leading to the generalised stigma that associated women trans-border traders to prostitution.

C. Theft

Most of the women interviewed were particular about loaders' theft in the process of loading and offloading their goods. For example, at the Bamenda, Mamfe and Kumba markets there were loaders who stole certain goods either to resell when the Ekok Vehicles had left or to take them home. At the Ekok custom check point however goods from both sides of Nigeria and Cameroon were usually off loaded for checking at the warehouse in Ekok by an organised group of loaders.

In fact, the women trans-border traders were not usually at peace until the crossers (persons who helped women smugglers to cross with goods at the border) delivered their goods. Truck men brought their goods and even after that they monitored the drivers until when they were about to leave then they stole some items. [11]. Stolen items were hardly ever discovered until the trader concerned reached the final marketplace of sale. Such loses had a negative impact on the profit margins of the women traders.

A fraudulent practice that affected female trans-border trading activities along the Nigeria-Cameroon border was commonly known as 'four-one-nine'. Four-one-nine is a Nigerian confidence trick. Even though Code No. 419 existed before the era of former president Ibrahim Babangida, it only became pervasive during his tenure of office. In the course of a business transaction, if one carried out a fraudulent act and got away with it thereby making a profit, one is said to have made money out of 'four-one-nine'. [12]. However, if caught, it is believed that the person had already made money out of the act. Hence there was the need to 'settle' the law enforcement officers got their share of the profits. Female trans-border traders have fallen victim of 'four-one-nine' either in the course of currency exchanges through black marketing or while purchasing certain goods from Nigerian traders whereby fake items were given in place of genuine ones at the same cost.

Unlike men, most women could not concentrate only on specific trade items when they go to make purchases; they spent more time in the market buying other items not just for business but also for household use. In the course of buying, they got exhausted to the point that they could easily be cheated or given fake items without realizing it or sometimes they were in rush to catch the boat. [13]

D. Inadequate Education

Women trans-border traders in the Mamfe-Ekok corridor did not fully explore or invest in functional education in which the pursuit of scientific and technological skills crucial for women to develop their capabilities was and is still foremost. Women were lagging behind in critical contemporary fields of science and technology such as computer literacy, engineering among others. Hence they could not apply modern scientific methods in the cultivation of food and agricultural products that would have increased the supply of trading items and the conservation of perishables. Some women were unable to make use of the internet to advertise their products or get access to trading information and border rules. E-commerce (buying, advertising, selling and paying charges through the internet) was unknown to them which would have reduced the delays and stress that characterised trade within the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom road. [14]

E. Inadequate access to Information

Information is a very vital aspect in trans-border trade. Most of the difficulties faced by women trans-border traders in the Mamfe-Ekok corridor stemmed from lack of information about trading rules and regulations as well as available trading opportunities. Men and Women traders were either not aware or not well informed of the details. This was compounded by the fact that trading procedures at the Ekok-Mfum border post were not usually transparent and specific documentations were not always available as well. Custom officers and other border officials exploited the ignorance of the women to add or demand fake amounts of custom duties or settlements. [15] All the female trans-border traders interviewed confirmed to this fact, which also affected their profit margins.

III. ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

A. Capital and Credit

The Issue of Capital and Credit was one of the key economic factors that affected the participation of women in trans-border trade in the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom trade corridor. This was so because trans-border trading activities usually required substantial financial resources. Yet both male and female traders often relied on personal savings and loans backed by interest as their main sources of capital. Inadequate finance served as a major impediment primarily to women trans-border trade because it was correlated with limited access to credit facilities. Women had limited ability to reinvest earnings because they extend financial support to their immediate and nuclear families. Besides, limited land rights for women preclude diversification possibilities for female harvesters and limited their access to finance. Nkem Augustina, a female fuel dealer in Mamfe lamented about her limited capital:

I started the fuel trade 2012 with a capital of 125,000FCFA, and I could not cope with the rate of expenditures involved. Paying boys to load and off-load, transportation, settlement, and other forms of payments. In 2014, I stopped buying from Nigeria due to lack of capital. Then I decided to buy only from the John Holt Beach. [16]

One of the members of the Ikom-line Women traders in Kumba, Elizabeth Ekah, also corroborated the said view by saying, women were more involved in small scale business transactions due to lack of capital. She added that their male counterparts could go beyond Ikom to Abba and Onitcha to buy and dealt with heavy manufactured goods because they had enough capital. [17] This situation can be explained by the fact that most financial institutions granted loans to persons with heavy deposits or investments to serve as collateral security. Except for a handful, most women did not own property such as land before they got involved in trans-border trade.

The issue of inadequate capital and credit facilities made most of the women trans-border traders to remain engaged in small-scale trade largely within the informal sphere. This waved them out of the formal approaches prepared by governments and regional organisations for wider trade facilitation and economic growth. Hence, they could not benefit any of such programmes. Rather they were more vulnerable to trading barriers that hampered productivity. This was especially so because small trade transacted by women suffered negatively from custom controls and other complex regulations, at the hands of the border officials who took advantage of the vulnerability of the women trans-border traders. This situation was exacerbated by a lack of empowerment on the part of small traders, women in particular, in terms of knowledge surrounding trading processes, procedures and their rights. [18]

B. Trade and Marketing Constraints

Marketing constraints resulting from the problem of perishables such as *eru* and oranges and from the lack of marketing information also affected the women trans-border traders. Before the tarring of the Kumba-Mamfe road and the Bamenda-Mamfe-Ekok Road, vehicles transporting *eru* from Kumba spent days on the road to reach Ikom in Nigeria. By the time they started selling at Ikom much of the *eru* had gone bad. Some of the women traders involved in the business at the time say they even spent money to get boys to dispose the bad *eru* in the rubbish corners and the rest were sold at prices lower than was expected. [19]. Also Oranges bought from the Tiv in Nigeria sometimes got bad before they reached their market destinations in Bamenda and Kumba due to the delays. It was very discouraging especially for the new comers in the business who risk losing capital. [20].

Another marketing constraint was excess supply over demand. Some women in the *eru* business affirmed that the bulk of *eru* from Kumba and Mamfe sometimes far exceeded the demand at the Ikom Market. This was because women buyers from different parts of Nigeria converged at Ikom as in Calabar in huge numbers. This was also because of lack of marketing information amongst the suppliers and buyers. When this happened, Cameroonian women who were the main suppliers of *eru* were forced to reduce the prices per bundle as dictated by the forces of demand and supply. Apart from price reduction, the women resorted to crediting to no avail. Finally, the remainders got bad and were disposed of. [21]. This situation occasionally affected other perishables and demotivated the women traders.

During the economic crisis, labour retrenchment meant basically to cut down the number of civil servants under the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) seriously affected the purchasing power of households. The result was a fall in the demand for goods including the trade items from Nigeria. The turnover was slow, which affected the profits of trans-border traders in the area. The women also faced stiff competition with each other for the limited business opportunities. [22].

C. The absence of reliable Trading Records

At the individual level, the rural women hardly ever kept records of what they produced or sold. Many of the women trans-border traders did not have individual records of sales and profits except for the case of purchases backed by receipts. As a result, the expenditures, sales and profits could not be determined. They made blind sales until when shortages were experienced, and then they looked for ways to borrow money. [23]. At the level of the women associations such as the Ikom-line women of Mamfe had little or no reliable data base and system for the collection and analysis of data on the activities of women trans-border traders.

D. The Economic Crisis of the 1990s

The economic crisis coupled with the ghost town operations (strikes) in the early 1990s and the devaluation of the Francs CFA in 1994 led to increased prices for some staples such as *garri*, *egusi*, water *fufu* and *eru* within the Mamfe-Ekok areas. This made the number of buyers (mainly Ibos) to rush to the villages in search of these commodities in order to make better sales in town and in Nigeria. [24] Unfortunately, they were bound to sell at high prices which discouraged buyers who already had very low purchasing powers due to the economic crisis.

Table 1: Price Index showing Inflationary Trend in Cameroon between 1993 and 1995 in (thousands of CFA francs)

	December 1993	March 1994	March 1995	December 1995
Food	100	152	165	160
Transport	100	130	134	142
Schooling	100	139	139	143
Total	300	121	138	445

Sources: Seyed Muhamad Israr et al., "coping strategies of health personnel during economic crises: A study from Cameroon" available at <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/links/doi/10.1046/j.1365-3156.2000.0054f.x>, accessed on 25th July 2016.

Table 1 illustrates changes in the prices witnessed in the Cameroonian economy between 1993 and 1995 for food, transport and education services. The persistent increase in the prices of food, transport and cost of schooling indicates deplorable living conditions for both the urban and rural poor persons. It therefore propounds the financial difficulties and less purchasing power faced by Cameroonian households at the peak of the economic crisis, which negatively affected the sales of women trans-border traders. Marceline Tiku an Ikom-line trader gave a succinct description of her personal experience as follows:

The Ikom-line business was booming when I started it and that was in 1987, 1988 and 1989. But, in the 1990s the cost of transportation along the Manyu River and the rate of settlements were so high that making profit was very difficult. More so, the number of buyers reduced due to increase in the prices for goods caused by the economic crisis. I used to go to Ikom weekly in the 1980s but in the 1990s, I could do only once a month. Conditions became so critical then, many Ikom-line women could not cope while others simply abandoned. [25].

The above statement is a reflection of decreasing level of trade during the peak of the economic crisis in the 1990s caused by price hikes consumer's low purchasing power which negatively affected the profit margins and capital of the women trans-border traders.

E. The Devaluation of the Francs CFA

The devaluation of the Francs CFA in 1994 was a consequence of the Structural Adjustment programmes meant to reverse the economic meltdown of the 1990s. The aim was to create more opportunities for agricultural producers and increase the prices for domestic products so that the producers would eventually enjoy the value of their products. Unfortunately the prices of imports and basic foodstuff and services skyrocketed while income levels dropped. With less money at hand women traders bought less than was expected and could not engage in heavy business transactions nor go beyond Ikom, to Onitcha. Consequently, imports became expensive and the turnover was slow due to less demand. An Ikom-line business woman corroborates this view with the following words:

Since the 'devaluation' of our money, the CFA franc is small when exchanged into the Nigerian Naira. We cannot buy as much as we used to do because of high Prices of things in Nigeria. We sell mostly during the Christmas period (November and December) and after that the market is very slow and we cannot make any good profits as before. [26].

The above statement exposes one of the factors that affected the demand for goods and consequently the profit margins of female trans-border traders and which discouraged some women traders from the business, in the 1990s.

F. Shortage and Scarcity Of Trade Items

Apart from credits, seeds, hoes and machetes, the rural women in the Mamfe-Ekok corridor did not have labour-saving technologies necessary to increase output. For example, in the villages of Mukonyong, Nyang, Mbu, Akwa, Eshiobi, Enjoh in Akwaya sub Division Cassava was cultivated but *garri* was scarce due to the use of manual labour. In the Bayang and Ejagham (Keaka) villages most of the women undertook the stress of making *gari*, palm oil and palm kernel oil manually. Many of them complained that they badly needed cassava grinding machines, oil pressing machines for palm nuts and kernels to increase production. Some of them started using such machines only in the years 2000. Consequently, female trans-border traders from Cameroon and Nigeria faced the problem of shortage of trade items. [27]

G. Competition from Gabonese and Equatorial Guinea Traders

The inadequacy in trade items was compounded by the influx of trans-border traders from Gabon and Equatorial Guinea in the Southwest and Northwest regions of Cameroon most of whom were Cameroonian women. They were particularly buyers of foodstuffs - *garri*, plantains; non-timber forest products such as *eru* and bush mango and fruits like mangoes, tomatoes and oranges. The prices of these products were higher in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea due to scarcity.

Over exportation of the aforementioned products towards other trade corridors - Gabon and Equatorial Guinea created scarcity within the Mamfe-Ekok Corridor. This also contributed to the rising prices of food and agricultural products that characterised this area in the 2000s. Buying the above mentioned products at higher prices plus the transport cost affected the profit margins of the women trans-border traders as Hanna Bawah Etaka revealed:

*Prices for our trading commodities have been on the rise because of the Gabonese buyers. They buy mangoes and oranges before the fruits even get ready. They buy unripe mangoes and paid better prices. Others buy large quantities of *eru* and *garri*, which they export through Limbe and Idenau. Once they come in producers become reluctant to sell to us. Sometimes we got a little but at higher prices, we cannot make better profits except for those involved in petrol, cocoa and cocoa chemicals. [28].*

H. Fluctuations in the Exchange Rate

The British Economist, G.F. Stanlake defines the rate of Exchange as the external value of a currency expressed in terms of gold or a major currency such as the dollar or as a weighted average of its values in terms of several major currencies. [29] The rate of exchange may be determined in a number of ways. The government may decide to express the value of the currency in one of the aforementioned ways (fixed exchange rate). Using the managed exchange rates system, the monetary authorities intervene to keep the exchange rate higher or lower than it would be in a free market. But, Under a Floating exchange rate the external value of a currency is determined by the unrestricted operation of the forces of demand and supply. The latter was the most practiced among the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom traders through black-marketing.

Women trans-border traders in the said corridor were familiar with the exchange of currency through black marketing. This however posed a problem because once the exchange rate dropped trans-border traders from Cameroon exchanged their sales of much Naira for less CFA. Hence, some of the women decided to use their sales to purchase goods at Ikom sell in Mamfe. Moreover, currency fluctuations occurred after few hours only and on a daily bases. It is what noting that these currencies rose and fell with the changes in US dollars in the international market. But a slight change in the dollars resulted to more fluctuations in the naira. [30] In the black market however it depended on the availability and fluctuations in the demand in the market. [31]. For example, between 2012 and 2016 the exchange rate fluctuated between 650Naira and 805Naira per 1000FCFA. The exchange rate could drop to 700, 600 and 500 Naira or vice versa, at any time. [32]. The implication was that when the value of the Naira was on the rise women trans-border traders made more profits or sales and experienced increased purchasing power as well. When the value drops those selling commodities did not benefit but those selling the CFA and dollar currencies bought more Naira in the black market. [33]

I. Transportation

The poor nature of the Mamfe–Ekok road and high transportation costs in the years before 2016, discouraged road travellers and traders. Before the years 2013-2016, the Mamfe-Ekok road was an earth road, almost impassable during the raining seasons (see Picture below). Transport vehicles carrying goods or commodities from Mamfe spent days to reach Ekok. With the bad roads in the years before 2016 traders and travellers spent days before reaching Ekok. [34] This was not however the case on the Nigerian side which was already having a tarred road. During this time transport costs alone were estimated to account for 23 per cent of exporters' costs and 42 per cent of gross margins. [35]. As a result the number of women trans-border traders reduce greatly as many preferred using the Manyu River.

Nature of the Mamfe-Ekok Road before 2013



Source: Courtesy of Arrey Tabot, Ekok

This picture shows the poor state of the Mamfe-Ekok road which also reduced the rate of trading activities because the women sometimes spent days on the road with perishables such as, *eru*, *ogbono*, oranges, and *egusi* as they travelled to and from Ekok. Some of the perishables got bad and this reduced the profit margins of the traders. It also discouraged incoming buyers seeking to buy from Mamfe. Some villages remained inaccessible in the Upper Bayang, Akwaya and Eyumojock sub Divisions posing strain to village women willing to transport farm produce to different market places. [36]. Thus some potential buyers and sellers of trans-border trade items were kept out of contact.

It is also important to note that most of the farms to market roads within the Mamfe-Ekok Corridor were inaccessible by cars during the raining season, making it difficult for women to get to the sources of trade items in the villages. This also accounts for the shortage of trade items that occurred. The poor state of farms to market roads reduced the rate of *Buyam sellam* trade activities because the *buyam sellam* women sometimes spent two or three days with perishables such as fish, *garri*, oranges, and *egusi* as they travelled to and from Kumba. Some of the perishables got bad and this reduced the profit margins of the traders. It also discouraged incoming Ibo women buyers seeking to buy from Mamfe. Some villages remained inaccessible in the Upper Bayang, Akwaya and Eyumojock sub Divisions posing strain to village women willing to transport farm produce to different market places which would have exposed their products to trans-border traders. Women in Akwaya also trekked several miles crossing rough rivers to sell rice and or cocoa at Ikom. [37]

IV. POLITICO - STRATEGIC CONSTRAINTS

A. Licensing system

The **licensing system** aimed at ensuring a sustainable exploitation of the *eru* product gave local communities the right to exploit *eru* for home consumption. [38] To trade, however, small traders who constituted mostly women, needed to obtain licenses from government, which they were generally unable to acquire, as these were allocated to larger broker companies who on-sell way bill quotas above the established regeneration tax prices. However, direct access to obtaining these permits seemed to be extremely cumbersome. This reduced exporters' profits, or pushed smaller traders into informal trade relationships.

B. Documents Required during Border checks

The documents required for cross-border traders the same for both male and female traders but depending on the type of goods. In fact different institutions were represented at the border and trans-border traders and migrants began by buying a pass for 2000CFA and a valid National Identity Card for those crossing from Cameroon to Nigeria. [39]. Documents required complying with particular regulations, to which the female and male traders were subjected to in addition to the general included, certificate of origin, phyto-sanitary certificate, fumigation certificate, certificate of conformity, certificate of health, temporary admission authorization, and importer's trading license. Special authorizations are required for importing goods such as pharmaceutical products, and weapons and ammunition.[40] These documents put together were costly and time consuming to comply with.

There were also Import and Export Declaration forms (Custom Duties), which the custom officers verified for large consignments of agricultural and manufactured goods. Customs also demanded a certificate of origin of goods from such traders. The phyto-sanitary Brigade demanded documents that certified that the agricultural products crossing the borders met the sanitary requirements (issued by health inspection bodies from the country of origin). Meanwhile, the Packing List was also required for confirming identity and volume of the products traded. [41] Each of the border institutions had a table within the same building. Immigration officers on both sides of the Cameroon/Nigeria border checked the passports or a pass document from travellers and traders crossing the borders. The Gendarme and police office on the Cameroon side of the corridor checked the pass and Identity Cards of their citizens crossing to Nigeria. [42]. Such procedures were time consuming too for the women giving the responsibilities awaiting them back at home.

In principle, both countries apply most favourite nation's tariffs at an average of 11.9 per cent in Nigeria and 19.1 per cent in Cameroon to imports from the partner. [43]. However, imports to Cameroon and Nigeria seem to pay less than statutory duty rates and can enter despite import bans such as in the case of rice. Generally, goods are traded despite existing import and export bans. Many women trans-border traders said they were neither aware of the government policies governing trans-border trade between Cameroon and Nigeria nor the required documents. This was because the officers often demanded bribes or settlements from them before allowing them to pass.

In addition to the lack of transparency, a number of regulatory requirements and procedures were not fully applied but nevertheless generated delays and costs, without achieving the policy objectives that justified their existence. A large number of agencies were present at the borders and at a multitude of control points along the major corridors, generating delays and informal payments. In practice many requirements were ignored while formal and informal payments were collected.

C. Numerous Check Points

The road block was a particular problem in Cameroon, as compared to Nigeria. The main checkpoints on the Cameroon side were found at and continue to exist in Bamenda up Station (Bamendankwen), Okoyong-Mamfe, Ayukaba, Eyumojock and Ekok, in that order. On the Nigerian side, at Mfum and the Eferaya junction. The checks mounted by the officers' in charge caused unnecessary delays to both male and female traders alike. Some women jointly paid for transport services through loaders and forwarding agents. The women who had their goods in such trucks could travel ahead through the Cross River and wait for two weeks before the goods ever arrived especially during the raining seasons when the road was untarred.

While accounting for less than forty percent of the geographic distance, total payments to the police and local authorities were more than three times larger in Cameroon. This confirms a common complaint traders have about police and gendarmes, especially those on the Cameroon side, where police and gendarmes extract money from traders and travellers from Ekok to Bamenda and vice versa, also increased the transfer costs. On the Nigeria side, payments to police were still a significant relative to all transfer costs within Nigeria. [44].

D. Constraints posed by border officials

Some women trans-border traders faced pervasive harassment for by male officials and buyers. Some of the women affirmed they were sexually harassed by male custom officers, police and Gendarmes, who perceived women trans-border traders as prostitutes. [45]. A Nigerian ex-custom officer, explained that some women willingly gave up themselves for sex as a way of evading the numerous demands for settlements, which affected their profit margins. [46]

E. Policy Alterations

Regional and domestic trade policies, as well as other policies also determined actual trade outcomes, even though they were often not fully applied. This was largely based on the Trade Policy Reviews of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Trade Policy Review, that give an overview of the legal frameworks existing in both countries that are likely to affect cross-border trade. Actual implementation of these legal frameworks, however, differed significantly since national policies were often not in conformity with regional commitments. This was particularly the case with sensitive products, for which both countries often applied tariff rates that differed from those agreed at either the CEMAC or ECOWAS level. Similarly, procedures were generally much simpler at land borders than foreseen and applied at larger ports, and they are also often more arbitrary. [47]. However, as cross-border trade expanded and became more formal, the formal trade policy regime and regulations became increasingly important. For example, procedures to demonstrate compliance with existing standards in both countries became binding once controls were effectively applied at the border circumventing them with informal payments equally became more costly.

Cameroon a member of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC in French), applied a common external tariff (CET), [48] and harmonized a number of other policies, restricting unilateral changes in trade policies. [49] Established in the late 1990s with a view to create a single market based on the free movement of goods, services, capital, and persons, CEMAC members focused initially on customs and fiscal matters as well as the free movement of persons and goods. The Customs Code was revised to include, inter alia, the acts and regulations on customs valuation and rules of origin; likewise, a common external tariff (CET) was established and largely applied with the application of the VAT was harmonized across member states. CEMAC members also attached particular importance to coordination of national transport policies in order to promote development of trade. However, intra-CEMAC trade remains limited and numerous obstacles remained, which affected both male and female traders.

Nigeria has been a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and is applying a tariff structure similar to the one that will eventually be agreed as a CET under ECOWAS. Agreement and application of a Common External Tariff (CET) had initially been foreseen for 1990, but this deadline witnessed repeated adjustments and the CET could not be achieved as Nigeria kept arguing for the creation of a higher tariff band at 35%. [50]. With agreement on the precise structure of the CET still pending, Nigeria continued levying additional duties and implementing large numbers of import bans making the target for the completion of the CET moved to 2012. This of course limited the types of commodities dealt with by both female and male traders alike because of the issue of contra-bans that ensued.

Also, Intra-ECOWAS trade had been duty and quota free but that objective has not been achieved due to a lack of implementation, critically also in Nigeria, and because of tedious procedures required for manufactured goods to move freely within the region. [51]. Women could not exploit such advantages talk less of trading in manufactures towards the Mamfe-Ekok corridor found within the CEMAC region where manufactures were heavily taxed. This partly explains why only men in both Nigeria and Cameroon got involved in motor-spare parts business in the corridor.

Trade policy in Nigeria has generally been on a path towards trade liberalization since the 1980s even though there have been frequent adjustments and protectionism. A number of structural factors, such as deficiencies in electricity supply and other infrastructures, as well as an overvalued naira, negatively impacted the competitiveness of Nigerian enterprises, which had chosen the path of lobbying for trade protection to respond to these challenges. Though the process of policy making was not at all transparent, it had resulted in high tariffs and numerous quantitative restrictions on trade where domestic industries were threatened. While these restrictions seemed to be declining protectionism limited the trading sphere of women traders across Ekok/Mamfe. For example, they could not indulge in the import of second hand dresses, Guinness products and soap. Cameroon women transacted very limited quantities to Nigeria in smugly. [52].

The existing trade policy environment in both countries, domestic subsidies for a number of commodities, and price measures impacted prices in both countries. The dominance of petroleum exports from Nigeria caused the overvaluation of the real value of the naira for most of the recent past, making tradable goods relatively inexpensive in relation to non-tradable once. [53]. This together with severe infrastructure constraints, inconsistent electricity supply, and inadequate security resulted in domestic manufacturers having successfully lobbied for strong trade protection in Nigeria, resulting in high import tariffs, additional trade taxes, and quantitative restrictions, including outright bans, on imports that compete with Nigerian production. [54]. A recent study found that import bans in Nigeria raised prices for these products on average by 77 per cent, while subsidies depressed prices for fuel. Policies oriented towards reducing the prices for food staples in Cameroon and other industrial-type policies led to significant price differences that create incentives for arbitrage between the two countries. [55].

F. Location, Seasonal variations and Insecurity

The strategic location of the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor at the border between Cameroon and Nigeria attracted bandits from both sides especially during the period economic crisis in the 1990s. The Corridor was characterized by banditry, which negatively affected women trans-border traders. The bandits were rendered dangerous because deadly weapons and cartridges were often smuggled from Nigeria into Mamfe through unofficial routes. Thieves systematically ambushed traders who left Mamfe to buy goods in Nigeria. As a result some women trans-border traders undertook the Ikom-line as a seasonal business while others simply abandoned. In addition to regional cultural norms which discouraged women from becoming long distance traders, gender-based insecurity discouraged many women from participating in the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom trans-border trade. [59] Before 2016, Traders travelled for several days on the road, often spending nights in small towns. With thick forest, dilapidated roads and vehicle breakdowns, traders often stayed in relatively unsafe places. [60] Most women interviewed affirmed women trans-border traders who found themselves in such situations were vulnerable to gender-based violence.

The whole corridor is located in the Tropical Rain Forest with seasonal variations that created impediments to both male and female trans-border traders alike. During the dry season, the river route was discouraging because the River level was so low that boats found it difficult to ply the Manyu (Cross) River. At this time of the year, the road was more preferable and the transportation costs higher. Meanwhile during the rainy season, the Mamfe-Ekok road becomes almost impassable due to the very poor earth road conditions. The best four-wheel-drive vehicles were stocked in mud and women were refused aboard transport vehicles because they would not produce enough energy to push the Lorries when stocked in the mud. [58] At that point in time the cost of transport by road triples and some women traders simply halted their activities.

In addition, gender-based insecurity discouraged many women from participating in the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom Trans-border trade.[61] Before 2016, traders travelled for several days on the road, often spending nights in small towns. With dilapidated roads and vehicle breakdowns traders often stayed in relatively unsafe places. [62] Most women interviewed affirmed women trans-border traders who found themselves in such situations were vulnerable to gender-based violence.

G. Border Closures

At times the Ekok-Mfum border was closed either by the Nigerian or Cameroon government for security reasons or in retaliation. When this happened hundreds of trans-border traders and travellers got stocked on both sides of the borders. Women who dealt with perishable trade items incurred losses. This was the case in 1984 when the Nigerian government expelled aliens in retaliation to the expulsion of Nigerians in Ghana, in 1993 during the Bakassi crisis and in 2016 following the Anglophone crisis. Women dealing with oranges and *eru* were the most affected and this was a very demotivating factor. Offloading and reloading of the *eru* leaves at the border, as well as the time to clear customs were also reported to be major barriers, particularly because of *eru*'s perishable nature. [63].

H. Depletion and Scarcity of non-timber Resources

The over exploitation of non-timber resources led to depletion in most parts of Mamfe-Ekok corridor except in the Southern Akwaya areas and the town of Eyumojock with vast forest reserves. Over exploitation was as a result of the increased demand for *eru* not only at home and in Nigeria but also in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. So, Women spent days in the forest with their grown up children to pluck *eru* while others engaged in the gathering and splitting of *Bush Mango* or harvesting of *Baillonella toxisperma* (*Njabe*). [64] Girls covered long distances in search of *eru* due to depletion and scarcity.

V. CONCLUSION

The constraints of women trans-border traders were varied and specific. The findings reveal that women involved in the Cameroon-Nigeria trans-border trade within the Mamfe – Ekok - Ikom corridor were plagued with numerous socio-economic and politico-strategic constraints. The constraints contributed to sporadic decline in female trade in particular and the overall trade in the corridor in general. Women were however the most affected because they were vulnerable to risks and other conditions that limited their efforts, participation and profits. Based on these findings the paper concludes that women trans-border traders are a key resource that need to be encouraged through gender-based trade policies that could eliminate the constraints they faced. Facilitating female trade in the said corridor will certainly enable the attainment of full trade potentials by Cameroon and Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

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