



Evidence synthesis

Women and cross-border trade in Africa during times of conflict

Orly Stern

June 2024

XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

About the author

Dr Orly Stern is a researcher, consultant and international lawyer, focusing on armed conflict, gender, security and law. Orly has worked and researched in several countries, including Somalia, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan and Sierra Leone. She has consulted for various international organisations, governments, research institutions and NGOs, and has published extensively in her field. Orly holds a PhD in international humanitarian law from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and a Masters from Harvard Law School. She served as a visiting fellow with the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government and has held a senior fellowship with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative at the Harvard School for Public Health. Her book, *Gender, Conflict and International Humanitarian Law: A Critique of the Principle of Distinction*, was awarded the International Committee of the Red Cross' inaugural prize for the best published work on international humanitarian law in Africa.

Orly would like to extend her gratitude to the XCEPT team and the anonymous peer reviewers for their inputs into this work, as well as the editors and designers who worked on the paper.

About XCEPT

This publication is a product of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

This research is part of XCEPT's workstream on how conflicts connect across borders. It was supported by the XCEPT Research Fund.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the UK government.

This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) should be credited, with the date of the publication and reference to XCEPT. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, the author(s) will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this document.

Cover image: Darren Baker / Shutterstock 789765616



Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Research gaps	7
3. Methodology	8
4. Borders, conflicts, and war economies	10
5. Cross-border trade in conflict	11
6. Women and cross-border trade in conflict	12
7. Women and smuggling	18
8. Women, armed groups, and cross-border trade	20
9. Border closures, restrictions, and women's trade	22
10. Conclusion	23
11. Bibliography	24

Executive summary

Women cross borders to trade in times of war, just as they do in peacetime. In conflict, women conduct trade across national borders as well as across internal borders that separate territories held by different fighting factions. In conducting this trade, women play a vital role, generating livelihoods for their families, and helping ensure the availability of essential goods and supplies to war-affected communities.

This report synthesises evidence from existing research on women and cross-border trade in armed conflict. The review is specific to conflict settings in Africa, reflecting the fact that much of the available research on this topic is Africa-focused. This evidence synthesis presents a review of publications, including academic articles, organisational reports and media reports, assessing the relevant literature, analysing key themes, and identifying areas where further research is required.

This review revealed significant research gaps, identifying the need for a greater breadth of research on this topic, which would allow for more generalisable findings about women who trade across conflict-affected borders. More comprehensive research on this subject is required to inform action by states, policymakers and practitioners to better support women's cross-border trade in conflict. In particular, further empirical research is needed to examine:

- How conflicts affect women's cross-border trade outside of Africa, and beyond the African civil wars that are currently over-represented in the research.
- How armed groups utilise women in their cross-border trade, and how this contributes to armed groups' profiting endeavours and war economies.
- How women's involvement in smuggling plays out across various contexts, and the relationship between women's smuggling and trade.

- The experiences of female traders who cross borders controlled by organised armed groups and militias.
- The effects that conflict-related border closures and other border security measures have on female traders.

Significant numbers earn their livelihoods from cross-border trade, which is often informal. Women dominate this trade across Africa. They often become involved in conflict cross-border trade as a means of survival, as they find themselves responsible for supporting their families while livelihood options are constrained and disrupted by war.

Cross-border trade in conflict is difficult and dangerous work, particularly for women. Female traders are subject to threats and violence from a variety of men they encounter. Documented harms experienced by women trading across conflict borders include assault, sexual violence, verbal abuse, and detention, as well as harms related to their trading work, such as having their goods confiscated, bribery, corruption, and theft. Women are at risk of violence not only at border crossings, but also at other places along their journeys, including on roads, on transport, and at roadblocks.

Bribery by officials is a significant issue affecting female traders. Border officials commonly demand bribes – including non-monetary bribes like sex – in exchange for passage or for the return of confiscated goods. In conflict areas where borders are not tightly monitored by the central state but rather guarded by armed men, various actors demand arbitrary taxes, fees and services from women.

The design of border infrastructure contributes to women's vulnerability. In many conflict-affected states border crossings are overcrowded, poorly lit, and unsanitary. Many borders do not have appropriate toilet and sanitary facilities for women. Where women are forced to spend nights

at borders there are often only unsafe, badly lit accommodation options available, like dormitories or places where women must sleep in the open.

Women involved in this trade are often stigmatised for violating societal gender norms, as they must travel away from their husbands and must associate with male border officials and other men to get goods across borders. While female traders might need to spend long periods away from their homes, they often remain responsible for childcare and housework. Women generating income through cross-border trade challenge power relations within households, which can create tensions, in some cases leading to intimate partner violence.

A challenge for both female and male traders is the cost of conducting trade. The cumulative costs of the many fees, duties and taxes at borders can become prohibitive. Women are particularly vulnerable to bribery and exploitation by border officials, a vulnerability which is exacerbated by women's lack of education and access to trade information. Female traders also lack access to capital to start or expand their trade initiatives, a problem amplified in conflict contexts.

Sometimes armed or criminal actors deploy women across borders to trade. Women carry goods across borders so that armed groups can acquire the supplies they need, or so that food and goods will be available to the populations of territories controlled by these groups. Women sometimes carry goods as part of armed groups' money laundering, smuggling, or illicit trade endeavours. In trading goods across borders in this way, women contribute to armed groups' subsistence and profit and to the war economies in general.

Smuggling can also be a significant contributor to local economies and an important source of goods for communities. Much of women's smuggling appears to be small-scale, informal trade involving elements of bribery. Female traders with kin across borders sometimes tap into a greater network to help them smuggle their goods.

In times of conflict, states often restrict movement at borders or temporarily shut borders as security measures. These responses have unintended effects for female traders that are poorly understood by decision-makers. Decisions about border security measures should carefully consider their human and economic consequences. This can be a tricky balance to strike, and one that would be served by having a better understanding of these dynamics.

Women who engage in cross-border trade in conflict play crucial social and economic roles in their families and communities, yet they face significant barriers. It is therefore important to address the significant research and knowledge gaps identified in this review. Doing so will help facilitate the necessary support for the women who provide this vital service in times of war.

1. Introduction

Women cross borders to trade in times of war. As in times of peace – where in Africa, for example, an estimated 70 per cent of informal cross-border traders are female¹ – during armed conflicts, women play significant roles in this trade. Women trade across national borders and, within countries, across borders that separate territories held by different armed factions. Women can often cross wartime borders more easily than men, as they are less likely to be suspected of insurgent involvement. In crossing borders to trade, women play a vital role in war-affected communities, by helping to ensure the availability of essential goods and supplies.

This paper looks at women and cross-border trade in conflict in Africa. It presents an evidence synthesis, drawing together the limited existing literature on this topic, examining the key themes that arise, and ascertaining what we know, where the research gaps are, and where there is a need for further research. While summarising what is known about this topic, this paper highlights its under-researched nature. Further research is required to better understand women's roles, experiences, challenges, and vulnerabilities; to find out how this trade plays out across differing conflict contexts; and to understand how armed conflict affects and hampers women's trade. In particular, there is a need for research that addresses these questions head-on, as at present, information is largely inferred from indirect research and case studies, raising questions about the generalisability of these findings, and making it difficult to answer important questions on how war and gender operate together to affect women's cross-border trade.

Increased knowledge on this topic would assist a range of actors in addressing the needs of women who engage in cross-border trade in conflict. The current gaps in our understanding of this topic contribute to insufficient support for female traders. Better understanding could lead to

better targeted interventions — ones that are both cognisant of the critical roles that female traders play, and that are aimed at making women safer along conflict-affected borders, at increasing the flow of trade to conflict-affected populations, and at designing and implementing policies to improve women's security at borders.

Women carry goods over borders as a means of economic survival, with this work offering them a way to generate livelihoods within constrained wartime economies where there are few livelihood prospects available. Many female traders find themselves solely responsible for their families, as male family members and providers are killed or recruited into conflict, or as their husbands' livelihoods become untenable due to war.

Sometimes women are deployed across borders to trade by armed or criminal actors who take advantage of women's greater ease in crossing. Women carry goods across borders so that armed groups may obtain the supplies they require, or so that food and goods may be available to the populations of the territories they control. Women sometimes carry goods for armed groups as part of their money laundering efforts — buying goods on one side of a border and selling them on the other in order to move funds across — or as part of smuggling or illicit trade endeavours. Sometimes women do this willingly for armed groups they support, but sometimes they are coerced or forcibly recruited into these roles. In trading goods across borders in this way, women contribute to armed groups' subsistence and profit, and thus to the war economies that the groups play a part in.

Cross-border trade in conflict is difficult work, taking women away from their homes, often for lengthy periods, with women having to travel through insecure environments where they are exposed to a range of risks, both on the road and at militarised, male-dominated

1 UN Women, *Unleashing the Potential of Women Informal Cross Border Traders to Transform Inter-African Trade* (2010), <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Media/Publications/en/factsheetafricanwomentradersen.pdf>

border crossings. Women must often travel long distances, frequently on foot and in hot, dusty conditions, while carrying back-breaking loads. At border crossings, they are subjected to a range of abuses, from bribery and corruption to sexual exploitation and violence — abuses they are forced to endure because their livelihoods depend on cross-border travel.

This paper begins by identifying the research gaps on this topic, pointing out areas in which further research would increase knowledge, and explaining the potential value of having a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. This is followed by a discussion of the wartime border space and the roles that borders play in war economies. The paper then looks at cross-border trade in conflict and at women's roles in this trade, describing women's experiences and the challenges they face in carrying it out. The paper also considers women and smuggling — a facet of cross-border trade that often blurs somewhat with licit, yet informal, cross-border trade. The paper considers the deployment of female traders across borders by armed groups. Finally, it looks at the effects that border closures and restrictions, often taken as security measures, have on female traders.

2. Research gaps

The existing body of research on women's cross-border trade in conflict reveals, to a limited extent, how this trade plays out, how it is experienced, and what challenges women face. Many of the challenges described in this report also apply to non-conflict borders.

In this evidence synthesis, the ways in which armed conflict in Africa affects women's cross-border trade have been inferred from available case studies. In general, however, little research has focused directly on this subject.

Most research on this topic focuses on African contexts — with this area of scholarship dominated in particular by research on the Great Lakes

“ Sometimes women are deployed across borders to trade by armed or criminal actors who take advantage of women's greater ease in crossing

region of Central Africa. Far less information exists on women and cross-border trade in conflict settings in other parts of the world. Consequently, little is known about this trade in other regions, or in contexts that differ from the types of civil wars commonly found in Africa. Case studies from other parts of the world, and from other types of conflicts, would strengthen the body of literature on this topic, demonstrating how women's conflict cross-border trade plays out in different contexts — in order to make the findings more generalisable, and to learn whether women face these same challenges and problems in different parts of the world.

There is little research available about armed groups deploying women across borders to trade for them. There is a clear need for more research on the cross-border roles that women play for armed groups, and on how women's involvement contributes to war economies and armed groups' profiting endeavours. Section 8 of this review provides examples of armed groups utilising women in cross-border trade in various Africa contexts. Yet, documented evidence and details about these (and other) cases are scarce. Given how crucial cross-border trade can be to armed groups and to the subsistence of communities under the control of armed groups, the important roles played by women in such trade need to be better understood.

There is no available research on how crime groups — also essential actors in war economies — utilise women in cross-border trade and in other cross-border roles in times of conflict. There is also a need for further research on women who smuggle goods in conflict, including in-depth research on women's smuggling in a variety of conflict contexts. Another gap in the research is on the experiences of female traders who cross borders run by non-state armed groups

and militias. Most available information on women's cross-border trade in conflict focuses on government-run borders.

A further apparent gap is research that provides a greater understanding of the effects that conflict-related cross-border closures and other border security measures have on female traders, and thereby on broader communities. The literature on border closures lacks a gendered lens as well as a focus on traders and their experiences.

Why is this important?

Filling in these research gaps would facilitate action to assist women's cross-border trade in conflict. When women trade across conflict borders, they perform a crucial service to conflict-affected communities, by providing them with much-needed goods and produce, generating income for families, and contributing to local economies. The many barriers and abuses described in this review hinder women in these roles and impede their ability to provide this service to conflict-affected populations. Furthermore, the abuse women are subjected to by government officials, as described in the sections below, can undermine the legitimacy of the state and, consequently, can further weaken security.

Steps could be taken by policy, humanitarian, and development actors to support this trade, and to remove the barriers women face in carrying it out – steps that would be facilitated by an increased understanding about women in cross-border trade in conflict. Developing this body of research could assist a range of actors, including

“When women trade across conflict borders, they perform a crucial service to conflict-affected communities

policymakers, practitioners, state officials, border management, and security personnel. Understanding how armed and criminal groups deploy women into these roles, and how this forms part of the war economy would be valuable in developing strategies to counter these groups, and to address war economies. In synthesising the available research, this report identifies where future research should focus, with the goal of informing better support for women who engage in cross-border trade in conflict settings in Africa and around the world.

3. Methodology

A primary reason for the lack of research on women's cross-border trade in conflict is, undoubtedly, that it takes place at insecure border crossings in conflict-affected countries where research is both challenging and dangerous. At the best of times, researching corruption and exploitation by officials, including border officials, can be fraught,² with this made worse by conditions in armed conflict.

The women involved in cross-border trade can be reluctant to speak out about abuses perpetrated against them at borders for fear of repercussions. Because these women rely on border staff and on being able to continue crossing borders for their livelihoods and survival, they are unlikely to risk angering authorities by speaking out. Cross-border trade is difficult to research for other reasons, too, like the fact that this work is often conducted informally, and is consequently not captured in formal records and statistics.³ As with other subject areas in the social sciences, research on trade has been both dominated by male researchers and inadequately attentive, if at all, to women's experiences, which has had an accumulative impact on what information is gathered and available.⁴

2 J. Jacobson and S. Joekes, “Violence Against Women Traders at Border Crossings,” *Work and Opportunities for Women (WOW) Helpdesk*, Query 31, UK Aid/WOW (November 2019), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e7cdc63d3bf7f134447df6f/Query-31-VAW-Traders.pdf>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

The existing research directly addressing this topic is limited, consisting mostly of case studies that examine how women's cross-border trade plays out at a few conflict-affected borders, primarily in Africa. There is no work that ties this research together theoretically and that assesses what we know and do not know about women and cross-border trade in conflict. There is a more extensive body of work on women's cross-border trade, more generally, which has been brought into this review, yet it does not tell us about how this trade is conducted in, contributes to, and is altered by armed conflict. No existing work locates findings about female trade in conflict within discussions on the complex war economies within which this trade occurs.

There is an increasing body of work on the gendered experiences of armed conflict⁵ and about the human dimensions of conflict-affected borderlands⁶ – yet there remains a gap at the intersection of these areas of literature. Work on gender and conflict (or on women in war, specifically) seeks to document how women experience armed conflict differently than men, exploring women's differing roles, experiences and vulnerabilities in times of conflict – recognising that understanding these unique experiences is an important step towards being able to address them.⁷

This paper contributes to this literature by considering a particular group of women, a group that to date has been largely overlooked in the women in war literature. As part of this enquiry, this work considers how differing identities and vulnerabilities intersect with gender, to shape the experiences of female traders. The literature on the human dimensions of conflict-affected borderlands, touched on in section 6, lacks a gender perspective and only minimally addresses the roles, experiences, and challenges of women in these spaces.

“ This work considers how differing identities and vulnerabilities intersect with gender to shape the experiences of female traders

This synthesis of the existing research is based on a desk review of existing material, including academic articles, organisational reports and media reports. Materials directly pertaining to this topic were reviewed, as well as materials in which this subject was not the primary focus, yet which nonetheless provide some relevant insights.⁸ No original fieldwork was conducted for this research synthesis. This review was conducted to assess the state of the literature on this subject in an effort to establish whether further research is required and how it might be valuable.

This review draws on examples from the African continent. A good deal of the literature is drawn from one country in particular – the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – and examples from this context feature prominently throughout. Focussing on border contexts in Africa was not a methodological choice, but rather an indication of the geographic focus of the available research. This imbalance makes sense when one considers the higher proportion of conflicts in this region, as compared to other parts of the world.

The borders this report focuses on are those in poor, fragile and conflict-affected states, rather than the borders of resource-rich countries of the West, where trade often plays out differently. Much of the cross-border trade described in this piece is informal – trade that operates outside of official channels. Some of the trade is formal, and some of it straddles a space between these points. The women's trade described in the

5 C. Lindsey, *Women Facing War: ICRC Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women* (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2001), https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0798_women_facing_war.pdf; A. L. Strachan and H. Haider, *Gender and Conflict: Topic Guide*, Applied Knowledge Services, GSDRC (University of Birmingham, 2015), <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/gender-and-conflict/>.

6 See research from the XCEPT programme, in which these are assessed across various conflict-affected borders and thematic areas.

7 *Women Facing War*.

8 Open-source material was relied on. Online searches were conducted using Google and Google Scholar, searching for terms including “women and cross-border trade,” “women and cross-border trade in conflict,” “cross border trade in conflict,” “women and smuggling in conflict,” “borderlands in conflict,” and several others. Other open-source sites such as Acedemia.edu and ResearchGate were also used.

following sections is generally small-scale, with traders being largely poor women operating in resource-poor settings – as conflict-affected borderlands often are.

4. Borders, conflicts, and war economies

Border regions connect the economies of countries and regions. They separate countries experiencing war from those outside of conflict, although borders can be porous and the effects of conflict can trickle over. In fragile states, border areas are often neglected places, suffering from poor governance. There is frequently a lack of collaboration by the states connected by these borders, particularly as borders are often historic sites of conflict.⁹ Borders are sites of trade and movement, of displacement and migration and of crime — no-man’s lands where insurgents and criminals can operate freely. Borders are complex sites — a type of space where “the nexus of security, development, crime, conflict and politics is often at its most dynamic.”¹⁰

A key feature of many borders is the incongruity in how governments see them and how local populations experience them. For governments, borders are demarcation lines for national trade and security interests, while for locals, borders can be hypothetical and arbitrary — the results of political processes they had nothing to do with. Border populations routinely cross borders to buy goods and access services. Pastoralists

cross back and forth to graze their flocks. People cross borders to see family and kin, who are often separated by borders that cut through ethnic groups.¹¹ Sometimes there are not even physical markers, or a government presence marking borders, with local populations leading their lives across them.

Some governments see borders as places of threat — where control over people is weak, where insurgents and criminals pass freely, and where illegal trade flourishes. Governments might therefore see borders as things to harden and fortify.¹² Securing borders can be an important facet of states’ conflict responses, and a necessary task towards ensuring state legitimacy. Fortifying borders can also allow governments to control trade and to extract duties and taxes.¹³

Securing borders, however, can be challenging during conflict. One reason is that border areas tend to be characterised by governance gaps, with scant means for the enforcement of regulations and systems.¹⁴ Government officials stationed at border outposts are often relatively unsupervised by the centre, particularly at smaller, more remote border crossings. In conflict zones, there tend to be a myriad of actors present at borders, including military, police, customs officers, and militias, with borders becoming little ecosystems of their own. Rather than helping to regularise borders and bring them under state control, border officials often operate as part of the shadow economy — extracting bribes and favours as they control the flows of goods and people.¹⁵

Borders play a key part in war economies — the economies sustained and fuelled by conflict, which in turn help to fund and sustain further

9 Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program, “Sustainable Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: Shadow Economies and Cross-border Trade,” Discussion Note (2012), <https://au.int/en/documents/20120820/sustainable-reintegration-ex-combatants-shadow-economies-and-cross-border-trade>.

10 ACCORD, “Security and Conflict Management in the African Borderlands,” *Conflict Trends* (January 2017), <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/security-conflict-management-african-borderlands>.

11 G. Tchouasi, “Conflicts and Women in Informal Cross-Border Trade Between Cameroon and Nigeria,” in *A Comparative Study of Nigeria: Lessons From the Global South*, eds. C. Enwere, O. Aytac, and M. Khalil-Babatunde (Abuja: Nile University of Nigeria, 2017).

12 “Security and Conflict Management”.

13 X-Border Local Research Network, *Trade and Livelihoods in the Afghanistan–Pakistan Borderlands* (The Asia Foundation, 2019), <https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Trade-and-Livelihoods-in-the-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Borderlands.pdf>, p. 1.

14 “Sustainable Reintegration”, p. 2.

15 Ibid.

fighting. War economies have crucial regional and global dimensions that are linked by borders. As a Transitional Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme discussion note describes, “Beneath this global lens are complex regional, national, and sub-national war economies... These regional, national and sub-national economies are not layered one on top of the other but rather overlap and are criss-crossed by networks, borderlands, border crossings and neuralgia spots.”¹⁶ War economies are supported by cross-border trade networks, traffickers, smugglers, and licit businesses operating across borders.¹⁷ Borders can be important sites of profit for armed actors in war economies; taxation on the passage of goods can be a critical income source for armed actors.

Borders can also be sources of ‘arbitrage’, where actors profit from leveraging prices and availability of goods on either side of a border. As a result, border areas that fall along trade routes can be key prizes for armed groups and are often sites of competition and violence between war economy actors.¹⁸ Traders who wish to benefit from the different pricing and availability of goods on different sides must often negotiate with and pay armed actors for passage and market access, thereby themselves contributing to war

“ For many, cross-border trade is a direct source of income, while it also indirectly creates jobs and livelihoods, such as jobs in the transportation sector, in markets, in wholesaling, and as cargo handlers

economies. Even traders who are not seeking to exploit war economies can feed into them, as simply sending goods across borders in countries with war economy activity can drive profit into the hands of armed actors.

5. Cross-border trade in conflict

Across Africa, significant numbers of people earn incomes from cross-border trade, formal and informal.¹⁹ For many, cross-border trade is a direct source of income, while it also indirectly creates jobs in the transportation sector, in markets, in wholesaling, and cargo handling.²⁰

As in much of the globalised economy, those in different socio-economic groups benefit from this trade in differing ways. The poor tend to carry out small-scale trade or smuggling, or work for rich traders who take most of the profit. Wealthier traders often create larger enterprises in which they exploit the labour of poorer people to run their operations.²¹

Cross-border trade is often informal, in that traders are not registered and do not pay income tax.²² Yet formal and informal trade are not entirely distinct categories — even informal traders participate in some formal procedures, such as paying certain fees or utilising formal visas and travel documents, and thereby contribute in some ways towards formal economies.²³ In Southern Africa, cross-border trade ventures commonly involve low levels of capital and small numbers of

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ T. Eaton et al., *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa* (Chatham House, June 2019), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/conflict-economies-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

¹⁹ J-G. Afrika and G. Ajumbo, "Informal Cross Border Trade in Africa: Implications and Policy Recommendations," *Africa Economic Brief* 3, no. 10 (African Development Bank Group, November 2012), <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/economic-brief-informal-cross-border-trade-in-africa-implications-and-policy-recommendations-30008>.

²⁰ “Conflicts and Women”.

²¹ *Trade and Livelihoods*.

²² K. Titeca and C. Kimanuka, *Walking in the Dark: Informal Cross-border Trade in the Great Lakes Region* (International Alert, 2012), <https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2021/09/Great-Lakes-Cross-Border-Trade-EN-2012.pdf>.

²³ “Violence Against Women Traders”.

employees, and are often operated by the owners themselves.²⁴

Such small businesses are highly vulnerable to external influences, market forces, and shocks, and easily collapse.²⁵ This trade is often carried out by people of the same ethnicity, as in the Great Lakes region where people often conduct business with family or kin living on opposite sides of borders. Cross-border trade sometimes creates ties between populations where there might otherwise be mistrust, due to conflicts that have plagued some borders for years.²⁶

Cross-border trade can be economically significant, contributing substantially to local economies. For example, informal cross-border trade is said to make up between 30% and 40% of all trade within the Southern African Development Community region.²⁷ In the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, informal cross-border trade provides livelihoods to over 45,000 traders.²⁸

Most informal cross-border trade centres on staple foods like rice, maize, and vegetables, as well as low-quality consumer goods such as electronics, clothes, and shoes.²⁹ This trade allows regions that do not produce enough of certain goods to obtain the things they need. Armed conflicts lead to significant disruptions in production, including agricultural production, which heightens the need for goods to be imported from across borders.³⁰

While significantly affected by war, cross-border trade continues in times of armed conflict.

Despite the risks and surrounding violence, goods continue to move through territories affected by war, as populations continue to require food and goods, and traders require livelihoods. If anything, conflicts can drive up prices and create new markets, increasing the incentives for those involved in this trade.

6. Women and cross-border trade in conflict

Women generally dominate small-scale cross-border trade. Around the world, in both peace and wartime, large numbers of women take part in this trade.³¹ This number varies significantly by region. In Southern Africa, women make up about 70% of informal cross-border traders, and around 60% in West Africa.³²

These numbers appear to hold up in countries affected by conflict. A study in Africa's Great Lakes region found that 74% of traders along four conflict-riddled borders were women.³³ The same was found to be the case along the Sierra Leone-Liberia border during their civil wars.³⁴ Women often have greater success than men in wartime trade; as men struggle to cross borders during conflicts, as they are more likely to be suspected of insurgent involvement.³⁵

24 R. Lesser Blumberg, J. Malaba, and L. Meyers, *Women Cross-Border Traders in Southern Africa: Contributions, Constraints, and Opportunities in Malawi and Botswana* (AECOM International Development/Banyan Global/ USAID, 2016), https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICBT-Gender-Assessment-Report_Final_4-30-2016_DEC.pdf.

25 "Conflicts and Women".

26 *Walking in the Dark*.

27 "Violence against Women Traders".

28 *Walking in the Dark*.

29 "Violence against Women Traders".

30 *Walking in the Dark*.

31 T. Ndiaye, *Women Informal Traders Transcending African Borders: Myths, Facts and Ways Forward, Aid for Trade Case Story*, (International Trade Centre, 2010), <https://www.oecd.org/aidfortrade/47715006.pdf>.

32 "Violence against Women Traders."

33 *Walking in the Dark*.

34 UN Women, *Informal Cross Border Trade Report – Liberia*, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Media/infocus/en/ICBTreportLiberia.pdf>.

35 P. Brenton et al., "Risky Business: Poor Women Cross-Border Traders in the Great Lakes Region of Africa," *Africa Trade Policy Notes 11* (World Bank Group, January 2011), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/742571468007855952/pdf/601120BRI0Afri11public10BOX358310B0.pdf>.

“ Women often get involved in conflict cross-border trade as a means of survival, as they find themselves responsible for supporting their families and livelihood

In terms of the items traded, women tend to trade in lower-value products, while men often trade in higher-value goods. Men are more likely to be involved in operations surrounding cross-border trade, such as transport and money exchange.³⁶ Titeca and Kimanuka describe the differences in the products men and women sell in the Great Lakes region: women tend to sell food produce like flour, corn, tomatoes, onions, and fish, while men are more likely to sell higher-value non-food products. When female traders can access enough capital, they also trade in manufactured goods — although women seldom have this access. Titeca and Kimanuka explain that this delineation of goods shapes the movement of men and women at border crossings — a higher percentage of female traders are found at borders where there is intensive trade in foods, while at crossings with lesser food movement, there tend to be more male traders.³⁷

Women often get involved in conflict cross-border trade as a means of survival, as they find themselves responsible for supporting their families, when livelihood options are constrained and disrupted by war. Titeca and Kimanuka found that in the Great Lakes region, female traders were more likely than male traders to be divorced, separated, or widowed. There, as in other conflict-affected areas, many women

have lost their husbands due to war, as a result of death, recruitment, or displacement. Because women lack support and other economic options, including access to land, they turn to cross-border trade.³⁸ Hossein et al., writing on trade in eastern DRC, note that, “Wars and instability has contributed to the rural exodus, and to the increase of female-headed households and many traders shared stories that they migrated to the borderlands because of the increased security at these points.”³⁹

In conducting cross-border trade in conflict, women play essential roles in their families and communities. Households are reliant on this trade — and on women’s participation in it — in order to survive. The fact that this trade generates livelihoods is significant — as Titeca and Kimanuka, describing small-scale cross-border trade in the Great Lakes note, it is a lack of livelihoods that contributes to much of the conflict in this region.⁴⁰

This trade is also important in facilitating the availability of essential goods for conflict-affected communities and in helping to increase the food supply and food security where there are shortages.⁴¹ Women also carry goods over borders as a means of cultural survival — Nyibol describes women carrying seeds over the border when displaced from South Sudan, so that sorghum varieties from South Sudan would be available for special celebrations and rituals by the displaced community.⁴²

A difficult, dangerous trade

Cross-border trade in conflict is difficult work. Research demonstrates that women travel long distances, often on foot, in hot, dusty conditions.

36 “Violence against Women Traders”.

37 *Walking in the Dark*.

38 Ibid.

39 “Risky Business,” p. 15.

40 *Walking in the Dark*.

41 “Conflicts and Women”.

42 E. Nyibol, *Migrating with Seeds: Women, Agricultural Knowledge and Displacement in South Sudan*, XCEPT / Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper (April 2020), <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/migrating-with-seeds-women-agricultural-knowledge-and-displacement-in-south-sudan/>.

They carry heavy loads, sometimes weighing up to 100kg.⁴³

This trade is also dangerous, and made all the more so by armed conflict, which compounds the many risks that female traders face in non-conflict settings. Describing cross-border trade along the conflict-affected border of eastern DRC, one report notes that, “wars, rape and banditry in the eastern Congo borderlands make it dangerous, especially for women, to travel and to cross borders.”⁴⁴

Dangers at the border

Female traders face threats from all directions. The available literature describes the range of men who perpetrate violence against female traders — including state officials, border staff, police, military, transport workers, smugglers, insurgents, intermediaries who facilitate border crossings, male traders, and others crossing borders, including refugees.⁴⁵ Women working in cross-border trade are subjected to a myriad of harms, including assault, sexual violence, verbal abuse, and detention, as well as harms relating to their trade, like having their goods confiscated, bribery, corruption, and theft. Men are also sometimes victims of such violence; however, certain risks are explicitly aimed at women, or are things that women are more vulnerable to.

Many of the risks female traders face come from men working at borders. Borders are male-dominated spaces, making them particularly dangerous for women. Customs officers, as well as other border staff, are far more likely to be male. According to the World Customs Organization, only 23 per cent of customs personnel in Central and Western Africa are female.⁴⁶ At the border between the DRC and

Rwanda, women report searches by male border officers degenerating into groping and all-out assault. On the eastern DRC border, rape by border officials is said to be a significant problem. Women also describe having to “let themselves be raped” after having their goods confiscated, in order to get them back.⁴⁷ Women report beatings, insults, strip-searches, and threats at borders in Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, and Uganda.⁴⁸

Beyond border personnel, other actors stationed at borders also pose a risk to women, including military, police, and members of militias. At the Kasindi-Mpondwe crossing between Uganda and the DRC, female traders report being forced to engage in sexual relations with police and military in order to deal with the challenges they face at crossings.⁴⁹ Women reportedly accept this harassment, saying nothing, for fear of being refused permission to cross, of having their goods confiscated, or that further delays at the borders will cause their perishable goods to spoil.⁵⁰

The design of border infrastructure adds to women’s vulnerability. Border crossings at conflict borders are often overcrowded, poorly lit, and dirty. Many borders do not have appropriate toilet and sanitary facilities for

“ Borders are male-dominated spaces, making them particularly dangerous for women... According to the World Customs Organization, only 23% of customs personnel in Central and Western Africa are female

43 *Walking in the Dark*.

44 “Risky Business”.

45 “Violence against Women Traders”.

46 A. Larouche-Maltais, “Central African Borders: A Danger Zone for Women Traders,” *UNCTAD Transport and Trade Facilitation Newsletter* 93 (March 2022), <https://unctad.org/news/central-african-borders-danger-zone-women-traders>.

47 Ibid.

48 “Violence against Women Traders”.

49 “Risky Business”.

50 “Central African Borders”.

women⁵¹, or have features that put women at risk, such as toilet doors that do not lock, lock from the outside, or have dark and concealed entrances. Where women are forced to spend nights at borders, there are often only unsafe, badly lit accommodation options available, like dormitories or sites where women must sleep out in the open.⁵² As well as making this trade more dangerous, these conditions make women feel more vulnerable, exposed, and humiliated.

The risks to women are often greater at unregulated border crossings. Due to the problems women face at formal crossings, some female traders try to avoid them, with stricter border crossings sometimes pushing women towards unpatrolled borders.⁵³ Yet women face risks at informal crossings too — including by smugglers and facilitators (those who profit by helping people and goods cross borders), as well as by border officials, when women are caught crossing illegally. In East Africa there have been reports of women caught in this way having to provide sexual acts in order to be released or to get their goods back.⁵⁴ Female traders in the Kongo Central region use unregulated border crossings to head into Angola, where they are subject to violence, theft, and rape.⁵⁵

“ In Liberia, women report border officials demanding sex as the price for not arresting them or confiscating their goods. The same thing is reported at certain East African borders

Female traders are also vulnerable to criminals. Theft is a serious concern both en route to borders and at border crossings, particularly when women are traveling with goods. Women are also vulnerable to scamming and deception. For example, some remote borders with little movement have no customs authorities stationed there on a permanent basis. At the Gasenyi-Mburi border between Burundi and Tanzania, for example, con artists and criminals pose as government employees and illegally collect fees from female traders.⁵⁶

Studies point to high rates of sexual violence against female cross-border traders.⁵⁷ This takes differing forms; sometimes women are blackmailed by border officials demanding sexual favours.⁵⁸ In Liberia, women report border officials demanding sex as the price for not arresting them or confiscating their goods. The same thing is reported at certain East African borders.⁵⁹

While not specifically at border crossings, along the Goma-Gisenyi border area in the DRC, female traders who sell their goods door-to-door are routinely raped by men in the housing complexes they sell to.⁶⁰ Rapes often go unreported, with women reportedly accepting this as being part of the job.⁶¹

Dangers on the journey

As the last example illustrates, it is not only at border crossings that female traders are at risk. Women also experience violence on other parts of their journeys, including on roads, on transport, and at roadblocks.

51 Ibid.

52 “Violence against Women Traders”.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 “Central African Borders”.

56 Ibid.

57 “Violence against Women Traders”.

58 “Central African Borders”.

59 “Violence against Women Traders”.

60 “Risky Business”.

61 Ibid.

In northern DRC, female traders often have to travel for long periods to get goods across borders, sometimes spending weeks moving through dangerous territories where they encounter a myriad of threats⁶² from militaries, armed groups, bandits, and others — in a region dubbed the “rape capital of the world.”⁶³

Poor road infrastructure makes women’s journeys slower, more difficult and more dangerous, with challenges compounded by poor transport networks and high transport costs.⁶⁴ Women on the road at night find themselves at particular risk.⁶⁵

Organised armed groups are also a threat to traders. For example in central Africa, armed groups threaten traders’ safety near certain border crossings between Uganda and the DRC. In Ituri in the DRC, armed rebels frequently burn trucks of goods, injuring people on the roads, including women.⁶⁶

It can be an unhealthy lifestyle, with female traders facing a range of health risks derived from the conditions they work in — cheap, overcrowded accommodations and sanitary facilities and long periods of travel. Further health risks arise from poor nutrition, as women seek to save money while on the road.⁶⁷ HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are another risk, resulting from the sexual violence and exploitation so prevalent in conflict cross-border trade.⁶⁸

Culture and stigma

Despite how common it is for women to work in this trade, female traders are often stigmatised.

Patriarchal stereotypes impact how female traders are perceived. Titeca and Kimanuka note that,

... the fact that they leave the house early, return home late, are away from their husbands and must speak on friendly terms with the border authorities and others (to ensure their goods cross the border at the lowest possible cost) is considered to be morally “bad”; they are often considered as “free women”.⁶⁹

Border officials often have negative opinions about female traders, who they reportedly perceive as being ‘difficult’.⁷⁰ Such prejudices fuel the mistreatment of female traders.

While flouting traditional gender norms to some extent, female traders are still expected to conform to social and cultural norms. Within households in many African contexts, the gender division of labour assigns women domestic responsibilities, and female traders also attend to domestic duties, despite their trading work and incomes. Female traders often get home late, and once home, must begin their household duties. Some have to work their fields in the morning before setting off to trade, as documented in the Great Lakes region.⁷¹ Domestic responsibilities add a heavy load to the daily work of female traders, often leaving them extremely pressed for time.⁷²

The fact that women generate incomes through trade sometimes disrupts power relations within households. This can create tensions, with men struggling with their wives being breadwinners and thereby challenging their perceived places as providers and heads of households.⁷³ Research in conflict-affected regions of Africa reveals that some men respond with violence when

62 Ibid.

63 In 2010, UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallstrom, referred to the DRC as the “rape capital of the world.”

64 *Women Informal Traders*, p. 4.

65 “Violence against Women Traders”.

66 Ibid.

67 *Women Informal Traders*, p. 4.

68 Ibid.

69 *Walking in the Dark*, p. 35.

70 Ibid.

71 “Central African Borders”.

72 *Women Informal Traders*, p. 4.

73 *Walking in the Dark*.

confronted with challenges to household gender norms.⁷⁴ For example, female traders working along the Nigeria-Cameroon border report abuse from their partners who feel their jobs impinge on their domestic duties. This falls within a broader documented phenomenon of women's economic empowerment being linked to rising intimate partner violence.⁷⁵

Other gendered cultural barriers also stand in the way of women's trade. In the DRC, for example, 'marital authorisation' for married women was abolished in 2016, yet some customs officers still require a husband's written authorisation to allow female traders to operate.⁷⁶

Costs, taxes, bribery, and corruption

A challenge experienced in both war and peace, and by male and female traders alike, is the cost levelled against them in the course of conducting trade. While it is normal for traders to be charged certain amounts at borders — such as customs duties, import and export taxes, and other government revenues — the cumulative cost can become problematic and can hinder livelihoods.

Taxes at borders are often complicated, vague and unpredictable, leaving traders unclear about what they owe and creating space for corruption.⁷⁷ Informal taxes are a problem, including in countries like Congo and Burundi. These are taxes that go unrecorded or that are outside of a country's regulatory framework. Sometimes they are collected by border officials, yet not on the basis of any law or regulation, and sometimes

they are collected on the basis of law yet are not actually paid to the state, but rather pocketed by officials themselves.⁷⁸ On the Nigeria-Cameroon border, traders have to move through multiple control posts at borders — customs, police, environmental officers, water, and animal securities — each of which charge their own fees.⁷⁹ In conflict areas, where borders are not as tightly monitored by the central state, and where these are often manned by a range of armed actors, these problems are compounded by the number of different actors demanding arbitrary taxes and fees.

Bribery by border officials is a significant issue affecting female traders. A study of female traders along the eastern DRC border found that 85% of female traders in the research sample pay bribes. Border officials blatantly inform traders, "sans argent, on ne passe pas" (no money, no passing).⁸⁰ The more complex the systems are, the more opportunity this creates for officials to abuse this, and the more female traders suffer a disadvantage.⁸¹ Such disadvantages include inconsistent application of border rules for women and inconsistent calculation of fees. At the border crossing between Kinshasa and Brazzaville, for example, women sometimes have their personal luggage, such as their handbags, treated as goods, which are subject to duties and costs.⁸²

Furthering women's vulnerability to exploitative charges, both in conflict and peacetime, is the fact that women often do not have access to the trade information they require, including information about taxes, trade laws and procedures. Female traders in Africa are less likely to be educated than their male

74 *Walking in the Dark*. See also V. Akaezuwa et al., *Ethical Cross-Border Trading between Kenya and Uganda by Women-led Micro and Small Enterprises* (Earth Institute/ACE/Busara, Columbia School of International and Public Affairs, 2021), <https://ace.globalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ethical-Cross-Border-Trading-Final-Report.pdf>.

75 "Violence against Women Traders".

76 "Central African Borders."

77 *Walking in the Dark*.

78 Ibid.

79 "Conflicts and Women".

80 "Risky Business". See also K. Croke et al., "Up Before Dawn: Experimental Evidence from a Cross-Border Trader Training at the Democratic Republic of Congo-Rwanda Border," Policy Research Working Paper, World Bank Group (January 2020), <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/1813-9450-9123>.

81 "Violence against Women Traders", p. 17.

82 "Central African Borders".

counterparts,⁸³ and are consequently less able to source this information. As reported in West Africa, trade information is rarely published in the indigenous, local languages frequently spoken by female traders.⁸⁴ Border officials are consequently able to cheat and demand bribes from women by exploiting their lack of information on rates and fees.⁸⁵ As an example, in Burundi, women often confuse the types of duties they have to pay, leading to fines or having their goods confiscated.⁸⁶

Sometimes border officials recruit others to intimidate women and to extract funds from them. Hossein et al. explain that in the DRC,

Sub-contracted hires by the officials are posted around the border point but many move into the main market place to harass the women for payment. Congolese traders call these informal hires “les viseur” (watchers) who are paid by border officials to extract in-kind and cash payments from traders and use any means necessary to do so.⁸⁷

The authors of that study describe witnessing such men encircling a group of female traders, once they had crossed the border in Goma, to intimidate them into paying unofficial fees.

Another challenge for female traders in parts of Africa is access to micro-finance to start or expand their trade initiatives,⁸⁸ a problem amplified in conflict contexts. Studying cross-border trade in the Great Lakes, Titeca and Kimanuka found that female traders mostly use capital derived from household resources or loans from family members or friends. There, the availability of

loans from banks or associations is limited and few banks or financial institutions are available in isolated border regions. Existing financial institutions also often avoid funding cross-border trade, due to the perceived high level of risk involved. Titeca and Kimanuka found that the average start-up capital amongst traders that they interviewed was \$32.35, with women having lower levels of capital than men, since women have less access to household resources and networks. This is a reason why women tend to trade in food, which costs less to start with, yet also yields lower returns.⁸⁹

7. Women and smuggling

Smuggling is intrinsically related to cross-border trade. Like licit trading, smuggling can be a significant contributor to local economies, a key source of income for border populations, and an important source of goods for communities.⁹⁰ It is often hard to differentiate licit and illicit trade as so much trade takes place within an informal grey area, or a ‘semi-legal’ context.⁹¹ Licit trade can become smuggling when traders refuse to conform to the regulations that govern cross-border activities. This can happen as a result of the many charges and abuses traders suffer at borders, leading them to choose to cross borders using informal routes. In East and West Africa, regardless of legality, women who engage in

83 In Titeca and Kimanuka’s study, *Walking in the Dark*, the authors found that the level of education amongst female traders is low, with most having gone no further than primary school and some having no education at all. They found that the number of traders with low levels of education was much higher than those with no education, suggesting that a basic education is important in cross-border trade. Yet in their sample, women involved in cross-border trade were more likely than men to have no education at all. In a study in Liberia, only 43% of female traders could read and write, while 70% of male respondents could, showing that women are at a disadvantage in trade due to their lack of education. See *Unleashing the Potential*.

84 O. Yusuff, “Gender Dimensions of Informal Cross Border Trade in West-African Sub-Region (ECOWAS) Borders,” *Journal of Women’s Entrepreneurship and Education*, no. 1–2 (2014): 132–52.

85 “Violence against Women Traders”.

86 “Central African Borders”.

87 “Risky Business”.

88 “Conflicts and Women”. See also: Y. Yoshino, G. Ngungi, and E. Asebe, “Enhancing the Recent Growth of Cross-Border Trade between South Sudan and Uganda,” *Africa Trade Policy Notes 21* (World Bank Group, June 2014), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/877731468309332369/pdf/638090BRI0Sout00Box0361527B0PUBLIC0.pdf>.

89 *Walking in the Dark*.

90 *Trade and Livelihoods*.

91 T. Raeymaekers, “Scales of Grey: The Complex Geography of Transnational Cross-border Trade in the African Great Lakes Region,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling*, eds. M. Gallien and F. Weigand (Routledge, 2021).

informal cross-border trade are reportedly more likely than men to be perceived as smugglers.⁹²

The limited available examples on this topic demonstrate how female smuggling and informal cross-border trade sometimes present in similar ways, albeit with more prominent elements of bribery.

While not dealing with a conflict border, a piece by Ghanem about smuggling on the Algeria-Tunisia border provides some insights as to how female smuggling sometimes plays out. There, the goods women smuggle, the methods they use, and the routes they take reflect women's roles in society, as well as what men perceive to be acceptable female behaviour. Most women smuggling along this border handle items seen as 'women's items' – dishes and kitchen utensils, linen, materials, perfume, and make-up. Most only travel to the towns just over the border so that they do not have to spend a night away from home – important, as these women have domestic responsibilities to attend to.⁹³

These female smugglers pay 'settlements' or bribes to people along smuggling routes, including drivers, customs agents, and porters. Settlements with customs officials are negotiated by phone, before the journey – with male drivers often handling the negotiation and the handover of cash on the women's behalf.⁹⁴ Ghanem writes, "Thus, even while conducting an illegal activity, women smugglers remain constrained by the cultural expectation that they maintain an unimpeachable reputation. In theory, they must avoid interaction with men to whom they are unrelated. This is why it falls on the driver to deal with border officials."⁹⁵

“ Even while conducting an illegal activity, women smugglers remain constrained by the cultural expectation that they maintain an unimpeachable reputation

Gender stereotypes sometimes give these women advantages in dealing with border officials, as women can play on men's respect for their mothers, wives, and daughters, thereby garnering some sympathy from border officials, making them less likely to be arrested. These female smugglers wear Islamic clothes and headscarves, demonstrating that they are good, religious women – and customs agents in Tunisia and Algeria, many of whom are religious themselves, reportedly prefer to not search them and their belongings too much.⁹⁶

During the war in Sierra Leone, market women smuggled goods across the Guinea-Sierra Leone border by bribing border police and customs officials.⁹⁷ In East Africa, women engage in small-scale smuggling of processed goods like soft drinks across the DRC and Uganda border.⁹⁸ Research about women crossing the DRC-Rwanda border reveals the sometimes creative strategies employed to smuggle products through formal crossings; including hiding goods inside children's clothing and schoolbags.⁹⁹

While these examples demonstrate that women play a role in conflict smuggling, more research is required on this topic and on how female smuggling plays out across different contexts.

92 "Gender Dimensions," p. 27; "Enhancing the Recent Growth", p. 8.

93 D. Ghanem, *The Smuggler Wore a Veil: Women in Algeria's Illicit Border Trade* (XCEPT/Carnegie Middle East Centre, 2020), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/09/14/smuggler-wore-veil-women-in-algeria-s-illicit-border-trade-pub-82691>.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 A. Mama and M. Okazawa-Rey, "Militarism, Conflict, and Women's Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African Contexts," *Feminist Review* 101, no. 1 (2012): 97–123, p. 109.

98 M. Turshen, *Gender and the Political Economy of Conflict in Africa: The Persistence of Violence* (Routledge, 2016), p. 21.

99 T. Raeymaekers and B. Korf, eds., *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict, and Borderlands* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

8. Women, armed groups, and cross-border trade

Armed groups sometimes send women over borders to trade on their behalf. The deployment of female traders can provide a source of goods that are needed by armed groups. It can also ensure the availability of goods for populations in areas under the control of armed groups. Sometimes women are deployed over borders as part of armed groups' illicit trade – with women trading for groups as part of their money laundering and smuggling schemes. Women's trading roles can be essential to the subsistence, the profit-making, and the economic survival of certain armed groups, and can thereby contribute to war economies.

The Somali militant group al-Shabaab, for example, routinely sends women across borders to trade on its behalf – most commonly over the internal borders between al-Shabaab and government-controlled territory in Somalia, but also over national borders with Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somaliland. Women can cross borders more easily than men, as they are generally not suspected of militant involvement and, consequently, are less likely to be searched at checkpoints. Al-Shabaab women travel to government-held territories to buy goods – including food and fuel – which they bring back and sell in al-Shabaab territory. They bring back goods that the group requires, as well goods needed by the general population in al-Shabaab territory. The latter is an important service for the group, as without this, al-Shabaab's territory would not be a viable place in which people could survive.¹⁰⁰

Wives of al-Shabaab militants often carry out these roles. They are trusted by the group, so

they are given more freedom to move than other women in the population, including permission to move in and out of al-Shabaab territory. Other women in al-Shabaab territory are prohibited from working and from moving around without a male escort, behaviour considered by the group to be 'un-Islamic'. Wives trading on behalf of the group are also not stopped or taxed at al-Shabaab's roadblocks, as other civilians are.¹⁰¹

Women also facilitate al-Shabaab's money laundering efforts through trade. Moving money in and out of al-Shabaab territory is challenging for the group, particularly amid banking and financial restrictions imposed to limit the group's ability to transfer funds. Al-Shabaab circumvents these controls by relying on trade to move cash from one location to another. Women are often used by the group to transport, buy and sell goods as a means to move funds. The International Crisis Group (ICG) explains:

One common method is to convert commodities into cash via the daily business operations of local female entrepreneurs. Al-Shabaab asks women to ferry its goods between markets along with their regular wares. Once they reach the destination, the women either sell the goods themselves and return the proceeds to Al-Shabaab, or hand them over to the movement's business contacts.¹⁰²

The reasons for female traders participating in these schemes are varied. Some participate because al-Shabaab offers them a share of the profits, while others are coerced. ICG notes that women in female-headed households are particularly vulnerable to this type of coercion.¹⁰³

Another example of an armed group using women for trade is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a group that terrorised northern Uganda for two decades. The LRA is reported to have deployed some of its abducted girls and women as traders, to acquire goods and supplies for its operations. These women and girls operated in markets

100 O. Stern, *Al-Shabaab's Gendered Economy*, Rehabilitation Support Team (Adam Smith International, 2021), <https://orlystern.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Al-Shabaabs-Gendered-Economy.pdf>.

101 Ibid.

102 International Crisis Group, *Women and al-Shabaab's Insurgency*, Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 145 (June 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b145-women-and-al-shabaabs-insurgency>.

103 Ibid.

across the region, buying and selling goods, and often serving as intermediaries between the LRA and other traders.¹⁰⁴ In the late 1990s, the relationship between the LRA and the Sudanese government soured and the LRA could no longer rely on Khartoum for food and supplies. To deal with this, some girls abducted by the LRA were tasked with making charcoal and raising crops and selling them in Juba, or were sent into Kenya to trade and sell goods.¹⁰⁵

During the latter years of Angola's civil war, the government controlled most of the urban infrastructure, while rebels held much of the rural parts of the country. Shortages and needs were created on both sides as a result of this split, and trade across these lines became critical for survival. Yet this trade was also deemed treasonous. A 'dead zone' developed between the territories the two sides held — a depopulated strip of five to ten kilometres controlled by no one. Trade between the two sides took place across this dead zone, and was often carried out by women. Some women engaged in this trade as means of generating income. Others were threatened by the men running this trade that they and their children would be killed if they did not do it. These women often earned nothing more than basic income or goods, while the men running the trade made significant profits.¹⁰⁶

Militant groups sometimes rely on female traders for intelligence gathering. Al-Shabaab's intelligence agency, the Amniyat, deploys women to trade in government-held areas in order to gather information.¹⁰⁷ During the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, women who traded

across internal and/or national borders were at times accused by civilians and armed groups of spying for other armed groups.¹⁰⁸

Sometimes armed groups do business with female traders. In Sierra Leone's war, for example, some market women became involved in trade with rebels.¹⁰⁹ Women smuggled food and petrol from Freetown to rebel-held areas in Sierra Leone's provinces to sell to rebel commanders, transporting these goods on trucks or trailers. They were paid in either cash or goods like jewelry or diamonds. On returning to Freetown, they sold the gems to local diamond dealers or smuggled them to Guinea, where they could get higher prices for them, enabling them to buy more food. Trading with the rebels, however, was dangerous and some women died on the roads. Some were even ambushed on their way back to Freetown by the same rebels they had just done business with, who sought to take back the money or stones the women had received as payment.¹¹⁰

Northern Nigeria presents another example of women trading with armed groups. Women within Boko Haram-controlled territory are generally prohibited from working in markets.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, male members of Boko Haram reportedly have a preference for dealing with female traders to access goods from outside the territory. Women from outside Boko Haram-controlled territory bring goods, such as jewellery, sanitary items, cosmetics, and clothes to sell to the wives of Boko Haram members in their homes.¹¹² Cameroonian women living in the border city of Kolofata are also known to regularly supply male Boko Haram members, travelling to the Nigerian village on

104 S. McKay and D. Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War* (Rights & Democracy, 2004).

105 Ibid.

106 C. Nordstrom, "Women, Economy, War," *International Review of the Red Cross* 92, no. 877 (2010): 161–76, p. 170.

107 *Women and al-Shabaab's Insurgency*.

108 M. Utas, "Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone," *Anthropology Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005): 403–30; Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Witness to Truth – Volume Three B (Chapter 3: Women and the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone)," (n.d.), p. 190; I. Specht, *Red Shoes: Experiences of Girl-Combatants in Liberia* (International Labour Office, 2006).

109 "Militarism, Conflict, and Women's Activism," pp. 109–10.

110 C. Solomon, "The Role of Women in Economic Transformation: Market Women in Sierra Leone," *Conflict, Security and Development* 6, no. 3 (2006): 411–23.

111 M. Samuel, "Boko Haram's Deadly Business: An Economy of Violence in the Lake Chad Basin," *West Africa Report* 40 (Institute for Security Studies, September 2022), p. 20.

112 Ibid.

the other side of the border, with goods and medicine.¹¹³

While these cases offer examples of how women interact with armed groups in the context of cross-border trade, few studies give the subject more than a passing mention. Even less is known about women deployed by organised crime groups and other criminal actors across conflict-affected borders to trade.

9. Border closures, restrictions, and women's trade

In times of conflict, states often restrict movement at borders or shut down borders temporarily as a security measure to impede the flow of armed actors and insurgents. However, restricting border movements has consequences, affecting the livelihoods of many, including female traders. Balancing border security measures with the human and economic consequences is challenging, yet is especially important in times of war.¹¹⁴ How these measures impact female cross-border traders in war-affected borderlands can be gleaned only from partial or indirect evidence found in the literature. Further research is required to comprehensively examine this issue.

Cantens and Raballand explain that states have three broad types of reactions at borders in wartime. The first is a 'non-response', in which administrators and security personnel are no longer present at borders. Oftentimes, local militias or peacekeepers step in to fill the void

and provide border security. Where local militias manage borders, they tend to favour certain people — like those from their own religion or ethnicity — and to prejudice others. This can lead to changes in the composition of those trading at these borders, with certain groups needing to flee the area, who are then replaced by others. A second type of state response is the closure of borders, with a strong state presence positioned there to enforce it. This brings out changes to trade patterns and routes; traders might need to travel further, often across insecure territory. A third type of response is reducing borders by creating restricted access to border areas, only keeping a few border posts open, or creating militarised zones where movement is prohibited.

¹¹⁵

Each of these responses has unintended consequences for traders, including female traders. Persons implementing security measures often do not properly distinguish between the different types of movements at border crossings, whether they be for insurgency, licit or illicit trade, or migration. In fact, security personnel often assume that there is a connection between these different flows and treat everyone with some level of force or suspicion.¹¹⁶

The regional response to threats from Boko Haram in the Chad Lake Basin illustrates some of the consequences that closures and other security measures can have on female cross-border trade. Regional and international forces have significantly militarised border crossings throughout the Chad Lake Basin, and governments have, at times, closed borders completely.¹¹⁷ In northern Cameroon, where women are highly represented in small-scale trade, the closures, restrictions, and insecurity have made it impossible for some to continue

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 8.

¹¹⁴ *Trade and Livelihoods*.

¹¹⁵ T. Cantens and G. Raballand, "Cross-Border Trade, Insecurity and the Role of Customs: Some Lessons from Six Field Studies in (Post)Conflict Regions," ICTD Working Paper 67, International Centre for Tax and Development (August 2017), <https://www.ictd.ac/publication/ictd-working-paper-67-cross-border-trade-insecurity-and-the-role-of-customs-some-lessons-from-six-field-studies-in-post-conflict-regions>.

¹¹⁶ "Cross-Border Trade, Insecurity".

¹¹⁷ W. Assanvo, J. E. A. Abatan, and W. A. Sawadogo, "Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram," *West Africa Report 19* (Institute for Security Studies, September 2016), <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/assessing-the-multinational-joint-task-force-against-boko-haram>.

trading across borders with Nigeria and Chad.¹¹⁸ Some of these women also report destruction of their goods by authorities enforcing border security measures.¹¹⁹

More research is needed on how border control measures affect women. Studies about COVID-19 border closures and restrictions can offer insights, especially studies about borders that were simultaneously affected by conflict. Koshin writes about the effects of pandemic-related border closures on women in the context of Somalia. For a short period, as a safety measure during the pandemic, Somalia prohibited the sale of Khat and paused its import, with steps taken by the government to ensure that Khat could not be transported. As the primary Khat traders in Somalia, women were particularly affected by these import restrictions. Traders nonetheless found ways to move Khat by having it travel via alternative routes (such as overland rather than by air) when restrictions prohibited traditional routes.¹²⁰

Border closures and restrictions often have limited success, with goods and people finding alternative ways to move.¹²¹ Yet these alternatives have human costs that need to be considered by those imposing restrictions. As the research suggests, there are important policy trade-offs that can be made when imposing border controls so has to avoid harming livelihoods and that are cognisant of the costs that border restrictions have on people. A first step towards making these trade-offs, is investing in research to document the true gendered consequences of the measures.

10. Conclusion

Cross-border trade is difficult, dangerous work, often carried out by society's poorest women. The many challenges of conducting this work are compounded in times of armed conflict, with increased insecurity, militarisation, and restrictions adding to the dangers. Borders in conflict zones are often *forgotten areas, minimally supervised by central states*, leaving those operating in them *free to act as they will*. In these conditions, *female traders are subjected to a range of abuses*, including violence, rape, and exploitation.

Yet, as this evidence synthesis reveals, these women play crucial social and economic roles, working to provide for their families and to ensure the availability of goods to conflict-affected populations. The barriers faced by these women impede them in carrying out their trade, to the detriment of many. It is therefore important to gain a better understanding about women's cross-border trade in times of war, and about the challenges women face, so that steps can be taken to address them.

118 R. Hoinathy and T. Tayo, "Lake Chad Basin: Socio-economic Resilience in the Shadow of Boko Haram," *West Africa Report* 38 (Institute for Security Studies, March 2022), <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/lake-chad-basin-socio-economic-resilience-in-the-shadow-of-boko-haram>, p. 14.

119 Ibid. The security goal behind such actions is to keep Boko Haram from accessing supplies.

120 S. Koshin, *Khat and COVID-19: Somalia's Cross-Border Economy in the Time of Coronavirus*, XCEPT / Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper (May 2020), <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/khat-and-covid-19-somalias-cross-border-economy-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>.

121 *Trade and Livelihoods*. This report offers a valuable example from outside Africa of the effects of border restrictions on traders. Around 2016 on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Pakistani authorities began imposing stricter border controls, ostensibly in response to insurgent attacks. They required Afghans coming in to present valid passports. However, many of those living near the borders and who were reliant on cross-border trade did not possess passports. The borders were also often temporarily closed by Pakistani authorities in response to specific security incidents or to more general deteriorating security conditions. Traders trying to cross were frequently turned back, with borders sometimes closed for days at a time, causing problems for traders, such as losses of income and rotting produce. There were social consequences, too, like people missing funerals and weddings, or having deteriorating health conditions after missing medical appointments. Often, the people affected crossed the borders by alternative routes that had few or no border controls, including over hundreds of walking trails.

11. Bibliography

ACCORD. "Security and Conflict Management in the African Borderlands." *Conflict Trends*, January 2017. <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/security-conflict-management-african-borderlands>.

Afrika, J.-G., and G. Ajumbo. "Informal Cross Border Trade in Africa: Implications and Policy Recommendations." *Africa Economic Brief* 3, no. 10, African Development Bank Group, November 2012. <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/economic-brief-informal-cross-border-trade-in-africa-implications-and-policy-recommendations-30008>.

Akaezuwa, V., A. Chakraborty, B. Chang, S. Manian, A. Prabhakar, S. Sriram, and C. Zhu. *Ethical Cross-Border Trading between Kenya and Uganda by Women-led Micro and Small Enterprises*. Earth Institute/ACE/Busara, Columbia School of International and Public Affairs, 2021. <https://ace.globalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ethical-Cross-Border-Trading-Final-Report.pdf>.

Assanvo, W., J. E. A. Abatan, and W. A. Sawadogo. "Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram." *West Africa Report* 19. Institute for Security Studies, September 2016. <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/assessing-the-multinational-joint-task-force-against-boko-haram>.

Brenton, P., C. Bashinge Bucekuderhwa, C. Hossein, S. Nagaki, and J.B. Ntagoma. "Risky Business: Poor Women Cross-Border Traders in the Great Lakes Region of Africa." *Africa Trade Policy Notes* 11, World Bank Group, January 2011. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/742571468007855952/pdf/601120BRI0Afri11public10BOX358310B0.pdf>.

Cantens, T., and G. Raballand. "Cross-Border Trade, Insecurity and the Role of Customs: Some Lessons from Six Field Studies in (Post)Conflict Regions." ICTD Working Paper 67, International Centre for Tax and Development, August 2017. <https://www.ictd.ac/publication/ictd-working-paper-67-cross-border-trade-insecurity-and-the-role-of-customs-some-lessons-from-six-field-studies-in-post-conflict-regions>.

Croke, K., G. Mora, M. Elena, M. Goldstein, E. Mensah, and M. O'Sullivan. "Up Before Dawn: Experimental Evidence from a Cross-Border Trader Training at the Democratic Republic of Congo–Rwanda

Border." Policy Research Working Paper, World Bank Group, January 2020. <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/1813-9450-9123>.

Eaton, T., C. Cheng, R. Mansour, P. Salisbury, J. Yazigi, and L. Khatib. *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa*. Chatham House, June 2019. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/conflict-economies-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

Ghanem, D. *The Smuggler Wore a Veil: Women in Algeria's Illicit Border Trade*. XCEPT / Carnegie Middle East Center, September 2020. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/09/14/smuggler-wore-veil-women-in-algeria-s-illicit-border-trade-pub-82691>.

Hoinathy, R. and T. Tayo. "Lake Chad Basin: Socio-economic Resilience in the Shadow of Boko Haram." *West Africa Report* 38, Institute for Security Studies, March 2022. <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/lake-chad-basin-socio-economic-resilience-in-the-shadow-of-boko-haram>.

International Crisis Group. *Women and al-Shabaab's Insurgency*. Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 145, June 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b145-women-and-al-shabaabs-insurgency>.

Jacobson, J., and S. Joekes. "Violence against Women Traders at Border Crossings." Work and Opportunities for Women (WOW) Helpdesk Query 31, UK Aid/WOW, November 2019. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e7cdc63d3bf7f134447df6f/Query-31-VAW-Traders.pdf>.

Koshin, S. *Khat and COVID-19: Somalia's Cross-Border Economy in the Time of Coronavirus*. XCEPT / Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper, May 2020. <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/khat-and-covid-19-somalias-cross-border-economy-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>.

Larouche-Maltais, A. "Central African Borders: A Danger Zone for Women Traders." *UNCTAD Transport and Trade Facilitation Newsletter* 93 (March 2022). <https://unctad.org/news/central-african-borders-danger-zone-women-traders>.

Lesser Blumberg, D., J. Malaba, and L. Meyers. *Women Cross-Border Traders in Southern Africa: Contributions, Constraints, and Opportunities in Malawi and Botswana*. AECOM International Development/Banyan Global/USAID, 2016. https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICBT-Gender-Assessment-Report_Final_4-30-2016_DEC.pdf.

Lindsey, C. *Women Facing War: ICRC Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women*. International Committee of the Red Cross, 2001. https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0798_women_facing_war.pdf.

Mama, A., and M. Okazawa-Rey. " Militarism, Conflict, and Women's Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African Contexts." *Feminist Review* 101, no. 1 (2012): 97–123.

McKay, S., and D. Mazurana. *Where Are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War*. Rights & Democracy, 2004. <https://au.int/en/documents/20200820/where-are-girls-girls-fighting-forces-northern-uganda-sierra-leone-and-mozambique>.

Ndiaye, T. *Women Informal Traders Transcending African Borders: Myths, Facts and Ways Forward*. Aid-for-Trade Case Story, International Trade Centre, 2010. <https://www.oecd.org/aidfor-trade/47715006.pdf>.

Niang, A. "The (In)Commodities of Laissez-faire Integration: Trade and Mobility in a Cross-border Market." *African Studies* 72, no. 1 (2013): 41–63.

Nordstrom, C. "Women, Economy, War." *International Review of the Red Cross* 92, no. 877 (2010): 161–76. <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/irrc-877-nordstrom.pdf>.

Nyibol, E. *Migrating with Seeds: Women, Agricultural Knowledge and Displacement in South Sudan*. XCEPT / Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper, April 2020. <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/migrating-with-seeds-women-agricultural-knowledge-and-displacement-in-south-sudan/>.

Raeymaekers, T. "Scales of Grey: The Complex Geography of Transnational Cross-border Trade in the African Great Lakes Region." In *The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling*, edited by M. Gallien and F. Weigand. Routledge, 2021.

Raeymaekers, T., and B. Korf, eds. *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict, and Borderlands*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Samuel, M. "Boko Haram's Deadly Business: An Economy of Violence in the Lake Chad Basin." *West Africa Report* 40, Institute for Security Studies, September 2022. <https://issafrica.org/research/west-af>

[rica-report/boko-harams-deadly-business-an-economy-of-violence-in-the-lake-chad-basin](https://www.issafrica.org/research/west-af).

Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "Witness to Truth – Volume Three B (Chapter 3: Women and the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone)." N.d. <https://www.sierraleonetrctc.org/index.php/view-the-final-report/download-table-of-contents/volume-three-b/item/witness-to-the-truth-volume-three-b-chapter-3>.

Solomon, C. "The Role of Women in Economic Transformation: Market Women in Sierra Leone." *Conflict, Security and Development* 6, no. 3 (2006): 411–23.

Specht, I. *Red Shoes: Experiences of Girl-Combatants in Liberia*. International Labour Office Geneva, 2006. https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2006/106B09_262_engl.pdf.

Stern, O. "Al-Shabaab's Gendered Economy." Rehabilitation Support Team and British Embassy in Somalia, 2021. <https://orlystern.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Al-Shabaabs-Gendered-Economy.pdf>.

Strachan, A. L., and H. Haider. "Gender and Conflict: Topic Guide." Applied Knowledge Services, GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2015. <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/gender-and-conflict/>.

Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program. "Sustainable Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: Shadow Economies and Cross-border Trade." Discussion Note, TDRP, 2012. <https://au.int/en/documents/20120820/sustainable-reintegration-ex-combatants-shadow-economies-and-cross-border-trade>.

Tchouasi, G. "Conflicts and Women in Informal Cross-Border Trade Between Cameroon and Nigeria." In *A Comparative Study of Nigeria: Lessons From the Global South*, edited by C. Enwere, O. Aytac, and M. Khalil-Babatunde. Abuja: Nile University of Nigeria, 2017.

Titeca, K., and C. Kimanuka. *Walking in the Dark: Informal Cross-border Trade in the Great Lakes Region*. International Alert, 2012. <https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2021/09/Great-Lakes-Cross-Border-Trade-EN-2012.pdf>.

Turshen, M. *Gender and the Political Economy of Conflict in Africa: The Persistence of Violence*. Routledge, 2016.

UN Women. *Unleashing the Potential of Women In-*

formal Cross Border Traders to Transform Intra-African Trade, 2010. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Media/Publications/en/factsheetafricanwomentradersen.pdf>.

Utas, M. "Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone." *Anthropology Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005).

X-Border Local Research Network. *Trade and Livelihoods in the Afghanistan–Pakistan Borderlands*. XCEPT / The Asia Foundation, 2019. <https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Trade-and-Livelihoods-in-the-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Borderlands.pdf>.

Yoshino, Y., G. Ngungi, and E. Asebe. "Enhancing the Recent Growth of Cross-Border Trade between South Sudan and Uganda." *Africa Trade Policy Notes* 21, World Bank Group, June 2011. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/877731468309332369/pdf/638090BRI0Sout-00Box0361527B0PUBLIC0.pdf>.

Yusuff, O. "Gender Dimensions of Informal Cross Border Trade in West-African Sub-Region (ECOWAS) Borders." *Journal of Women's Entrepreneurship and Education*, no. 1-2 (2014): 132–52.



XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS