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WOMEN WITHOUT BORDERS: GENDER AND INFORMAL CROSS-BORDER TRADE

QUESTION AND ANSWER AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

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PRESENTERS

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Julie MacCartee:

Thank you so much for these extremely important and compelling presentations. A really important topic of conversation on International Women's Day. All right. We have about half an hour for questions, comments, Q&A. We'll take questions from both the in-person audience and from our online audience joining by webinar. And feel free to direct them to either Lis or Sait, or just more generally pose a question. And we also just ask that you state your name and organization if you will. So, please raise your hand if you have a question, and we'll kind of alternate between the in-person and online.

Audience Member:

Hi. Chris Mccrae, valuetrue.com. Could you clarify a bit more exactly what defines "informal trade"? Because you mentioned that maybe you could do that in a few hours if you were an informal trader, but you might have to wait till ten days if you were a formal trader. And I ask partly because you normally think that with efficient traders, you'd want to help scale them up. But if there's some kind of maximum, in terms of it's only what you can carry over, whatever, obviously the definition of "informal trade" conditions what's possible.

Lis Meyers:

Sure. So that's a great question. So some of the definitions that we used were from SADC and COMESA. That's why I was looking through the report to give you the official definition. So the SADC definition of ICBT is any business operating in goods and services that trades across the border and that has no official export/import license or permit within a defined threshold and frequency. And COMESA defines it as a form of trade that's unrecorded in official statistics and often carried out by small businesses or traders in the region. And the COMESA definition's a little more problematic as it largely defines ICBT as somewhat criminal, and there's this confusion between criminal and informal.

So our definition was a little bit more broad, and it was people who were not trading — so the Southern Africa Trade Hub was working with formal trade, looking specifically at big trucks and large companies that were getting goods across the border. And we were looking at more informal businesses, people who don't have a registered business and who are just doing it through a much more ad hoc approach.

Audience Member: Just a follow-up question. I was wondering if that was actually the definition in terms of — thinking of people getting into queues, maybe if they had some kind of truck or size of container which was larger than such-and-such, they had to go into one queue versus another. So I was wondering if there was some kind of volume definition applied. Do you know if there's one or not?

Lis Meyers: I don't think we applied anything based on volume. But it's more about the women and whether or not they had formal or informal businesses.

Julie MacCartee: A question from our online audience. And also let us know how many people are joining.

Carla (Agrilinks): Hello? So we have about 97 participants online. We had a few people asking about constraints. How are respective ministry offices addressing various constraints? Do these constraints exist only in the informal sector? And do men face the same constraints? Those questions come from Marydean Purves, Mona Shrestha, and Indra Klein.

Lis Meyers: All right. Those are really good questions. So, in looking at constraints, we found that: yes, many of the constraints that we discussed you can apply to men and to women. The biggest difference is gender-based violence. You know, again, this was a rapid assessment, so this wasn't a long quantitative study. But we didn't hear about gender-based violence happening to the male traders. And so I think that is one key gender difference. And, you know, we found that safety was just a bigger concern amongst the women informal cross-border traders.

We talked to a group of women who said that they just band together, and for example, they travel on all their journeys together because it means that someone is awake on the long bus rides across borders to

watch over their goods, to make sure they're not being harassed. They use bathrooms together. They stay in accommodation together. And so the women seemed generally more concerned about safety and have experienced gender-based violence as additional constraint. But all of the other constraints I highlighted talking about finance, talking about lack of information — those are all applicable to women and men. And we just applied a gender context to it because that was what we were looking at in our research and also because there's such a high percentage of women who are informal cross-border traders.

I think the question on ministries is good. And, you know, we didn't have enough time to talk to every ministry and understand what they were doing. But we did find that a lot of the interventions that are happening are focusing more on working with informal cross-border traders, for example, putting them in associations, working to help inform them on their rights. And not much is being done to actually address issues that're happening with the border agents on the front lines. And that's a tremendous area for further improvement and looking at some additional solutions. And so that's why we were really trying to highlight that recommendation on working with border agents. Because we just found that that's not really happening by different ministries.

Carla (Agrilinks):

And if I could ask a follow-up question from Mona Shrestha: how strong were women's networks, NGOs, in addressing these constraints?

Lis Meyers:

So we didn't have time to talk to a number of NGOs. But we have found that NGOs are working with women informal cross-border traders. But it's not at scale. There's just a lot more that needs to be done. And a lot of the women we spoke to in our research weren't tapped into associations, had not received support from different NGOs. And while there are NGOs doing programming, again, that programming is primarily working with traders and not really addressing the other side of the coin, which is the government officials, the infrastructure at the border, some of these bigger issues. But they are helping to raise awareness on women's rights, make sure the information is out there, form

associations, form some type of, almost like a complaint mechanism, for when incidents do happen. But it's just not happening at scale.

So many of the women we spoke to had no idea that there were these services available, or they weren't available at their respective borders.

Sait Mboob:

I just wanted to add quickly onto that. On the ministries question. I think there's significant opportunities, especially in light of this type of research, to show off the findings to the ministries. And I mean, you know, a ministry could, for instance, resolve to hire more women at the border. And from a research perspective, I'd love to see an experiment where you have all women border agents at a border and how it changed the trade flows. I think that if we had the research to show to a government to say, "Hey, this is a potentially easy change that you could implement" — 'cause also I don't know the employment statistics: how many people actually work at a border? Probably formally less than 100. So I think that's something to consider as people that interact with governments and ministries.

Audience Member:

My name's Melissa. I work with Lloyd Advisors. I tend to work a lot in agriculture and looking at the kind of pipeline from the informal to formal trade. I think it's great how you pointed out that there's a scale limitation; it's not really advantageous for a lot of folks to move up into that formal market. And although the scale is different, a lot of the constraints faced in the informal and formal market are quite similar. Have you heard of or worked with anybody that's kind of looking across trade together? I'm curious because I'm wondering if we reduce some of the constraints in formal trade how it could have some positive effect in the informal trade.

Lis Meyers:

So, what we found in our limited research for this rapid assessment, is that there just isn't that much being done on women in informal cross-border trade. And specifically informal cross-border trade. There's a lot of work being done working with informal women-owned businesses

and entrepreneurs, but not really looking at this issue through a trade lens. And we tried — one of the things we wanted to do in our research was this big best practices review of what was happening and what others were doing, and then recommend these best practices. And that — couldn't really find those best practices. So I think it's actually a tremendous gap in programming.

Carla (Agrilinks):

On training and re-education, we have some questions from Indra Klein. With regard to borders where the majority are men, what steps are being taken to re-educate agencies for male representatives to respectfully acknowledge and treat women? Many times that involves addressing cultural systems that are in place. And kind of on that same question, with regards to training, is there corrective action such as fines or removal from position?

Lis Meyers:

So those are great questions. And what we found is: there really is no training happening right now working with the border agents. I think maybe about three and a half years ago I went to a regional conference in Southern Africa on informal cross-border trade. And as I mentioned, everyone's working — anyone who's doing any programming in this area: they're working with the traders. No one is doing any work to work with border agents to be more respectful, to reduce gender-based violence, to better understand the constraints that women informal cross-border traders encounter. And that's why in our recommendations, I repeatedly highlighted this.

And I think opportunities like the current Southern Africa Trade and Investment Hub, and perhaps some of the other USAID trade hubs, just have this tremendous opportunity because if they're already working with border agents and officials, this is just an easy way to leverage those existing connections. Maybe not easy, but it's a way to leverage those existing connections and finally provide that training. Because that training is not happening.

And in terms of corrective action, I mean, the women that we talked to — they're not even seeking corrective action because they accept it as this reality. They just say, "This is the cost of doing business. And I want to be able to keep feeding my family. So I'll keep letting this happen." So I think we also have a lot of work to do in terms of promoting greater awareness that: "No, this isn't okay." But if a woman has to deal with losing her entire day's work, losing everything she's purchased for the day, all of that labor and that effort that's involved in crossing the border, getting these goods that she's going to sell at the end of the day to feed her family, and she's torn between sexual coercion and losing those purchases, she's going to choose what means providing for her family. And that's really the only option available to a lot of these women at this point.

Sait Mboob:

_____ better than women. Women deserve more nuance when dealing with government officials on this topic. Because just charging in and saying, "You guys are treating your women poorly and you need to change" is not always the best way to do it. And in cases like that, accountability is the best way to go. And on the World Bank project that I mentioned that has the credible complaint mechanism, again, I'm curious to see whether that has worked. Just because oftentimes you have these toll-free lines that, after a month, no one's picking up the phone. So I'm curious to see whether that has worked, and I'll report back to you if you give me your name and e-mail.

Carla (Agrilinks):

As a follow-up to that question very quickly from Carmine Soprano, who's a cross-border trade specialist at the World Bank: what incentive mechanisms would you recommend to introduce at the border to reduce corruption and improve officials' behavior? This is just a statement: many of them do acknowledge the importance of cross-border trade and the challenges this presents. They would also object that bribes are often their main sources of livelihoods, due to very low salary levels and poor working conditions.

Sait Mboob:

Well, first of all, I'm not necessarily going to answer that question, but Carmine Soprano is a World Bank person that I've been trying to get in

touch with who I might be in East Africa. So if he can answer the question about whether that complaint mechanism is working, I'd appreciate that.

Lis Meyers: Do you want to try to answer?

Sait Mboob: No. Go ahead.

Lis Meyers: Okay. Yeah. I mean, I think these are all really valid points that Carmine raises. And one of the things that we would've liked to have done with the Southern Africa Trade Hub if there had been more time was — the Southern Africa Trade Hub was creating these joint border committees where you could coordinate with the different national borders and talk about issues, and really leveraging these border associations and committees and using these existing networks and these existing convenings to have some opportunities to talk about issues with informal cross-border trade and get informal cross-border traders in the room and get people who have really had an opportunity to think about and formulate their requests and talk a little bit about: "These are the constraints we encounter. This is where we're coming from." Just to promote better understanding between the two sides.

Because clearly right now there's a lot of misinformation. There's a breakdown in communication. There's abuse happening. And we thought the first step is: let's create a dialogue. Let's create a conversation and try to promote a more mutual understanding. I think Sait's point about also trying to make sure that there are women at border posts is also something that's definitely worth highlighting and emphasizing. Women can then also check up on bad behavior like gender-based violence. And then obviously let's pay the border officials more so that they're not as reliant on corruption. But that is also a huge thing.

Sait Mboob: That's a really important point on the salaries issue. I mean, I'm an economist, and so: why do people take bribes? Not because they're necessarily bad people. They need to feed their families as well. And when your salary is \$60.00 a month, which is a lot less than what these traders earn, that's a problem. And so I appreciate that nuance and thinking more critically and deeply about the full political economy of what happens at borders.

Julie MacCartee: Great. Thank you. We'll take a couple from the room. I saw a few hands over here.

Audience Member: Hi. My name is Jennifer with Heifer. And I have a question about the methodology. Just to clarify that I understood this correctly, if I understood, Lis, most of your desk research was — you were citing reports that I think were for all over Africa. Is that correct? And then your research was just in Southern Africa. Is that right? So I'm wondering if you found any kind of discrepancies or anything that you noted that was different in the Pan-African research as opposed to your research that I know was fairly quick that you were able to do — if you found any real differences that were worth highlighting. And also: who is hearing these recommendations, officially and formally, they're you're providing? Thanks.

Lis Meyers: Sure. We'll start with your last question: who's hearing these recommendations? And one thing that USAID has been really great about is sharing this information throughout the agency. So back in November, USAID had an advanced trade facilitation workshop where — how many people was it, Sait?

Sait Mboob: Like 30 or 40.

Lis Meyers: Yeah. Like 40 people from agencies all around the world came together for a weeklong training on trade facilitation. And we presented on this

research at that workshop. We also did an interagency brown bag back — I don't know; it was almost six or seven months ago at this point — where we talked about the research specifically looking at infrastructure and gender-based violence. And then the Africa bureau did a seminar where we also presented on this research. And in addition to that, we did a presentation on this research to the Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Services as well. So trying to bring this out to other United States agencies and say that this is relevant to their work as well.

So I think we've done a really great job sharing this within USAID and getting attention within USAID. And I think this was the goal of having this Microlinks/Agrilinks webinar was to now start disseminating it to a wider population and getting the information out beyond USAID. Because we know it could potentially inform many other programs outside of the USAID space, but also more at the implementation level.

And then remind me of your first question. Sorry.

Audience Member:

So the other part of the question is just that you were citing studies that are all of Africa, but your research was just Southern Africa. So I guess highlighting any differences or anything that would be useful for us to know.

Lis Meyers:

Yeah. We didn't really find anything that was so different. I mean, a lot of the research out there is a little bit outdated, and so we had to take everything with a little bit of a grain of salt. But I think there was nothing that we said, "Oh, this is really different from the more general research out there."

Julie MacCartee:

We'll take another question from here in the room.

Audience Member:

Hi. I'm Megan. I work with the Feed the Future Enabling Environment for Food Security project with USAID. So I work on the project, not with USAID. But it's funded by USAID. I was really struck by kind of a high-level takeaway from your presentations, which is the importance, when we're consuming information about the impacts of trade and the rules and regulations that come along with it — the importance of really understanding: is that data or is that information really including the informal sector or not? Because there's a lot of good intentions around changes around trade, and people aren't always aware of the impacts that they have on the informal side for a lot of very real reasons. The data around the informal sector is much harder to get in the hands of decision-makers who are trying to make positive change in terms of rules and regulations.

So my question to you really is if you see a role, either in your research or in other research you have come across, around: how can we look at the informal sector and get that information to decision-makers? Because we know there's a lot of challenges around formal data and data that captures the formal sector. So there's a lot of data challenges around that. How do we, kind of, close the gap and make informal data around trade as well as around women and trade more accessible to those decision-makers?

Lis Meyers:

So I think one opportunity is obviously doing events like this. I mean, we saw, with this seed trade project, which is obviously another regional trade project that, they saw this research and they said, "We want to have research on women's role in the seed trade, both informal and formal." And they've specifically asked for research that doesn't just look at the formal seed trade, but the informal seed trade as well. So it's great that we're already seeing the little gender-ometer moving a little bit forward, inching forward because of this first report. And they're saying, "Oh, we might need to consider how women are involved in our seed value chain and trade." And so that's a great first step.

But I also think that donors like USAID, like the World Bank, have a tremendous role to play in this area. Because I'm also an implementer,

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and implementers are going to really struggle to look at informal cross-border trade and other gender issues if that's not in the scope of work, if that's not in the contract, if the COR is not asking for that. And so I think there's definitely an onus on the donor and on USAID to say, "We want you to look at both informal and formal trade, or informal/formal economies."

For example, the scope of work for the Southern Africa Trade project and the components of the project — informal trade was not written into that project at all. It was formal trade, looking at big trucks crossing borders, "Let's speed up the time for those trucks to get across the borders." And we really had to push to get this research done on informal cross-border trade. And we were really lucky that we had some champions in the project who said, "We're at the borders every day. We see these informal cross-border traders. So even though this isn't a slam dunk in terms of its connection to formal trade, we value the research and think it would be informative to the work we're doing." But if you had had a few people who just weren't champions of this work, it never would've happened.

Sait Mboob:

So it's highlighting the data as well, understanding the macroeconomics behind informal cross-border trade and disseminating that information. Like Lis said, we've been trying quite hard to do that at USAID, and I think it's been quite successful actually. So infusing project material with the appropriate gender asks I think is a good first step.

I think also qualitative data is often overlooked. There's a natural bias towards quantitative data. And I think in a field like informal cross-border trade, that's something that is not necessarily best suited to quantitative data just because it's hard to identify. And so that's part of why we really like this research and this report: is the granularity it gives us and the face that it gives us of informal cross-border traders. And also I quite like the psychological aspects to this of looking at how this type of assistance affects women's self-esteem, for instance, or dealing with the psychology of border agents, talking to them and paying attention to them and trying to figure out how to make them change their behavior.

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Lis Meyers:

I mean, this research was very much, to me, like the Little Engine that Could. It almost didn't happen. It happened at the very end. It was very scrappy. But I think the fact that we've been presenting on it so much, and this is all demand-driven by USAID, shows that this is something that USAID wants to invest in further, and I think that's really encouraging. And hopefully maybe we will see more of a focus on informal trade in some of these trade projects. And I think I recall the Southern Africa Trade and Investment Hub solicitation did have informal cross-border trade built into that solicitation somewhat. Whereas the Southern Africa Trade Hub, the prior project that this research was done under, didn't have any role for informal cross-border trade. So already you see a shift, slight shift.

Julie MacCartee:

Thank you. I think we have about five minutes left. So probably time for one more online and one more in-person question. But I just wanted to ask you all to please fill out the surveys that were on your chairs. They just help us get a gauge on how well these events are coming across, what sort of value they bring to you, and help improve them for the future. So you can just leave them on your chairs or drop them at the table on your way out.

So do we have one more online question?

Carla (Agrilinks):

Yeah. We do. This comes from a bunch of folks, including Lukas Barake, Mona Shrestha, Angela Caporelli, and Daniella De Franco. What proportion of the women in informal cross-border trade that you interviewed are married? Could their marital status influence their participation in this kind of trade? And then general questions about sociodemographic differences. Are any of them from polygamous families?

Lis Meyers:

Those are great questions. And, unfortunately because this was a rapid assessment with only two weeks of field research — it was originally

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envisioned as being three times that amount of field research time — we weren't able to get into issues of polygamy. But I think that's really interesting. I think we found that — I can't give you a statistic, again, because this was a rapid assessment but many of the women were married. But they told us over and over again that they felt because they were bringing income into their families, their husbands respected that, and they had improved decision-making within their households with their husbands because they were bringing income to the family. So that's feedback we got specifically from women who had husbands, saying, "We have a higher decision-making role in the household because of this income."

But there were a lot of other women we spoke to who were de facto or de jour head of households because they were single, divorced, their husbands had died, or their husbands were away. So I can't give a number, but we did make sure to talk to women who were married and had their husbands present, and those who were not married for different reasons.

Julie MacCartee:

All right. One more hand I see in the back. This'll be our last question for the day.

Audience Member:

Hello. I'm Emily from the Grameen Foundation, and I was just wondering about whether the women talked about the safety risks of carrying cash across the border, and whether any of them were using any kind of digital payments or talked about the need for that as a way to facilitate their livelihoods.

Lis Meyers:

That's a great question. And women commonly talked about theft of both the goods they were trading and exchanging for as well as theft of the cash. And they said that was something to look out for in crowded accommodation. That was something to look out for in transportation, and also in markets when they were selling their goods. And many of them complained about this as a serious issue. And for that, I highlighted

earlier the safety in numbers where you found women informal cross-border traders traveling together, going to the bathroom together, going through long bus rides together because they felt someone could always stay awake and alert and help reduce this risk of theft.

Women talked about lack of banking facilities, but no one talked about having mobile bank accounts. And it seemed that most women were accessing only informal savings mechanisms. So it seems like they have not really had access to these mobile banking opportunities. But that would also potentially be an area for further investment.

Sait Mboob:

I think that's also an area that's interesting from a cross-border regulatory perspective. I'm not sure about the statistics of this, but I'm guessing that in-country mobile payments are a lot higher than cross-border mobile payments. And just getting regulatory officials to think about how building similar mobile banking infrastructure in one country and the other regionally might translate to lower attacks on women at the border — trying to cross borders. So I think that's an example of an implication that might seem far-fetched, but really isn't.

Julie MacCartee:

Great. Well, thank you so much to Lis and Sait for your excellent presentations and very deft answering of questions. Thank you to the KDAD project for making these events happen. And, most importantly, thank you to you for attending both online and in person, and for always sharing your feedback, asking great questions, and also helping make these events happen. So on behalf of Microlinks and Agrilinks, thank you, and we'll see you in the future.

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