



**Where does the
AfCFTA Meet
African Women in
Agriculture?
Feminist Reflections,
Insights and
Strategies**

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is by far the biggest sector employer in the African Continent. An Economic Brief from the African Development Bank in 2017 revealed that up to 70 per cent of the workforce, directly supports 90 per cent of the livelihoods, and accounting for up to a quarter of the continent's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹

The agricultural sector accounts for the work done by the majority of the continent's population, with further 2017 figures pegging the majority of countries as accounting for this group.² Further, 80 per cent of this farming is done by smallholders³, many of whom are women.⁴ As such, the status and role of women on the African continent is key to any gains that the agricultural sector intends to make on the continent. This is elaborated by the synergistic existence of African Union (AU) protocols, and some, in particular, that stand out. First among them is the 2003 Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security in Africa⁵, which states an intention to allocate at least a tenth of national budgets to the sector in recognition of the urgent needs therein, as well as the vulnerabilities and resultant crises.⁶ A second example is the Maputo Protocol⁷, with its focus on women's rights; Article 13 on economic and social welfare rights recognises current barriers to women's enjoyment of equity in this regard and outlines strategies to promote women's equal opportunities in work and career advancement and other economic opportunities.⁸ A third is the 2014 Malabo Declaration⁹, which cites the need for Africans, especially women, to both participate and gain from any growth and development opportunities afforded by agricultural practices on the continent; it notes that the undermined potential of the sector limits both participation and gains for marginalised communities:

The now two-year-old African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) that was established in 2018, with the trading launch effected at the start of 2021, is defined by an intention to expand trade within the continent to achieve "...free movement of persons, capital, goods and services", in order to promote, among other things, agricultural development and food security.¹⁰ Its overall goal is to increase trade by Africans with other Africans within the continent, in agricultural products. The Agreement is established with the intention of catalysing progress towards the African Union's Agenda 2063, where the goals of modern agriculture and full gender equality are cited as

1 Mukasa, A. N., Woldemichael, A. D., Salami, A. O., Simpasa, A. M. *Africa's Agricultural Transformation: Identifying Priority Areas and Overcoming Challenges*. Africa Development Bank. <https://bit.ly/3YCyICi>

2 Sow, M. (2017). *Figures of The Week: Sub-Saharan Africa's Labour Market in 2017*. The Brookings Institution. <https://bit.ly/3URd006>

3 *ibid*

4 Abass, J. (2018). *Women Grow 70% of African's Food. But They Have Few Rights Over The Land They Tend*. World Economic Forum. <http://bit.ly/3Aszalk>

5 file:///C:/Users/Maureen/Downloads/CAADP_Maputo%202003.pdf

6 (2003). *The Maputo Declaration*. Scaling Up Nutrition. <http://bit.ly/3tGjSwe>

7 https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37077-treaty-charter_on_rights_of_women_in_africa.pdf

8 (1995). *The Maputo Protocol*. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <http://bit.ly/3UNW0D6>

9 (2014). *The Malabo Declaration*. Regional Statistics Analysis and Knowledge Support System. <http://bit.ly/3V07XFo>

10 (2018). *Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*. The African Union. <http://bit.ly/3Ee1gZm>

key to inclusive socio-economic development.¹¹ An offshoot of this is outlined in the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Program, which recognises agriculture development by uplifting the 2003 Maputo budgetary commitment alongside an updated awareness of climate variables, and making production sustainable with the aim of increasing farm incomes¹².

Much has been said with regards to agriculture as a core sector in Africa's economic portfolio. In many countries the central role of the agricultural sector is on household food and nutrition security, feeding the public, promoting individual, communal and national economic advancement as well as wealth building through trade, industrialisation, and employment. From a trade perspective, which is the focus of the AfCFTA, these roles are very much upheld. There are, however, certain weaknesses in this approach; farmers would have to overcome numerous existing obstacles in order to achieve this boost of agricultural potential all through the value chain, from the availability of planted elements in both food and non-food categories, through to their harvest and sale. This makes the implied optimism about achieving this smooth flow through this plagued value chain quite misplaced. It also depersonalises the labour, assuming, - for the sake of the thought experiment and idealised future casting- that the farmer is always present, available and able to work to drive the process from start to end. It assumes the farmer has all the help and knowledge that they might need. It also assumes that maximum profit is extracted at the end of this process and that, ideally, it is shared in ways that are proportional and fair to the farmer, which would therefore incentivise them to remain in this line of work.

The process has to be imagined this way because it is assumed to be the best-case scenario. The viewpoint that focuses on trade, as the most meaningful focus of African agriculture, has urged Africans to be motivated in aspiring towards improving the sector to bolster trade, first and foremost, especially because of its potential to create "jobs"—not necessarily gainful, meaningful employment or decent work, but otherwise undefined "jobs. In many ways, the trade-first viewpoint considers keeping as many people as possible routinely occupied and earning gratefully to be the winners or victorious in this sector. An additional factor that contributes to this take is the global North-fuelled simmering panic about Africa's demographic dividend, or youth bulge. It is therefore necessary to outline a critical mass of work that needs to be done so that this population would not be unproductive or idle.¹³

A conscious feminist position can be challenging, because feminist economics lays the original sin on the existence of capitalism and its debilitating conditions, citing that capitalism thrives on structural inequalities.¹⁴ The African feminist economist Professor Lyn Ossome says, on this matter, that access to land and the commons for the masses, in this context, is much more about day-to-day survival than anything else, arguing that the social reproduction of these survival conditions contributes to the economic non-progress of both rural and urban populations living in poverty. She further posits that women's labour, through both capitalist and non-capitalist labour, is co-opted into the growth and

11 (2013). *Goals and Priority Areas of Agenda 2063*. The African Union. <http://bit.ly/3TO6cg>.

12 (2021). *The Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme*. The African Union. <http://bit.ly/3EJQ9c8>.

13 Beehner, L. (2007). *The Effect of "Youth Bulge" on Civil Conflicts*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://bit.ly/3F3WmyM>.

14 Shukla, A. (2021). *Feminism and Capitalism: The Ideological Dilemma of Co-existence*. Feminism In India. <http://bit.ly/3EJTuyG>.

maintenance of the market, which itself demands more workers, who are kept in place by more labour from women, especially rural ones.¹⁵ This positioning makes women's liberation unprofitable for trade as we know it. One viewpoint could be that without a radical rethink of land politics and economic value systems, it would be impossible for the AfCFTA to ever have a truly feminist intention, whatever approach it took to understanding people, place, and production.

Another way to look at this matter takes into consideration all the systemic dysfunction we live in, and attempts a more holistic view of these dynamic, sometimes contradictory matters, beginning from the fact that the Agreement, takes a trade-first approach. Fatima Kelleher in "African Feminist Futures: Macroeconomic Pathways" problematises a growth-first focus and urges a realistic view of the massive inequalities facing the majority of Africans, especially as regards the distribution of land and wealth.¹⁶ She further juxtaposes increased rural-urban migration with contracting agricultural sectors across the continent, which throws a spanner in the works of this optimistic trade focus for African agriculture. We cannot, as such, assume that there will be an infinite supply of Africans to grow and sell the projected crops from which nations desire to trade, profit and extract forex incomes, taxes from employed people, and positioning for a better quality of life.

Feminist outlooks and critiques frame their arguments toward a focus on people, not just for demographic reasons that highlight gender, but also positioning humans as beings with agency, whose decisions are responsive to and informed by their environments and circumstances in ways that already speak to the barriers they face, what they have been taught, their experiences and what they want for their future. Understanding people, then, becomes a necessary first step in being able to consider the promises the AfCFTA is making, especially as regards realising the potential of African women agricultural practitioners. A feminist consideration would therefore posit that the human being, their well-being and the context of their work, are the baseline upon which we can consider everything else.

This paper's engagement will therefore consider:

- If and how this is approached in the current AfCFTA, and where bridges can be built to a more comprehensive and generative outcome. Here, too, we ask if the Agreement, as it currently stands, positions all people, and specifically women, to gain from its promises.
- The activity of trade itself at different scales; it is at this point that the framework of agricultural expansion, for agriculture-led trade as established prior, can be considered.

Accordingly, agroecology can be considered as one way to action agricultural expansion, and the values therein, alongside the potentialities of big commercial farming which has a long history on the continent, making the assumption (and building from the hypothesis) that both approaches intend to result in sustainable modern farming to achieve the aims of the protocols and agendas listed above. Focus can then be directed on the alignments of the AfCFTA, and, locating the ideal equal and participation of all Africans, especially African women, in trade activities as a finish line, and consider what would be needed to actualise it on

¹⁵ Naidu, S. C., & Ossome, L. (2016). *Social Reproduction and The Agrarian Question of Women's Labour in India*. ResearchGate. <http://bit.ly/3V4IICM>.

¹⁶ Kelleher, F. (2020). *African Feminist Futures: Macroeconomic Pathways*. African Women's Development Fund. <http://bit.ly/3EKvEfx>

the ground. Feminist considerations consider profit as an output that creates a power dynamic, and holds up a mirror to illustrate that the hierarchies established by patriarchy elsewhere, such as in the household and on the street, which are then enabled by cultural, religious and secular institutions, are a feature, and not a bug, of this problematic system. They are intended to maintain women in particular oppressed positions, to their detriment and the benefit of others. The question that arises is whether the AfCFTA is consciously aware of this issue and, if not, how it can improve by adopting a solution-oriented mindset.

The context of agriculture, being so skeletal to Africa's very being, is massive; this is reflected in the number of times agriculture is mentioned across the Africa Union (AU) and other related stakeholder documents, protocols, and agreements, often without harmony between viewpoints and. For instance, food security and the eradication of hunger, are extensive subjects that warrant independent investigations. Other similar topics include climate change and emergencies, which have a massive effect on the process and output of agriculture, as well as on trade and the expenditure of trade gains. Governance, and the ongoing implementation of existing policies, as well as the wider status of micro, small, and medium-size enterprises, however, fall outside the scope of this exploration, even though they are brought forward within the context at a very top-line level to illustrate matters pertaining to women, the AfCFTA, and the potential for agricultural expansion.

It remains crucial to mention two more pertinent issues, thereby contextualising some further absences in this paper. Firstly, several assumptions made about agricultural practice immediately locate the African female agricultural practitioner as an able-bodied and healthy labourer, deemed eternally so, whose only disadvantage is due to gender roles. Nothing could be further from the truth; this severely ableist context leads to people having to make individualised accommodations to negotiate with day-to-day living, whether it means living within the limitations of reproductive expectations,¹⁷ or while having to manage the vagaries of another chronic illness or condition.¹⁸ The definition of the woman, as an agricultural labourer, must fully consider what is demanded of her body in the process of doing farm labour, or even as a caregiver in these very specific contexts. Most smallholder farm labour, even as it can be very self-driven and responsive to the weather, the seasons and more, is practised within the space of the body's abilities, which are dynamic from day to day. This remains out of the scope of this paper.

A second consideration is the limitations of the gender binary: in many ways, the term "women" is taken as a fitting blanket for everyone who experiences marginalisation because of harmful gender norms and is considered adequate when utilised this way. Again, the truth is very distant from this statement: the word "women" refers to people who appear to be and self-identify as cisgendered persons, most of whom happen to be heterosexual. Sexual and gender minorities are marginalised by the oppressive status of many African cultural and legal jurisdictions; this leaves them fighting for the right to live, beyond even the marginal economic gains, than those assumed to be, or those

¹⁷ Farming and doing heavy labour when pregnant, or when dealing with menses, bleeding, the effects of contraception and more

¹⁸ This could range from needing mobility aids, weekly or monthly clinic visits because of living with HIV, challenges with vision, hearing, speech, mobility, mental health, diabetes, hypertension or more, needing physiotherapy or other rehabilitative engagements due to a prior injury, or even having to deal with an acute accident whether on the farm or in general life.

self-identified as, cisgendered and heterosexual people. The premise that everyone who can and does participate in agriculture must be a cisgendered, heterosexual woman, per popular parlance, is therefore quite wrong. It locates trans, gender diverse, non-binary and non-heterosexual persons outside any conversation about agriculture, forcibly assuming that urban-aligned migration and outcomes are the only ones feasible for this population. These intersections of identity add nuance and dimension that has been easy to ignore for too long, to the great detriment and erasure of minority groups who feature in agricultural work and communities. A true engagement with the idea of gender would therefore need to be expanded beyond the idea of women, which should be a further phase of exploration in other related economic researches.

This paper recognises that with all its ambitions and limits, the potentially transformative implementation of the AfCFTA requires a critical mass to show its exponential impact. Women's groups, small and large, networks, and organisations seeking to engage and lobby on the contents of the Agreement, should engage with, consider, and even expand and disagree, with the contents of this paper, in the hopes that collaborative evolution of these thoughts will create the needed tensions and synergies required for collective gains, as people, as well as the continent moves further towards realising her infinite potential. This is illustrated by one independent platform, the African Feminist Forum; their assertion in 2007 was that feminist leadership, in any matter, use their concurrent abilities to challenge each other's ideas, and grow them together in the community in order to continuously build their knowledge and information bases.¹⁹ This aligns with the feminist determination to be located as a legitimate constituency in generating the knowledge that catalyse the push towards liberation.

19

(2007). *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*. Africlub. <http://bit.ly/3TNzzfJ>

Human Beings, Economics and Feminist Policy Ideals Regarding Agriculture in Africa

Agriculture is Africa's biggest employer, with the vast majority of lower-income earners earning from it.²⁰ The contribution of women in agriculture in Africa is undeniable. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), about 62% of women make an essential contribution towards agriculture in Africa²¹ It is however sad to state that women receive meagre yields and compensation from this sector, which is both the breadbasket from which the population eats, as well as a bedrock for wider national income consideration.

To consider the current AfCFTA's scope, as regards women, and how the idea of agricultural expansion through trade, as evidenced by agro-ecological practice, and also by the existence of big commercial farming, it may be useful to frame the conversation first, then begin building insights from there. This framing can be broken down in the following three sections:

- **The human element:** Map the centrality of women as full persons who can participate in this sector from a place that prioritises their most ideal outcomes for themselves;
- **The economic element:** Acknowledge the intention of trade to contribute to agricultural expansion, and how the labour of women has been seen in the context of both agroecology and big commercial farming;
- **The feminist policy element:** Situate the ideal outcomes of the AfCFTA relative to real-life practices, with reference to feminist economic values, and strategies for high-level shifts that will enable more gains for African women in the context of continental free trade.

This paper will address these three sections as follows:

1. *The Human Element: Women as Actors in Agricultural Practice*

- Is farming, as it is done by the critical mass of women on the African continent, currently sustainable?
- What do women want out of agricultural labour and practice? What can women have within the context of agricultural labour and practice?
- What do women trade in to take part in agricultural labour and practice?

20 Mueller, B. (2021). *Rural youth employment in Sub-saharan Africa: Moving away from urban myths and towards structural policy solutions*. International Labour Organisation. <http://bit.ly/3hVLCKU>

21 Kamau-Rutenberg, W. (2019). *Gender equality in African agriculture: An innovation imperative*. World Intellectual Property Organisation. <http://bit.ly/3gjq0rm>

2. *The Economic Element: Barriers to Equitable Agricultural Trade*

- Is it possible to centre the success and welfare of African women in culture in a context that is not primed to favour their best outcomes?
- What role does the state and the market play, separately and together, in contributing to the successes and failures of agricultural trade and value addition at all scales?

3. *The Feminist Policy Element: AfCFTA, Agricultural Expansion, Agroecology and Big Commercial Farming*

- What assumptions does the Free Trade Agreement make about agricultural expansion, agroecology, and big commercial farming? Are they informed by the lived realities of African women?
- What adjustments to the AfCFTA would ensure that women are gaining from this, and continual evolution, to ensure these gains are kept and made sustainable?

Each section will be accompanied by a Case Study that will illustrate either a measure or intervention, or the real-life outcomes of the challenges faced in this sector. This approach will help in visualising what best (or worst) practices can be adopted as we seek to locate African women in the continent's agricultural past, create enabling environments for their leadership in our agricultural present, and ensure their fair and sustainable gains from all the investment of time, labour and other resources in Africa's agricultural future, all through a feminist lens.

1.0 THE HUMAN ELEMENT: WOMEN AS PEOPLE IN AGRICULTURAL PRACTICE

The vast majority of African farmers growing up to 70 per cent of the food that feeds the continent, are smallholder farmers; majority of them being women (with 5 acres of land and below).²² It bears adding that women mostly have this land in trust for the family, working on it in the name of a male relative, such as a father or brother, or even a partner or husband, who likely has majority decision-making power over any hard cash generated.

Most women do not own the land in their names. Ownership of and access to land in order to ensure social mobility for themselves and their children, more so their male offspring, is a key reason why women tend to remain in violent and abusive marriages and partnerships.²³ *Naidu and Ossome*, when considering women's labour in India, contextualised this self-reproducing economic tragedy by comparing it within the wider structural violence of capitalism, stating that the livelihood strategies and wage work of many rural dwellers are not enough to release them from their peasant roots. noting also the additional increased and invisible domestic and allied labour that is carried out by poor and ultra-poor women, in both urban and rural areas.²⁴ Any access to land, in this context, is not the projected and immediate economic panacea that the mainstream economic theory would position it to be, without the erasure of existing systemic barriers.²⁵

Women tend to do the lowest, most manual, and most punishing cadres of agricultural work. In addition, because of the structural biologies of people assigned females at birth, their reproductive health is often put at great risk because of exposure to harsh chemicals via fertilisers and pesticides, which tend to be used in big commercial farms.²⁶ Monoculture and the increasing influence of agrotechnology and genetically modified seed producers are also creating a situation where every season, seeds must be bought because seed saving and crop diversity are being discouraged, or even prosecuted in areas where patented crops are being grown. This assures the seed developers and merchants of sustainable income, especially since any new seeds generated are modified to be non-reproducing.²⁷ Because women in Africa and the world at large tend to save and exchange seeds amongst themselves, especially for subsistence use, these developments create new cultural, economic and ethical dilemmas.²⁸

22 Abass, J. (2018). *Women Grow 70% of African's Food. But They Have Few Rights Over The Land They Tend*. World Economic Forum. <http://bit.ly/3AszalK>

23 Hilliard, S., & Bukusi, E. (2016). *Perceived Impact of a Land and Property Rights Program on Violence Against Women in Rural Kenya: A Qualitative Investigation*. National Library of Medicine. <http://bit.ly/3TT07fE>

24 Naidu, S. C., & Ossome, L. (2016). *Social Reproduction and The Agrarian Question of Women's Labour in India*. ResearchGate. <http://bit.ly/3V4IICM>

25 (2019). *Talking Back: a conversation with Lyn Ossome*. Review of African Political Economy. <http://bit.ly/3Gs6zqY>

26 Sutton, P., & Wallinga, D. (2011). *Reproductive Health and the Industrialized Food System: A Point of Intervention for Health Policy*. National Library of Medicine. <http://bit.ly/3gmfaB2>

27 (2018). *Seeds of Neo-Colonialism – Why the GMO promoters get it so wrong about Africa*. Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa. <http://bit.ly/3Xdv6WF>

28 (2018). *Celebrating African Rural Women: Custodians of Seed, Food & Traditional Knowledge – A Report from Gaia*. The Gaia Foundation. <http://bit.ly/30jaGrb>

Do women have a choice in doing agricultural work, or even how and when this work is done? For many Africans, agricultural work is mostly defaulted as one of the only accessible opportunities, as opposed to chosen labour usually accessible by education and employment opportunities. The availability of resources, such as land and tools, is what draws people to engage in agriculture. Initially, they acquire the necessary skills through informal domestic apprenticeship, which involves taking on increasingly complex tasks as they age and gain more experience in their practice. This enables them contribute to the household welfare and generate income. Moreover, agriculture is a predominant occupation in rural areas, where limited development and industrialisation have resulted in fewer opportunities for people to pursue other professions. The percentage of gross domestic product that Africa gets from agriculture has been reducing over the years.²⁹

The second reason for agriculture as default labour is because of the lack of technical and other skills by people that would enable them transition into another forms of work and labour. This can be attributed to limited education opportunities; the vast majority of Africans only have access to primary school education. Fewer of them join secondary school, while even fewer access tertiary education.³⁰ When gender is considered here, the stakes become even higher because of the precarious and vulnerable status of adolescent girls in school due to increased incidences of teenage pregnancy and allied morbidities and mortalities, with the data showing an increased risk of HIV in particular.³¹ Beyond the cost of attaining educational progress, which many parents who may themselves be entrepreneur farmers or low-level agricultural labourers who might not be able to afford, the social positions of women in their communities contribute further to obstacles faced in achieving educational options that allow for the freedom of choice on this matter.³²

As such, the status of agricultural labour is that of bare-bones survival for the majority. Any further expectation on the labourer to also do the herculean political organising to make it decent work is extremely unrealistic. Promises that politically and state-improved farm work will enable higher earnings then become easy fantasies in many electoral campaigns and manifestos at local and national levels³³. Promising the farm worker that they will earn more money covers another gap, which is that the state is not providing public goods in ways that would reduce their cost of living. This further illustrates the contributions of the state, both active and passive, in enabling the conditions that perpetuate continued poverty. The state can also be a supporter of women's rights, and can thus serve to reduce the effects of patriarchy on groups of women seeking to have more agency in conversations regarding collective organising, land access and ownership.³⁴ This changeable position makes it a potential ally, albeit it not being a very reliable one.

29 Jayne, T., Yeboah, F. K., & Henry, C. (2017). *The future of work in African agriculture: Trends and drivers of change*. International Labour Organisation. <http://bit.ly/3EmSYyq>

30 (2022). *Education in Africa*. UNESCO. <http://bit.ly/3UP9gav>

31 Groves, A. K., & Gebrekristos, L. T. (2022). *Adolescent Mothers in Eastern and Southern Africa: An Overlooked and Uniquely Vulnerable Subpopulation in the Fight Against HIV*. Science Direct. <http://bit.ly/3ggZJtP>

32 Musau, Z. (2018). *Africa grapples with huge disparities in education*. Africa Renewal. <http://bit.ly/3ArZ938>

33 Iraki, X. (2022). *Kenya's election promises: An economist's perspective*. The Conversation. <http://bit.ly/3EiaNil>

34 Ossome, L. (2021). *Pedagogies of Feminist Resistance: Agrarian Movements in Africa*. Sage Journals. <http://bit.ly/3OIWbCU>

Asking what African women want out of agricultural labour and practice can be answered by considering what any human being would want out of any decent work in any field. This will require one to view agricultural labour through the lenses of decent work as per the International Labour Organisation, specifically.³⁵

- Women want opportunities for productive agricultural work;
- Women want opportunities for agricultural work that delivers fair income;
- Women want opportunities for agricultural work that offers workplace security;
- Women want opportunities for agricultural work that offers social protection for their families;
- Women want opportunities for agricultural work that offers better prospects for personal development and social integration;
- Women want opportunities for agricultural work that creates freedom to express their concerns;
- Women want opportunities for agricultural work that enables them to organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives;
- Women want opportunities for agricultural work that allows equality of opportunity between them and men.³⁶

When viewed this way, it becomes apparent that farming, as it is done by the critical mass of women on the African continent, is not compatible with their desires for themselves, or indeed with any people-centred and sustainably good outcomes, or even with the growth of the human resource parts of this sector in general. In many ways, farming on the continent has been considered season to season, and year to year, riding on the desperation of a critical mass's seeking to eke out marginal economic survival at the household level.

The forced sacrifices of the majority who do agricultural labour as entrepreneurs or employees become evident. The vast majority of farmers currently take on the changes in weather seasons, as caused by wider climate change and impending crisis, by themselves, at the mercy of chance profits and almost certain losses. Their income is similarly unpredictable, dependent on their access to economic networks which may just as easily be extractive as not. This is linked to social security such as access to health and education for themselves and their families, which many have to buy from the market as it is not assured by the state in the form of public goods. Workplace security thus becomes an individualised struggle, whether women are victimised as employees in large farms physically or occupationally, or even denied the opportunities to access partnerships and deals that landowners and title holders, usually men, have, as they are viewed to be working on or holding land in trust for male partners, relatives and offspring.

35 (2022). *Decent Work*. International Labour Organisation. <http://bit.ly/3EkfSXi>

36 (2022). *Employment and decent work*. European Commission. <http://bit.ly/3hPAgbb>

Because of time limitations and even more obstacles to political participation, women agricultural workers do not work in environments that value their optimal participation in the expression of concerns, or participation in decision-making. Even the *Chama*, or informal financial merry-go-round entity that many participate in, is usually geared more towards ensuring the financial security that women are mostly denied elsewhere, rather than any focus on becoming politically engaged.³⁷ It is thus clear that the default practice of agricultural labour and production in Africa cannot automatically lend itself to being decent work, and that a lot of effort at the systemic level will have to be put in to ensure these outcomes for African women and gender marginalised people first, and therefore all Africans in agriculture by default.

The word “women” is found only one time in the original agreement that established the AfCFTA, tucked neatly into Article 27 part 2(d), referring only to the export capacity of formal and informal service provision.³⁸ The document, therefore, was established by viewing trade outside the lived experience of structural inequality that the people who undertake it face, and in further evasion of their context as people. The AfCFTA’s follow-up Futures Report, published 2 years later in 2020, seeks to remedy this erasure, but still falls into the trap of considering women in agriculture only through the lens of limited property rights as the main obstacle.³⁹ Considering the learnings from feminist agrarian economists, the role women play in social reproduction, and indeed in the wider labour of ensuring the wellbeing of wage labourers in the market, feeding and caring for the participants of this market, and more, whether they are directly involved in it or not, is still overlooked in the context of the race towards agricultural expansion via trade.⁴⁰

37 (2017). *Empowering Kenya’s Chama Market Women through Advocacy Training*. International Foundation for Electoral Systems. <http://bit.ly/3EojfML>

38 (2018). *Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*. The African Union. <http://bit.ly/3Ee1gZm>

39 (2020). *The Futures Report: Making The AfCFTA Work*. The African Union. <http://bit.ly/3URqaFw>

40 Rao, S. (2020). *Labor and Social Reproduction in Critical Agrarian Studies*. ResearchGate. <http://bit.ly/3tEpDuF>

1.1 CASE STUDY: Seed Savers Network Kenya

The Seed Savers Network in Kenya does work around free and open access to seeds in order to enhance food security and increase the agency and role of farmers in ensuring biodiversity and climate resilience in ever-widening communities. They do this through training farmers directly, empowering farmers to train other farmers, community seed banking and advocacy for farmer rights.

In their gender mainstreaming work, they recognise that women's role as the main custodians of seeds, selecting seeds, ensuring their diversity and health, and storing and exchanging these seeds are doing the analogous unpaid care work in the agricultural sector that they do in the home. This role makes them core in the growing of the subsistence foods that feed rural and wider national households; this work is, however, mostly erased in wider conversations with regard to women's contribution to community wellbeing via agriculture.

Seed Savers Network Kenya also recognises the forced and lowered socio-cultural status of women as detrimental to agricultural outcomes, and thus use agroecological training, strategies and methods to enable women farmers to have more agency as individuals and in groups, encouraging their leadership within the wider society.

Seed Savers contribute to the learning and praxis that dignifies farming, via knowledge sharing and community collaboration, to enable the raised status and respect of farmers, as well as ensuring that the role of women in this labour is centralised, amplified and recognised with a view to tangible increases in the quality of work and outputs.

The case of the Kenyan Seed Savers Network illustrates the invisible labour that women do in agricultural work that does not feature in any recognition of continental free trade: ensuring the multigenerational longevity of farming inputs, guided by cultural ideals. This labour also serves the crucial purpose of contributing towards modernised agriculture by the creation of archives and mutual agroecological learning at micro and small scale. As this has been successful for generations, it is African women who should be lauded for managing to work around the capitalistic framework of intellectual property rights and cutthroat competition to practice mutuality and reciprocation, elimination of trade barriers, enhanced cooperation and non-discrimination, as idealised in the text of the Agreement.

2.0 THE ECONOMIC ELEMENT: BARRIERS TO EQUITABLE AGRICULTURAL TRADE

As each household cannot produce every single product it needs, it has to take part in exchanges of goods and services to get everything it requires. These exchanges are termed as trade which take place in a jurisdiction known as a market.⁴¹ Because these trades are taking place in such large numbers and at a massive scales it, therefore, becomes essential for any state to become deeply involved in how trade happens, and ideally to ensure that trade happens fairly and in a way that accounts for all interests concerned in as equitable a way as possible.

The context of the trade itself on the African continent must be looked at critically. The vast majority of traders work within the informal sector, which is a livelihood source for millions. In West Africa, for example, up to 30 per cent of food crosses borders informally, whether via unregistered traders or via formal routes who are evading detection by customs border machinery.⁴² Among the drivers that cause traders to remain unaccounted for by state machinery include customs inefficiencies, high tariffs and quotas, complex and time-consuming processes, as well as social integration that enables traders to prefer remaining under the radar.⁴³ 70 per cent of informal cross-border traders in Africa are women; this demographic faces specific vulnerabilities that include harassment and abuse in their work, high incidences of corruption and extortion that takes advantage of their gender and lack of state-level protection.⁴⁴

In the context of trade, as regards African agriculture, it is common for women smallholder farmers to grow most of their food for subsistence, availing surpluses for micro-scale trade.⁴⁵ An ongoing pattern that entrenches patriarchy in agricultural trade practice is that women are concentrated at low levels of production, which is also where the labour is most, slowest and most painstaking.⁴⁶ It has been established that food crops tend to be left to women to manage, with designation as cash crops beginning the process of male farmer take-over and domination even when they may not have the required expertise and experience. One example of this is the United States chicken industry after the second world war, where the context of the work was masculinised to push women out once it was evident that it was a profitable space.⁴⁷ There is also the further takeover of land for cash crops which was once used for food crops, creating food insecurity especially when expected incomes from cash crops

41 (2022). *What is Trade? Definition and Meaning*. Market Business News. <http://bit.ly/3V0iyQG>

42 Karoff, T. (2022). *The hidden world of informal African trade*. Forum for Agricultural Risk Management in Development. <http://bit.ly/3ggOfq6>

43 *ibid*

44 (2008). *Unleashing the Potential of Women Informal Cross Border Traders to Transform Intra-African Trade*. UN Women. <http://bit.ly/3UQAGNe>

45 Brenton, P., Gamberoni, E., & Sear, C. (2013). *Women and Trade in Africa: Realizing the Potential*. The World Bank. <http://bit.ly/3AocMAv>

46 Njobe, B. (2015). *Women and Agriculture The Untapped Opportunity in the Wave of Transformation*. The African Development Bank. <http://bit.ly/3TS2RKL>

47 Weber, M. (2018). *All Cooped Up: Gender and Chicken Industry after the Second World War*. Rural Women's Studies. <http://bit.ly/3hVYvw4>

are insecure and unreliable.⁴⁸ The definition of a crop as a cash crop and its rise to dominate how African agriculture is defined (crops grown for export to benefit more powerful nations, relying on the cheapened labour of oppressed populations to flow resources towards their oppressors) is an ongoing conversation in African post-colonial studies.⁴⁹

A lot of agricultural subsistence business is done informally; women tend to take part in exchanges for their produce that are not optimised for profit. Beyond lacking the frame of sound formal business practice even at micro levels, they lack the necessary documentation, business continuity plans and strategies as well as opportunities for access to credit.⁵⁰

One additional challenge that women face is that most of their household-sustaining labours are not considered payable or valuable despite their high cost in time and essential status as regards wider societal and national well-being outcomes.⁵¹ This includes the work needed to create the conditions for the cleanliness of people and environments (ensuring water supply); perform the tasks of cleaning (people, especially children, the elderly, and the ill, as well as the house itself, the clothes people must wear, etc); ensure that food is obtained (subsistence farming that is not for outside trade); ensure the healthy preparation and provision of food (including creating conditions for cooking as well as the manual steps of cooking); and coordinate wider health and welfare of household members (taking the lead on health seeking activity and processes, assisting with educational tasks of others, ensuring adequate participation in family and community life, and more). Far from being a conclusive list of what care work is, it is a glimpse into the fact that all this is essential work; all household members would not be able to take part in other activities without this care work which is mostly done by women, and to which women have to add all other labours. The unpaid and unrecognised value of care work in the household, and the undervalued and feminised nature of care work in other sectors and contexts, is a core characteristic of the wider injustice that is systemic patriarchy.⁵² It is also central, however, erased in conversations about the state's progress, despite its significant contribution to ongoing public welfare and wellbeing.

A further resource that women have limited access to is knowledge and education. Farming methods have changed radically over the past few decades, and many Africans, especially women, who have pieces of land they are farming on for subsistence, do not have easy access to cutting edge knowledge, such as how to grow organic crops using standardised methods that might fetch a higher price in the open market.⁵³ One example that weaponizes gender roles

48 Hashmiu, I., Agbenyega, O., & Dawoe, E. (2022). *Cash crops and food security: evidence from smallholder cocoa and cashew farmers in Ghana*. Biomed Central. <http://bit.ly/3AqiFxa>

49 Darkoh, M. B. K., & Ould-Mey, M. (1992). *CASH CROPS VERSUS FOOD CROPS IN AFRICA: A CONFLICT BETWEEN DEPENDENCY AND AUTONOMY*. JSTOR. <http://bit.ly/3Ep1ltD>

50 Mbithi, L. M. (2013). *Barriers Faced By Women-Owned Businesses: Perspectives of Women from East African Community*. CORE. <http://bit.ly/3OhcFwk>

51 Charmes, J. (2019). *The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market. An analysis of time use data based on the latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys*. International Labour Organisation. <http://bit.ly/3V2PFU8>

52 Berg, W. V. D. (2021). *Africa: Unpaid Care Work Still Falls On Women - Seven Steps That Could Shift the Balance*. All Africa. <http://bit.ly/3V7Ag4P>

53 Duckett, M. K. (2022). *Empowering female farmers to feed the world*. National

against the success of women in agriculture, and therefore in agricultural trade, is the purposeful exclusion of women from conversations about mechanising labour, which would allow for larger and faster agricultural activity, thereby reducing time poverty and increasing yields.⁵⁴ Because women are not deemed worthy of these lessons, and because their time is consumed in care work as detailed above, a factor that would increase their profits in agricultural trade is thus turned into an obstacle.

Due to the amount of time that is taken from women performing care work duties such as childcare and care for the elderly or the ill, and even dual care duties such as first fetching firewood and water to then cook or clean, women may not have time to attend classes even if these are offered by agricultural extension offices and their personnel.⁵⁵ Further still, the digital gender gap further works to limit women's access to knowledge, that most ideally would also have to be made available at reading levels and in languages that they are fluent in, beyond the women needing access to internet-enabled devices and reliable Wi-Fi or data provisions.⁵⁶

A lot of crops in Africa are grown to then be exported so that further processing can be done, which is essentially value addition. It is here that raw materials can be preserved and stored for longer, or even be separated into elemental constituents that can then be used in a variety of ways, or even processed into completely different outputs. This is true of both food and non-food crops. The vast majority of this technical knowledge is sequestered in higher education forums, which the vast majority do not have access to as discussed above. The infrastructure and knowledge needed to do profitable value addition in Africa would need significant investment. In this regard, the suggested tariff liberalisation intentions of the AfCFTA would, would by no means, have to be considered. The Agreement's intention is currently to eliminate tariffs on 90 per cent of goods traded in Africa, alongside dealing with non-tariff barriers and making real moves towards enhancing the free movement of people. This has the potential to uplift African women farmers, who currently pay higher tariffs to move their products within the continent than European and Asian countries do.⁵⁷

As mentioned before, the Agreement is designed to favour formalised trading mechanisms, which means that African women agricultural practitioners who are trading in food and non-food crops that enjoy higher commercial are best placed to engage with this if they incorporate, or if they join cooperatives which can do collective negotiation and bargaining on their behalf. There can be gaps here if there is no hybrid approach to farming, which allows women farmers to take a hybrid approach to grow desired crops, mixing food crops needed for subsistence use at home, with crops that have higher commercial market value. This strategy would, therefore, make the most sense if the farmers already

Geographic. <http://bit.ly/3hUpWim>

54 Cele, L., Adelfang-Hodgson, I., Boateng, M. I., & Abio, E. M. (2020). *Empowering women through mechanisation: Where are the opportunities?* Rural21. <http://bit.ly/3AsMm0k>

55 Adedeye, O., Fabusoro, E., Sodiya, C. I., & Fapojuwo, O. (2021). *Gender differences in time-poverty among rural households in Southwest Nigeria*. JARTS. <http://bit.ly/3hY859Z>

56 Kapiyo, V. (2022). *Bridging the Gender Digital Divide is Critical for Achieving Digital Rights in Africa*. Cipesa. <http://bit.ly/3gkCK0M>

57 Ighobor, K. (2020). *AfCFTA: Africa Ready for Free Trade Come 2021*. Africa Renewal. <https://bit.ly/3hGAKRu>

had product diversity in this way. Cooperatives can also begin conversations around either taking on value-addition processes themselves, exporting value-added products, buying equity or making other profit-sharing agreements with relevant stakeholders in order to increase the incomes of their members. This underscores the need for African women with business qualifications to enter the agricultural sector with their expertise in managing these cooperatives and collaborations to the benefit of all the farmers, as well as using this platform to better educate African women farmers to maximise their profit-making potential as collaborative members and as individuals. It bears mentioning that African women farmers, much like the American women chicken farmers mentioned prior, have to face the gendered disadvantages of success; with any prestige gained from the rising profile of a crop, or any profit margin increases, men can move into the space, seeking dominance and taking over in the name of maintaining social, familial and community gender norms. This means that any successful cooperatives would have to have further strategic conversations with women's rights groups and other human rights stakeholders to push against harmful gender socialisation, to create space for women's agricultural successes.

In this view, the AfCFTA is essentially an agreement between states to catalyse the formalisation of trade across sectors as a means to quantify it for the measurement of growth. Without any understanding that the trading African is not a monolith person, and the context in which they trade both within and across borders is similarly layered and complex, the agreement shoots even its lofty aspirations in the foot. The follow-up AfCFTA Futures writeup assumes the same hypothesis, namely that the biggest opportunities for African youth and women to gain from the AfCFTA are found in the context of formalised trade, rather than in realising the potential in strengthening businesses, strengthening business owners, reducing barriers to knowledge, increasing digital access, and improving access to finance first, to build the necessary trust with the public, before taking on the role of census official and business/tax regulator. At the very baseline, there is an assumption that an open border will facilitate increased opportunities for all Africans across the board; this is not true. Openness is no guarantee of trade-supportive environments and does not enhance the competitiveness of businesses themselves, assuming that those taking advantage of the open border do so ready to be efficient and succeed in competition when the Micro,-Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSME) failure rates in Africa, more so among women, say otherwise.⁵⁸ Premature exposure of agricultural trade MSMEs to markets they are not ready for will first of all catalyse their early failure and death, as well as limit their possibilities for the traders economic gains, especially women who do not have as many opportunities and resources to try and fail as men.⁵⁹ It also assumes that benign and healthy competitive trade can easily take place in the wider context of pan-African collaboration, without specific guidance and oversight.

58 Njobe, B. (2015). *Women and Agriculture The Untapped Opportunity in the Wave of Transformation*. The African Development Bank. <http://bit.ly/3TS2RKl>

59 Mollick, E. (2015). *Why are women less likely to be entrepreneurs than men?* World Economic Forum. <http://bit.ly/3EMx89i>

2.1 CASE STUDY:

Digital Training and Support for Rural Women to Increase Market Access

The vast majority of focus on bridging the digital gender gap goes towards programs for girls in schools. This leaves out the population of adult women who are already out of school and may have little hope or intention for a return, but who would still greatly benefit from increased access to these skills and devices, especially in rural areas where the spread of information, knowledge and maintenance of networks is limited by access to infrastructure like roads, transport possibilities, and more.

Digital literacy courses should, therefore, be designed with the success of this demographic in mind; they have to account for the fact that these women have limited time to themselves, in their key roles as caregivers and agricultural workers. They also have to sacrifice deep conceptual learning, which could be useful in bridging literacy gaps, for a wider scope, especially with focus on how this access can in the immediate and short terms increase their ability to earn income with input that is not too technically challenging. The women may themselves have limited literacy, as regards reading and numeracy skills, having diverse entry and exit points into formal education. As such, programming around digital access would have to make things both easy to follow and understand, communicating what can be layered and challenging concepts in ways that can be easily understood. One such successful platform is Scientific Animations Without Borders, which has created videos with several topics and thematic areas ranging from agricultural processes to women's empowerment. Animation products have had far better uptake than more traditional learning methods. This program has had significant success in Mozambique, successfully enabling several villages from Africa to South America have access to safe drinking water.⁶⁰

Ideal digital literacy training would also have to incorporate the effective use of social media and social media networks to establish and remain part of mutually beneficial networks and groups, where people can exchange knowledge, access tools and more, as well as organise, enabling them to become more powerful advocates for their rights and wellbeing. Training would also enable access to marketing capabilities, as well as to credit services, even though women would need parallel business learning to guard them against falling for predatory lenders.

Many digital training facilities would need to be established alongside ways for women to get access to devices, even if they had to pay for these over a period of time, and also ensure internet access at greatly subsidised rates, for this learning to be sustainable. In places where women's ownership and access to devices are controlled as a function of patriarchy, further social and community engagement by their duty-bearers and influential stakeholders would also need to take place to protect women from any violence that could come from viewing their changed social status as a threat. A research in Ghana that focused on market women found that the hypervisibility of this demographic in the processes of their work stirred up what has been described as patriarchal anxiety, due to the stigmatisation of women in public as hypersexual and seeking sexual connections and

60 Ambrose, E. E. (2021). *Scientific Animations Without Borders Scales Knowledge For Impact*. Purdue University College of Agriculture. <https://bit.ly/3POaMrC>

participating in sexual activity.⁶¹ As such, and as mentioned before, bridging digital gender gaps also calls for wider social norm education to support communities in accepting women's increased access and potential success.

The fact that digital literacy, is in and of itself, such a hurdle illustrates how important it is that the challenges women and gender-marginalised people face are being dealt with through multi-pronged strategies in a multidisciplinary way. For instance, homing a lot of knowledge on agroecological methods, engagements with networks for negotiating better salaries and work environments, and increased marketing capacity is all moot if the women are not able to engage with each other in a sustainable way online or via technology, phones and smart devices. As such, instead of trying to deal with women's education and women's digital access as separate matters, it may be crucial to come at these issues as one, and deal with the challenge of siloed approaches: even agricultural engagement must open the door to this approach, beyond the terminology of "gender mainstreaming".

The AfCFTA original document does not mention digital, virtual or internet contexts in any way, shape or form, which creates a real policy gap as regards trade itself, and the facilitation of the same for Africans. The follow-up Futures document refers to digital trade as inevitable and can locate the need to catalyse digital literacy in order to enable wider gains by 70 per cent of African people who are not online. The document also makes careful note of the opportunity for young Africans to rise as digital service producers across sectors, and not just consumers of the rest of the world's products.⁶²

61 Bello-Bravo, J, and Lutomia, A. (2020). Changing Formal and Informal Learning Practices Using Smartphones: The Case of Market Women of Ghana. Environmental and Agricultural Informatics: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications. <https://bit.ly/3YLSjAg>

62 (2020). *The Futures Report: Making The AfCFTA Work*. The African Union. <http://bit.ly/3URqaFw>

3.0 THE FEMINIST POLICY ELEMENT: AFCFTA MEETS AGRICULTURAL EXPANSION, AGRO-ECOLOGY AND BIG COMMERCIAL FARMING

The AfCFTA can be seen to have a top-down approach that over-emphasises individual nation-states abilities to legislate proper market behaviour into being via organograms of ministers and high-level civil servants, and endless sub-policy and legal documentation with attendant training to ensure behavioural alignment by the requisite officials. In many ways, the AfCFTA is a document that is ready to engage in already successful trade activities as well as with formalised entities. It is, however, not as equipped to engage in ensuring success from the ground up with agricultural practitioners in general, and with traders in particular. It is even less cognisant of the different demographic contexts and constraints of African women, which then makes it a gender-blind document, much like many other national trade policies. As such, it amplifies the erasure of specific contexts, which would then carry forward the lack of supportive infrastructure if implemented as is without necessary revisions and adjustments to reflect an awareness of the continent's diversity of practitioners.

The reduction and elimination of tariff barriers, for instance, is one aim of the Agreement which revolves around duties and varied taxes, and non-tariff barriers, which are the universe of preventive factors that limit international trade. From the AfCFTA perspective, non-tariff barriers include national-level factors, such as quotas, embargoes, sanctions and other obstacles to trade. As of now, the one method that has been put in place is a reporting mechanism, where the participating traders are co-opted to more unpaid work to debug the system by reporting on the issues they face and waiting for government feedback.⁶³ As such, the state would wait for the trader to experience the violence, harassment, abuse or inconvenience of whatever undefined category, then trust that its legal framework would solve the issue. This also creates a situation where the traders incur time and other resource losses to help the state clean up their processes; the state will not help them with an easier trading process. The state's co-option of invisibility and unpaid care work from women, at the household level, is therefore repeated here in the implementation of trade policy, taking advantage of the trader's desire for smoother international trade.

From this exploration of the barriers women face in engagement in agricultural trade on the continent, it can be seen that the AfCFTA has engaged in oversights and valued optimism over reality. One of the goals of the AfCFTA is agricultural expansion, envisioned as a path to agricultural and industrial development, being a solid means to end food insecurity. Feminist agrarian scholars posit that Africans themselves, and specifically African rural women farmers, in their thousands, have been on the front lines of bridging food insecurity gaps at the household level. The fact that their efforts do not extend to the entire nation does not create a uniform gap in food security, but rather one where the limits of the individual should not be read as the limits of the system. A further

⁶³ (2022). *AfCFTA support programme to eliminate non-tariff barriers, increase regulatory transparency and promote industrial diversification*. UNCTAD. <http://bit.ly/3Gu9wXW>

argument is that because of precarious circumstances, the global South worker moves in and out of roles as the availability of resources and labour shifts, as explained by *Professor Smriti Rao*: “they may be wage workers for a time, traders for a while, find themselves as employers during times of surplus and rely on others during another time.”⁶⁴ Again, temporary availabilities of different work at different times can create a situation where the state’s intention to count and track a sector participant can be foiled, despite the diversity of incomes the worker can access. As such, because their contributions may consist of many smaller elements, which would have to be summed up, instead of one larger one, the AfCFTA would have to create a framework for understanding the African agricultural gig worker.

In considering potential paths to agricultural expansion, two key options can be explored; agroecology and big commercial farming. The agroecological context in Africa has invited a lot of controversies. On the one hand, some countries, such as Senegal, have embraced its potential to reduce severe hunger, noting a reduction from 17% to 9% in 15 years, along with improved soil quality and yield, reduced use of chemical inputs, and increased producer incomes.⁶⁵ They were also quick to note that supportive policy frameworks were the key that unlocked this favourable emerging reality. Agroecological principles include optimising the organic matter composition of the soil, strengthening soil immunity through enhancing functional biodiversity, ensuring beneficial biological synergies in agricultural processes, and more. In strong contrast to big commercial farming which has a focus on size and speed of output, and is known for exhausting natural and other resources, as well as having detrimental effects on workers, agroecology works within the context of climate change and finite resources, and in many ways, dials opt to work with the environment as it prefers to be at its most optimal. This in some ways mirrors the low input, relatively low-tech farming methods already used for generations by African women smallholder practitioners, just elevated slightly with more scientific evidence from all over the world. While agroecological methods are costly to implement as regards time and initial resources, their benefits are much more corporate to both people and the environment. Feminist ecologists like researcher *Ruth Nyambura* cautions that even the purest agroecological intention can still be implemented with patriarchal hierarchies inherent. She also cautions against the use of the family as an agricultural framework, noting the common reliance of this definition to mask patriarchal dominance and the extraction of women’s labour for its maintenance.⁶⁶

Naysayers to this say that it is possible for big commercial farming methods, in their turn, to be made sustainable; they argue that to alleviate food insecurity and extreme hunger needs there is need to employ high tech inputs, especially improved seeds, fertilisers and mechanised techniques to ensure faster high yields.⁶⁷ These methods called the “Green Revolution”⁶⁸ are also being pushed

64 Rao, S. (2020). *Labor and Social Reproduction in Critical Agrarian Studies*. ResearchGate. <http://bit.ly/3tEpDuF>

65 Wise, T., & Belay, M. (2021). *Time to transition to agroecology in Africa*. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. <http://bit.ly/3hWVfZz>

66 Merino, J. (2017). *Women Speak: Ruth Nyambura Insists On A Feminist Political Ecology*. Ms. Magazine. <http://bit.ly/3hW3EwA>

67 Lyons, K. (2017). *Only modernised commercial farms will fill Africa's plate, economists warn*. The Guardian. <http://bit.ly/3ApmLp6>

68 (2022). *Green Revolution - Definition*. Collins Dictionary Online. <http://bit.ly/3VcWfr9>

by donors as the advent of modern farming heralded in the aforementioned Africa Union Agenda 2063. The aim of big commercial farming has been repurposed to have a social impact beyond the maximisation of profit; its success would result in vastly increased job opportunities across skill levels, increased incomes in relation to this, and the achievement of sustainable development goals by eliminating severe hunger and poverty.⁶⁹ Further calls for this reiterate an exit from old colonial methods where forced labour was used to generate food and cash crops purely for export, especially after the displacement of hundreds of people. It has been argued that the new farms don't begin in this way, while data has determined that to augment the success and expansion of these massive plantations, displacement is still on the table.⁷⁰

Other models for this include medium-scale farms, often run by people with access to education, local market knowledge and access to operational and capital expenditure resources. The main issue with this model is that the profits all go towards these already privileged owners and limit local input to the purchase of goods for consumption or wage workers subject to the vagaries of an employer.⁷¹ There is also contract farming, which replaces the oft-villainised super-profit hunting middleman with an agro-processing company that then takes the farmer's direct outputs.⁷² Representation by an app has caused many to call this agrotech innovation, but the disadvantages faced by individual farmers facing unfavourable terms are very much real, not virtual. One more model is the farmer-owned cooperative, where several farmers come together to join their lands and harmonise their processes to minimise the cost of inputs, thus collectively benefiting from new knowledge, sharing the costs of experimentation or the losses of failures, and maximising successes across the board. Even these, sadly, can be sullied by socioeconomic factors, where some farmers are richer than others and thus have more say, poor management of the cooperative, and more.

One further consideration is the movement across borders of seeds, traditional, agricultural bits of knowledge and technologies, which are mostly imagined to be limited to the individual's jurisdiction (family, village or immediate community) when the reality is that borders become sites of dynamic exchange in this regard. The legal movement of these would immediately create conflict and tensions, as national or county/federal agricultural values, goals and intentions differ from country to country. However, at the small-scale level, there has been, and continues to be, a lot more freedom in these barterers. For products and services to move in meaningful ways, a feminist consideration would locate that necessitating safe and sustainable movement of the person first would be a critical first step in ascertaining the movement of services, and would then create a better framework for the movement of goods to be more valued as being in Africa for Africans. However, if Africans themselves cannot move with any assurances of safety or care, it becomes difficult to place the products and services these Africans provide in any kind of trade context that is optimised for mutual, incremental, ongoing gains. The AfCFTA therefore would have to cycle back to added considerations from other intersecting and cross-cutting

69 Hall, R., Tsikata, D., & Scoones, I. (2017). *The pros and cons of commercial farming models in Africa*. The Conversation. <http://bit.ly/3TOI5v2>

70 Hall, R., Tsikata, D., & Scoones, I. (2017). *The pros and cons of commercial farming models in Africa*. The Conversation. <http://bit.ly/3TOI5v2>

71 *ibid*

72 *ibid*

policies, and parties to its implementation would have to engage beyond trade to ensure that the status of the person, citizen or resident participating in this trade is considered so that effective trade can be a by-product of this. At a large-scale level, a lot of nuances would be needed to walk the fine line between what is considered the knowledge of the commons, shared by ethnic groups which transcend the nation-state border, and knowledge considered to be of national interest, which the AfCFTA intends to protect via intellectual property policy, negotiated room for member states to protect specific industries by limiting competition, and rules of origin guidelines.⁷³

3.1 CASE STUDY: AGRA – Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)⁷⁴ is an organisation purported to be rooted in smallholder farmer communities and working towards the gains of smallholder farmers, by ensuring increased yields and incomes by providing access to inputs, knowledge, support, credit and markets. In the context of the often state-abandoned smallholder farmer, this can sound like a dream come true. In one example, women in Mozambique were resourced to access combined harvesters, which were intended to promote agro-industry by processing support of corn, soybeans and beans.⁷⁵ In another example, despite the lack of access to title deeds, which is a common issue for women farmers, Kenyan women were able to access credit that helped bring about massive improvements and profits on their farms.⁷⁶

However, AGRA's methodology has received criticism from many. Some studies show that the claims of increased yields are unsubstantiated, with little to no difference before AGRA came along and during their periods of intervention.⁷⁷ Their state-level interventions, in pushing increased yields through improved seeds, have upon analysis revealed significant gains for seed and fertiliser companies over the food producers themselves. *Ashley Fent* of AGRA WATCH further problematises the patronising racial dynamics of behavioural change training, especially as regards changing gender norms, saying AGRA focused on white program officer intervention to save Global South women from Global South men.⁷⁸ This is a troubling repeat of colonial dynamics. Beyond this, AGRA and similar interventions consider African women blank slates ready to receive and implement AGRA-provided knowledge, as opposed to having their knowledge and expertise that is site-specific and already relevant.⁷⁹ In this, they also replicate

73 Ndonga, D. (2021). *Rules of Origin as a Key to the AfCFTA's Success: Lessons that can be Drawn from the Regional Experience*. Afronomics Law. <http://bit.ly/3TO15v2>

74 (2022). *Landing Page*. AGRA. <http://bit.ly/3V4Cm5e>

75 (2019). *Women entrepreneurs are generating agro-industries and rural jobs in Gurué – Mozambique*. AGRA. <http://bit.ly/3hYpFel>

76 Njagi, K. (2019). *Savings but no title deed? Loans help Kenyan women turn idle land into gold*. AGRA. <http://bit.ly/3GrcufR>

77 Mkindi, A. R., Maina, A., & Urhan, J. (2020). *False Promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)*. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. <http://bit.ly/3GpAW1j>

78 Fent, A. M. (2012). *Philanthropy and Sovereignty: A Critical Feminist Exploration of the Gates Foundation's Approach to Gender and Agricultural Development*. Compressed Air Gas Institute. <http://bit.ly/3TQTz1g>

79 *ibid*

patronising governmental relationships that had already caused farmers harm for generations. Further, critiques echoed that these projects, were considered failed after millions of dollars were spent, and thousands of farmers ending up in debt and no real measurable gains to show for it. AGRA stood to learn, from their massive flaws, with special regard to feminist methodology in embracing the values of listening, valuing local inputs, mutual learning, and collaborative creation.⁸⁰ Further noted is that rather than discouraging agroecology, these ambitious white elephants demonstrated a stronger case in favour of it.⁸¹

This use-case demonstrates that the AfCFTA approach would have favoured a Green Revolution approach, especially as regards its focus on industrial methods to increase incomes and prosperity. Agro-ecological methods are completely overlooked in the source document, and in future documents, referred to as a marketing gimmick to ensure the export of goods under “climate-friendly” marketing. Climate change in general, one of the biggest factors informing the change to agroecological methodology, is discussed in a very top-line way, as a wider systemic issue to respond to, with no specific reference to agroecology. The African Center for Biodiversity has made submissions to support the use case for the AfCFTA in enhancing people and nature-centred food systems, discouraging the use of the intellectual property to reduce crop diversity and organic seed distribution, as well as prevent corporate absorption of African and other global South smallholder innovations, traditional knowledge, and related agricultural practices.⁸²

80 Oliver, B., Deawuo, L. A., & Rao, S. (2022). *A Food Sovereignty Approach to Localization in International Solidarity*. Societies. <http://bit.ly/3Olld4bf>

81 Belay, M., & Mugambe, B. (2021). *Bill Gates Should Stop Telling Africans What Kind of Agriculture Africans Need*. Scientific American. <http://bit.ly/3TQmdiM>

82 (2020). *Commentary submitted to FAO discussion on the AfCFTA as it relates to food and agriculture*. African Center for Biodiversity. <http://bit.ly/3EMzwwg>

4.0 CONCLUSION

Following the AU's declaration of 2020 to 2030 as the Decade of Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion⁸³, it becomes necessary that the lived realities of women are considered in every ambitious policy and regulatory intention. The status of women is well enumerated in many documents published by the United Nations, the AU and individual governments themselves; but by and large, the participation of women themselves at all levels, especially the grassroots, and further as cross-sectoral women's networks with understandings that parallel and interact with agriculture, such as informal sectors, MSME's, civil society, academia, STEM and the media, is wanting. This amplifies any non-responsiveness of existing policy statements and resulting ideas. Further, the limited political will in implementation is another barrier to national or even bilateral, multilateral or regional level impact, and demonstrates the gaps between what there currently is and what can possibly be.

Without the strategic support, collective resourcing and systemic empowerment needed to enable African women agricultural practitioners to firmly take their place with full agency and confidence, their premature subjection to the AfCFTA's combination of vague support and strong free trade mechanics could alleviate agrarian distress, especially with increased rural-urban migration of men, as has been seen in India.⁸⁴ The current AfCFTA also attempts a thin balance between active enhancement of free market conditions and slight concessions to protectionist policies in special circumstances, which can be confusing as this is left up to member states to decide and define, with the assumption that they will do so, in ways that accord fair treatments to other member states. This has created room for misinterpretations and misunderstandings at the national and regional levels where the East African Community (EAC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and other similar bodies take precedence. In addition, excessive liberalisation can further enhance the marginalisation of African women smallholder farmers, if not carefully strategized, with all nuances concerning specific crops and specific trade engagements considered.

It is notable that since colonial times, African rural women with peasant livelihoods have recognised that their labour is the base extraction point, ensuring the survival of wage labourers and the growth of capitalist structures through, adjunct agricultural labour, and co-option of their reproductive agency to coerce further human contribution to the labour pool.⁸⁵ Their organisation and resistance to this, separate from men, is an oft erased point in history which unlocked and catalysed wider colonial independence struggles, as the women saw themselves, their labour and the land as one, and rightfully refused all efforts by violent settler-colonialists to co-opt these. Rama Salla Dieng in conversation with Lyn Ossome further notes that while care work contributes to wage labour and thus capitalism, capitalistic models are unable to substantively share their

83 (2020). *Press Release: A new Decade of Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion - Why Scaling Up Actions is Inevitable*. African Union. <http://bit.ly/3Grr9rB>

84 Pattlnak, I., Lahiri-Dutt, K., Lockie, S., & Pritchard, B. (2017). *The feminization of agriculture or the feminization of agrarian distress? Tracking the trajectory of women in agriculture in India*. Taylor & Francis Online. <http://bit.ly/3UQCVjC>

85 Ossome, L. (2021). *Pedagogies of Feminist Resistance: Agrarian Movements in Africa*. Sage Journals. <https://bit.ly/3OIWbCU>

gains back, as their whole point is the extraction from some for the profit of others.⁸⁶ This view implies caution at excessive optimism that profitable trade and impactful developmental outcomes are capable of creating the lasting and multigenerational systemic change needed in the real, lived socioeconomic circumstances of African women in agriculture.

As such, a true feminist strategy to shift the AfCFTA in radical and significant ways to assist African women in agriculture would be to insist on the status of the individual woman first, the family in all its possible diverse forms and expressions outside patriarchal norms, and the wider community, with the Agreement framed as a strategy towards their wellbeing. The AfCFTA, and all its follow-up annexes, national policies and evolutions could do with more listening to African women, in agriculture and other sectors, in order to be more nuanced and responsive to their real needs and lives, and in so doing, respond to the sectors they work in.⁸⁷ People-centred trade, rather than trade-centred policy, is thus the key to agricultural growth in Africa that is honest about who the bulk of their practitioners are, and what these practitioners can both gain and give to the work of feeding the continent and building its economic gains and reserves.

86 Ossome, L. (2022). *Feminist political economy, land, and decolonisation: Rama Salla Dieng in conversation with Lyn Ossome*. Developing Economics. <http://bit.ly/3EIT8X5>

87 Ojwang, H. J., Kabira, W. M., & Ogada, P. A. (2021). *Philosophical Foundations of African Women's Indigenous Knowledge for Food Security: Towards Narrative Feminist Knowledge for Food Security*. Nova South Eastern University Florida. <http://bit.ly/3u1dkc5>

