

Generating Inclusive and Sustainable Growth: Challenging Neoliberal Approaches to Gender Mainstreaming in Regional Economic Integration in Africa

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Abstract

The introduction of The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) is the most recent attempt to attain inclusive and sustainable growth through economic integration. The policies of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) prioritise reductions in tariffs; increased ease in the mobility of goods, services, and people among member states; access to sub-regional, regional, and global markets; and changing the position of the continent in global value chains. The very role of the RECs in mitigating the uneven effects of globalisation has been questioned. Prioritising gender equality has been championed as a mechanism to ensure that women are incorporated into these processes in ways that benefit rather than exploit them. Based on experiences, regional integration is unlikely to attain these aims if it is based on the same neoliberal logics responsible for the existing global inequities and domestic, sub-regional, and regional inequalities. This study uses African feminist theories to examine the gender mainstreaming provisions of the AfCFTA, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and Southern African Development Community (SADC) to assess their perpetuation of neoliberal frameworks. The agreements are further evaluated through contemporary Pan-African approaches for attaining regional integration. The qualitative content analysis of the gender equality provisions of all three agreements reveals four core features of persistent neoliberal and neo-colonial frameworks: a) success measured as

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increasing the presence of women (descriptive inclusion only) in economic sectors, b) women not centred as decision-makers setting policy priorities, c) absence of a formal monitoring role for women to continuously assess the effectiveness of the agreements, and d) constraints on the negotiating power of workers through supranational economic institutions.

Keywords: Regional economic Integration, Gender Equality, Neoliberalism, Pan-Africanism

Résumé

La création de la Zone de libre-échange continentale africaine (ZLECAf) est la tentative la plus récente ayant pour but d'atteindre une croissance inclusive et durable par le biais de l'intégration économique. Les politiques des Communautés économiques régionales (CER) donnent la priorité à la réduction des droits de douane, à l'amélioration de la mobilité des biens, des services et des personnes entre les États membres, à l'accès aux marchés sous-régionaux, régionaux et mondiaux, et à l'évolution de la position du continent dans les chaînes de valeur mondiales. Le rôle même des CER dans l'atténuation des effets inégaux de la mondialisation a été remis en question. La priorité accordée à l'égalité des genres a été défendue comme un mécanisme permettant d'intégrer les femmes dans ces processus de manière qu'elles en tirent des bénéfices plutôt que d'être exploitées. L'expérience montre que l'intégration régionale a peu de chances d'atteindre ces objectifs si elle repose sur les mêmes logiques néolibérales responsables des inégalités mondiales existantes et des inégalités nationales, sous-régionales et régionales. Cette étude s'appuie sur les théories féministes africaines pour examiner les dispositions relatives à l'intégration de la dimension de genre de la ZLECAf, de la Communauté économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEDEAO) et de la Communauté de développement de l'Afrique australe (SADC) afin d'évaluer leur perpétuation des cadres néolibéraux. Les accords sont également évalués à travers des approches panafricaines contemporaines pour l'intégration régionale. L'analyse qualitative du contenu des dispositions relatives à l'égalité des genres des trois accords révèle quatre caractéristiques essentielles des cadres néolibéraux et néocoloniaux persistants : a) le succès est mesuré en fonction de l'augmentation de la présence des femmes (inclusion descriptive uniquement) dans les secteurs économiques,

b) les femmes ne sont pas considérées comme des décideurs fixant les priorités politiques, c) il y a absence d'un rôle formel de suivi pour les femmes afin d'évaluer en permanence l'efficacité des accords, et d) le pouvoir de négociation des travailleurs est limité à travers les institutions économiques supranationales..

Mots clés: intégration économique régionale, égalité des genres, néolibéralisme, panafricanisme..

Introduction

Immediately post-independence new heads of state recognised that securing economic stability and maintaining political sovereignty were mutually reinforcing goals (Nkrumah, 1963; Nyerere, 1987; Nzewi, 2009). In fact, both political leaders and activists argued that the institutional legacies of colonialism were unlikely to be reversed if self-determination and autonomy were not established and retained (Gibb 2009; Nkrumah, 1963). These ideologies were a central feature of Pan-African movements around decolonisation and resistance to neo-colonialism (Gumede, 2019). Regional integration was touted as a way forward by Nkrumah, Nyerere and other newly elected heads of state (Gumede, 2019). They believed that cultivating integration at the continental level could yield the following: a) fiscal autonomy, b) prioritisation of the needs of the most excluded groups, c) collective bargaining around trade and tariffs and protectionist policies for domestic and local industries, d) labour that is free from exploitation, and e) the cultivation of states that are responsive to the needs of all citizens (Hailu, 2015). General agreement on the outcomes shifted the focus to outlining strategies most likely to attain and institutionalise integration (Ofori et al., 2021). The points of contention between the Casablanca Group and Monrovia Group were largely concentrated around whether incremental efforts through Regional Economic Communities (RECs) or continent-wide approaches which included political integration would achieve the type of fiscal security which prioritised the interests of all populations, in particular those groups that had been marginalised by the colonial state (Abbas and Mama, 2014). Ultimately and with much consternation, the establishment of geographically based RECs became the way forward. Over eight RECs were established between 1967 and 1998: the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Intergovernmental

Authority on Development (IGAD), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD). Despite having active RECs in place for over 56 years regional integration remains elusive for a host of reasons including lack of institutional capacity, failure to protect economically vulnerable groups, the reinforcement of existing structural and gender inequalities, and the presence of neoliberal frameworks.

The creation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA)¹, which entered into force on May 30th 2019, represents another attempt to attain integration, this time using a continent-wide approach. There is a clear need for regional integration. Trade within East, West and Southern African RECs remain higher on average than within other groups (UNECA, 2023). The African Development Bank (ADB) designates East Africa as the region with one of the fastest-growing economies². East Africa is poised to be a key economic hub in the areas of information technology and agricultural commodities markets (UNECA, 2023). The deepening of trade networks through the EAC is responsible in part for the high rates of growth among member states³. At the aggregate level, estimations of intra-regional trade breakdown are as follows: Africa 13%, Europe 69%, and Asia 59%.⁴ These patterns are significant because increasing trade within the region can help strengthen domestic and local economies, bolster collective trade agreements, facilitate the sharing of intellectual and technological resources, and provide the infrastructure required to diversify economies (Jibkou, 2015). The ability of regional cooperation to support political stability, and at times human rights, through institutional support and norms is another benefit (Jibkou, 2015).

The passage of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA)⁵ and the African Union's (AU) 2063 Agenda⁶ both emphasise the critical role of regional economic integration in accomplishing their goals. The AfCFTA seeks

1 <https://au-afcfta.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/AfCFTA-Agreement-Legally-scrubbed-signed-16-May-2018.pdf>

2 <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa/east-africa-overview>

3 <https://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/49729/b12032669.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

4 <https://hbs.unctad.org/trade-structure-by-partner/#:~:text=Intra%2Dregional%20trade%20was%20most,most%20trade%20was%20extra%2Dregional.>

5 <https://au-afcfta.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/AfCFTA-Agreement-Legally-scrubbed-signed-16-May-2018.pdf>

6 https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063_popular_version_en.pdf

to attain sustainable growth on the continent by increasing trade, the mobility of labour, and technology exchanges. The agreement argues that this is the most effective way to harness the fiscal and natural resources, and the intellectual capital of the region toward a collective economic agenda. Some of the top policy priorities include integrating the “informal” economy into the “formal” economy, developing more robust small and medium-sized firms, altering the place of African countries in global value chains, and addressing gender inequalities. These goals and strategies promoted by the AfCFTA are consistent with those undertaken by the existing RECs and Regional Integration Organisations (RIOs) on the continent. These initiatives by the AU also indicate that gender equality is essential and must be mainstreamed into all policy frameworks.

The primary focus of this work is to determine if the gender equality components of regional integration policies are transformative or perpetuate the status quo. The rest of the paper examines the broader theoretical justifications for promoting regional economic integration in general and in the Africa region specifically. Integration efforts are examined through Pan-Africanism to assess the extent to which current interventions reflect the ideologies of post-independence movements or more neoliberal priorities. Neoliberalism is defined as an ideology that promotes “obscuring practices that serve to entrench inequalities based on both gender and class, both oppressions being mutually constitutive.” (Ossome, 2015). In this paper neoliberalism refers to both the economic model and how it is used to govern decisions and policy frameworks (governmentality) (Foucault, 1991; Ong, 2006). This paper explores the ways in which these neoliberal approaches are translated into policies for economic growth and are used to measure their effectiveness. The efforts to decolonise these frameworks using African feminist critiques of the uneven effects of globalisation are included. The implications of neoliberalism as a policy implementation method are discussed. Next the methodological approach including the ways in which I am operationalising neoliberal gender mainstreaming in the regional integration policies is explained. The evaluation of the AfCFTA, ECOWAS, and SADC provisions is outlined and analysed. I conclude by making recommendations for rejecting neoliberal logics in regional integration efforts and gender mainstreaming and suggest some future directions for research.

Pan-Africanist Approaches To Regional Economic Integration

There is an extensive history of efforts toward regional integration on the continent, including the following key trade agreements: the 1977 Kinshasa

Declaration and the Monrovia Declaration,⁷ which focused on national and regional self-reliance through social and economic development; the Lagos Plan of Action⁸ in 1980; the Abuja Treaty⁹ 1991 which established the African Economic Community – including the Pan-African Parliament, Economic and Social Commission, the Court of Justice, and the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA)¹⁰ Agreement signed in June 2015. The RECs are seen as an initial first step in integrating the economies across the continent (Hailu, 2015). The benefits of regional integration include strengthening the capacity of countries with different economies of scale to engage in collective bargaining and pool resources to increase their competitiveness in global markets (Geda, A., and Kebret 2008). It also allows states to capture sub-regional and regional markets and create the infrastructure required to strengthen domestic private sectors (Hailu, 2015). Integration can reflect and further entrench existing hierarchies in the global economy if not undertaken in ways that place control in the hands of workers equally across economic sectors and labour categories (Ofori et al., 2021). Addressing the domestic inequalities, in particular the disparities in access to resources and revenue that women experience at an aggregate level, needs to be a central goal of integration (Abbas and Mama, 2014).

Post-independence arguments for regional economic integration had both political and economic dimensions (Gibb, 2009; Nkrumah, 1963; Nyerere, 1987; Nzewi, 2009). Although Nkrumah and Nyerere had very different ideas of what form governing structures that represented the interests of the people should take they agreed that the vestiges of neocolonial rule had to be completely removed from contemporary African political systems. Newly independent states sought to change a global system of extraction and exploitation by using collective bargaining, harmonising economic sectors for regional and global trade, protecting labour, and investing in social institutions of the state; however, without considering gender equality, these goals were unable to be attained

7 https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9526-assembly_en_17_20_july_1979_assembly_heads_state_government_sixteenth_ordinary_session.pdf

8 Provided the logistical policy steps for implementing the socioeconomic provisions of the Monrovia Declaration among all member states of the Organisation of African Unity. The plan detailed domestic policy frameworks to be adopted and harmonised them with efforts to integrate economies in mutual networks of economic and social support across the Africa region.

9 https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37636-treaty-0016_-_treaty_establishing_the_african_economic_community_e.pdf

10 Established to provide a free trade area from Cape Town to Cairo including members of three RECs in East, North, and Southern Africa, COMESA, EAC, SADC.

(Abbas and Mama, 2014). Nkrumah acknowledged that engagement with the global economy was necessary albeit under specific conditions. The following conditions are most relevant to this work and explain his vision of a single governing authority for the continent: 1) that African states retained sovereignty and control over their economic agenda and goals, 2) that exploitation was prevented, and 3) that the African state entered into equal partnerships with external actors (Nkrumah 1963). Nyerere's emphasis on retaining power within institutions to determine how wealth that is accumulated got distributed was a central component of how he envisioned integration which included a slower-paced sub-regional approach (1987).

Over time regional integration became less of a political project and more of an exclusively economic one emphasising participation in the global economy instead of fighting to reshape it (Gumede, 2019; Nzewi, 2009). The adoption of Western models of regional economic integration emphasised market integration to the exclusion of other political and social justice components and the transformation of institutions (Gibb, 2009). The role of RECs and continent-wide trade agreements in perpetuating neoliberal approaches to microcredit and the financialisation of microfinance has been heavily criticised (DeMartino, 2000; Korolczuk, 2016; Waller and Wrenn, 2021). The current frameworks and metrics for integration outlined in the AfCFTA represent another departure from the political aims outlined in Pan-African intellectual traditions of conceptualising integration (Gumede, 2019). The AfCFTA largely keeps the decision-making authority in the hands of state governments that do not always represent the interests of civil society, scholars, and the most vulnerable and socially diverse groups (Tsikata, 2014). Although creating architecture across the entire region instead of relying primarily on the subregional hubs represents a structural shift, it will also require an ideological one to be successful. The sheer scale of investments via fiscal and political capital that have been placed in creating and implementing the AfCFTA render it something we cannot afford to ignore or fail to engage with directly. Much of the gender mainstreaming endeavours to date have not prioritised the democratisation of integration processes; they have just emphasised having more women participate in economic sectors with their embedded power imbalances (Ofori et al., 2021). Examining the strategies of contemporary Pan-African movements can provide critical new approaches for addressing gender equality and integration.

During the 1960s Pan-Africanism was both a site of grassroots organising and included the participation of political leaders. In a contemporary sense, the movements remain strong however there are few, if any, presidents, and prime

ministers in the region who are members of Pan–African organisations (Gumede, 2019). The term Pan–Africanism while used rhetorically when referencing AU integration initiatives has largely been decoupled from the implicit neo-colonial critiques that formed its inception (Gumede, 2019). The work of Pan–African organisations like the All–African Peoples’ Revolutionary Party provide conceptual approaches and practical metrics for attaining regional integration consistent with the themes of post–independence movements (2018). More specifically the recommendations from their 60th Anniversary All–African Peoples’ Conference (AAPC) identify policy prescriptions that can be implemented. The plenary sessions of the AAPC panels on “Ending Imperialist Domination and Transforming Africa’s Economies”, “On Pan Africanism Today, Tomorrow and Building a New Politics of Substantive Democracy and Security”, and “On Youth, Workers, Progressive Women, and Africa’s Transformation” have critical insights on effective integration (2018). The economic panel emphasizes the importance of changing the position of African countries in global value chains from being mere sources of commodities for extraction into producers of manufactured goods that can be sold in global markets (AAPC, 2018). The need to reclaim and strengthen the capacity of the state to protect labour and industries from neoliberal markets which are seen as “...anti–people, anti–solidarity, anti–collective, and bolstered by the expansion of debt and numerous debt cycles which perpetuate crisis and undermine sovereignty and autonomy of African states as well as their control of their political economy” (AAPC, 2018; p. 4). The AAPC posits that regional integration is based on Pan–African constructions of development, which uses collective bargaining to safeguard African economies (2018). The second panel focuses on the importance of creating democracies that are inclusive and capable of addressing inequalities stemming from “weak economic institutions” (2018, 2). The panel on youth, women and workers discusses the important role of stopping economic, social, and physical violence against socially diverse groups as part of attaining development based on the principles of Pan–Africanism (2018). All three of these panels from the AAPC conference provide a roadmap for generating the institutional architecture required to integrate economies with the original political aims of autonomy, sovereignty, self–determination, and inclusion.

Regional Blocs And Integration: Feminist Critiques

The recognition of the critical role women play in the economy is one of the key reasons why this paper focuses on the gender equality provisions of the agreements (Dzisi, 2008; Harper et al., 2013; Naidu and Ossome, 2018; Ossome,

2015; Osome and Naidu, 2021; Spring, 2009). More specifically, I examine how gender equality and women's empowerment are framed in the AfCFTA and agreements of two sub-regional economic communities: ECOWAS and SADC. The work assesses the role of regional economic communities and continent-wide trade agreements in perpetuating or challenging neoliberal approaches to sustainable growth specifically through my application of African feminist and Pan-African theoretical frameworks. The conceptualisation of gender equality and women's empowerment in these regional integration policies focuses primarily on increasing women's descriptive representation in the marketplace. These gender equality frameworks do not reflect African feminist conceptualisations (Mbiling and Shechambo, 2009; Naidu and Osome, 2018; Osome 2015, Tsikata 2014). This paper relies on a qualitative study that provides a detailed examination of the structural foundations in the AfCFTA, ECOWAS, and SADC to assess their adoption of neoliberal principles. I included ECOWAS [the 1993 revision of the original agreement] and SADC [original agreement] for two reasons. First, the AfCFTA is still in the process of finalising some of the trade protocols to include phase one – trade in goods, trade in services, dispute settlement mechanisms, and customs and trade facilitation; and phase two – intellectual property rights, investment, competition policy, and digital trade. ECOWAS and SADC have been in force longer than the AfCFTA and the support they will lend to the continent-wide trade agreement, including harmonisation of policies, makes them appropriate case studies to evaluate the relationships among inequalities, neoliberalism, and institutionalised regional trade.

These relationships among gender, economic growth, neoliberalism, and inequality must be contextualised domestically to identify the types of structural changes that need to occur regionally and globally for gender equality to be attained. The assumption that increasing women's economic participation alone will address disparities and generate domestic growth needs to be re-examined (Ofori et al., 2021). The sources of state revenue stem from a combination of the private sector (national, multinational) and development agencies (regional, bilateral, international). International financial institutions, foreign direct investment, and development funding largely operate under and promote neoliberalism (Mkandawire, 2014). This includes domestic, sub-regional, regional, and global governing institutions. Therefore, gender mainstreaming by these organisations should be further scrutinised to determine if their approach provides descriptive inclusion (increasing the number of women) rather than substantive inclusion (increasing the presence of women as policy decision-

makers). Gender mainstreaming refers to targeted policy interventions to increase the participation of more women in the “formal” economy (Ofori et al., 2021). The role of women in governance is often untheorised in neoliberal integration approaches which can undermine the efficacy of their economic participation (Ofori et al., 2021). The ability of women to have control over supranational governing institutions and the capacity to negotiate to protect the different interests of groups of women are essential to ensuring that everyone benefits from integration. Regional integration and the AfCFTA will not be successful if we do not include African feminists’ conceptualisations of gender analyses into our understandings of work, trade, development, and econometrics and we run the risk of strengthening the very systems of economic oppression that regional economic integration should attempt to challenge. African feminist theories answer the political questions. Examining how gender equality is defined and gender mainstreaming approached in economic cooperation can help identify the presence of neoliberal agendas. The gender equality provisions of agreements and documents outlining the strategic vision of organisations are ideal policy components to use in assessing and identifying the presence of neoliberal logics for three reasons. First, gender equality provisions are mainstreamed into each dimension of the macro and micro economic trade agreements underpinning the regional integration policies. Second, they target the populations with the least amount of decision-making power within institutions. Third, gender inclusion within organisations often prioritises descriptive representation over institutional transformation.

There are several ways that neoliberal frameworks underpin gender mainstreaming in the agreements. The prioritisation of private sector growth and development coupled with an integration of “informal” and “formal” economic activities are the primary ways in which women are framed within these policy frameworks since women constitute the larger portion of the informal sector labour force. The “formal” and “informal” distinctions represent a false dichotomy that has been extensively critiqued (Alter, 2005; Dzisi, 2008; Niger-Thomas 2000; Spring, 2009). As previously mentioned, the false delineation between “informal and formal” economic activity is well documented. Many micro-sized enterprises and economic activity will take place in businesses that are not registered due to the associated costs. If the registration process becomes mandatory, not only should those issues be addressed but there should be some material and institutional benefit for the owner of those firms, the majority of whom are women. Participating in the formal economy comes

with tax liabilities, etc. which if not carefully regulated, can place women-owned and women-headed firms at a continued disadvantage (Spring, 2009). For example, women involved in small-scale fishing are integral to the local economies and the underestimation of their contributions in econometric data can result in miscalculating the costs associated with formalising their economic role (Harper et al., 2013). Altering the recognition of women-owned firms necessitates that the AfCFTA and other regional agreements carefully account for the associated bureaucratic costs and collaborate in partnership with owners to develop processes that work.

The normative approaches to gender mainstreaming within trade and development policy frameworks do not address the substantive impacts on fiscal security (True, 2008). Women are treated as a monolithic group in many attempts to address gender inequalities which do not address fundamental issues of power within which the same groups of women set the broader mainstreaming agenda. Feminist economists have been pushing these critiques further to highlight how feminist movements in the West often ignore national privilege and exclude the interests of other groups of women. Scholars argue that one of the greatest impacts of regional organisations is that they can help facilitate the adoption of democratic practices and progressive political positions within the governments of their member states (Nwogu, 2007; Ryu and Ortuoste, 2014; Spring, 2009; Tsikata and Amanor-Wilks, 2015). Tensions among different groups of women must be recognised. At times groups have competing political and economic interests and points of divergence on social issues; for example, the support of LGBTQIA+ communities and their mobilisation efforts. The complexities on the ground which reflect the ways in which the intersections of different socially constructed identity categories, e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnolinguistic heritage, necessitate that multiple women's groups need to be in positions to make decisions. Although the gains of integration are ideal, the existing political, economic, and social realities that women face every day must be accounted for otherwise these presumed gains can be lost or worse can lead to an entrenchment of marginalisation. Therefore, it is important to determine if regional and sub-regional integration, which uses collective bargaining, will protect women from the violence and exploitation that undermines the economic security of neoliberal economic approaches and governing mechanisms. Centring the experiences and priorities of different groups of women, such as Muslim women, is crucial as their important economic contributions are often not reflected in econometric data (Wallace, 2014). The

diverse experiences of women leading firms of various sizes such as micro, small, medium, and large, as well as those engaged in agriculture work, fishing, textiles, and development work can aid in identifying the key gender equality aspects of trade and cooperative agreements. It can also help assess the direct effect of these agreements on women's economic security and development.

Development is another concept that has been extensively critiqued for perpetuating neocolonial control and definitions of economic growth which prioritises profit over safeguarding people and preferences the private sector

and market in ways that weaken state capacity (Apusigah, 2009; Tsikata, 2009; Tsikata and Amanor-Wilks, 2015). Development in the context of this work refers to a holistic Pan-African framework that includes economic, social, and political equality with an emphasis on access to education and health care as defined by African scholars and activists (Hendricks, 2015; AAPC, 2018). To address gender inequality, economic, political, and social institutions that restrict women and have a disproportionately negative impact on them need to be transformed. This is essential for regional integration because biases present in national domestic structures are scaled up and replicated within regional groups and comprehensive continent-wide trade agreements. The critical role of African women in economic contributions across sectors is substantial (Naidu and Ossome, 2018; Ossome and Naidu, 2021). The over-representation of women in micro-enterprises and other activities that do not receive full remuneration or are inaccurately reflected in econometric data make them a group of workers that need protection, support, and institutional cover (Spring 2009, Naidu and Ossome, 2018, Ossome and Naidu, 2021). Often the very social and economic inequalities that collectively marginalise women's aggregate participation need to be addressed; this will make the political and economic systems accountable to those that need the greatest safeguarding. When these elements are missing from gender equality-focused components of protocols and agreements there is a focus on participation rather than changing power dynamics which is the very definition of neoliberalism. For example, when policies are designed to support women's microenterprises the women that own these businesses need to be at the table defining the provisions and detailing what they need. It is important to have direct communication channels with the authorities who have the power to make necessary changes.

Now that African Feminist and Pan-African frameworks for integration have been combined I need to outline, the four core features of persistent neoliberal and neo-colonial logics that are measured in the AfCFTA, ECOWAS

and SADC agreements as described in the methods section below: a) success measured as increasing the presence of women in economic industries (descriptive inclusion only), b) women are centred as decision-makers setting priorities, c) absence of a formal monitoring role for women, and d) constraints on the negotiating power of workers through supranational economic institutions.

Research Background And Methodology

In terms of methodology, I use qualitative content analysis to assess the relative resistance to and/or accommodation of neoliberal frameworks in the gender equality provisions specified in the protocols of the AfCFTA, ECOWAS and SADC. I selected ECOWAS and SADC because they are two economic and political communities with members that have some of the largest economies (GDPs) in the region as measured by GDP. They also have a long institutional history of implementing economic cooperative agreements, 1975 and 1980 respectively. Nigeria, the largest economy in the region by GDP, and South Africa, the second largest economy by GDP, have signed the AfCFTA and deposited their instruments for ratification with the AU. The members of their organisations are critical actors in the AfCFTA and will continue to retain a pivotal leadership role. The underlying AfCFTA provisions must include accommodations that are also made at the REC levels.

The ability of the AfCFTA, ECOWAS, and SADC to cultivate regional economic integration strategies that undermine neoliberal institutions, protect labour, and generate inclusive and sustainable growth are analysed in this study. The creation of collective policy frameworks around gender mainstreaming that are regional should be an important outcome of these regional economic integration efforts. The impacts of gender equality mainstreaming and women's empowerment targets in regional integration policies on economic security for women is a fundamental metric to determine the efficacy of the approaches to regional economic integration. The institutions that undermine the participation, economic security and decision-making capacities of women have yet to undergo transformation. The adoption of neoliberal policies involves several aspects, including a) the use of quantitative measures to gauge successful integration, with a focus on the number of women in the workforce, b) giving decision-making authority to the elite, c) limitations in monitoring and holding member states accountable for institutional practices, and d) failing to provide workers across various sectors with the ability to negotiate terms and conditions.

I begin with a content analysis using the conceptualisations of the terms “gender equality” and “gender mainstreaming” developed in the preceding theory sections to make sure they are contextualised properly. The legal texts that are examined in this analysis include a) the original governing agreements (ECOWAS revised agreement 1993), b) the strategic vision 2050, and c) the presence or absence of institutional mechanisms to include offices designated to examine issues of gender equality mainstreaming. I provide a detailed examination of the regional cooperative agreements to see if they reproduce economic disparities within member states and across sub-regional groups and sectors of the economy. There are three key areas that I assess: the degree to which AfCFTA, ECOWAS, and SADC a) destabilise neoliberal institutions, b) protect labour, and c) generate inclusive and sustainable growth. The definition of gender equality reflected in the regional and sub-regional trade and cooperative agreements will outline other metrics that should be operationalised to have an impact on women’s economic security. I used my African feminist Pan-African theoretical frame to evaluate how gender equality mainstreaming either accommodates or resists neoliberalism. These metrics were selected because they are necessary to make sure that the process of integration is democratised, and diverse, and that it secures the autonomy of individuals and African states, two critical components of Pan-African feminist integration goals. Moreover, I have distilled my theoretical framework into six categories of analysis detailed in each table as follows: first, the explicit goals of economic agreements explicitly specified; second, the conceptualisation of gender equality in the provisions; third, the participation of local women’s organisations and activists in the formation of diverse gender equality mainstreaming policies; fourth, the adoption of primarily quantitative measures such as participation, absorption into markets measured to determine if integration has been successfully attained; fifth, the stakeholders responsible for monitoring policy outcomes and holding institutions accountable; and sixth, the existence of units or agencies designated to be part of the gender mainstreaming implementation processes.

Summary And Description Of Data

This section provides a separate table for each of the three agreements to depict the critical data points. The tables depict the original agreements of the AfCFTA and ECOWAS (1993 revision) and SADC. A description of any units or specially designated agencies that have been created to further monitor the

institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming in regional integration is one of the metrics of evaluation. The existence or absence of such features are significant because if they retain neoliberal biases then the most public-facing components of the integration efforts, the governmental arm that everyday citizens might access to address their concerns, will have their ability to resolve issues severely mitigated. For example, if there is a gender desk, it is important to know if individual people may contact the office or if women and other groups are required to go through their state to gain access. Having the potential for direct contact can help people navigate around other issues of biases that may be extended through reliance on domestic governance structures. Additionally, even when departments work with civil society groups, those groups are not always representative and can speak more to the social capital of the heads of those groups rather than the variations in the needs of different women from all echelons of society. Therefore, understanding a bit about the levels of accessibility and selection criteria for grassroots participation is key.

African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA)

The AfCFTA components examined include the original articles of formation¹¹, compiled annexes to the agreement and the organisational components for gender mainstreaming. Figure 1 summarises the key findings for the AfCFTA. The AfCFTA is still in the process of finalising several components of the agreement therefore the description is limited to the existing data available at the time of publication of this piece. The massive undertaking of harmonising multiple economic sectors, the needs of different member states, the role of RECs, and other stakeholders on this scale is unprecedented, post-independence. The data below serves to potentially help avoid replicating the steps of previous Western neoliberal approaches to integration.

11 <https://au-afcfta.org>

Figure 1: Neoliberal Approaches to Gender Equality Mainstreaming in the AfCFTA

Broader Goals of Economic Agreements	Conceptualisation of Gender Equality	Policy Decision Making Authority	Measuring of Successful Gender Equality Mainstreaming	Monitoring & Institutional Accountability	Presence of Unit/Division to Implement Gender Mainstreaming
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Establishing single market (good, services, people) ➤ Continental customs union ➤ Sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development ➤ Promote gender equality ➤ Structural transformation of the State Parties ➤ Competitiveness of the economies of State Parties- continent & global market ➤ Informal formal economic integration ➤ Addressing multiple and overlapping REC memberships ➤ Substantial liberalization ➤ Protectionist policies of some infant industries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Liberal human rights language tied to economic participation ➤ Economic participation ➤ No specific definition or target areas ➤ Not fully integrated into policy in detail ➤ Interests & experiences of women & men in the design, monitoring, implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Domestic political officials ➤ REC representatives ➤ Stakeholder meeting planned not clear selection criterion for participation ➤ Limited representative civil society participation ➤ Limited professional or trade association participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Descriptive Inclusion ➤ Full integration of women into global, regional economies ➤ Quantitative metrics ➤ Efficiency ➤ Increase women's participation in local markets ➤ Promote "progressive liberalization" ➤ General increase in women's economic activities ➤ Market integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To member states ➤ No explicit role for women's groups ➤ No explicit role of civil society ➤ No explicit role for workers associations or unions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ No ➤ Depending on existing state structures ➤ Mentions transforming state structures, accountability mechanism unclear ➤ Drafting protocol women and youth

The overarching goals of the AfCFTA agreement include gender equality, informal and formal market integration as well as increasing access to regional and global markets as depicted in Figure 1. The commitment to securing a single market to facilitate the movement of goods, services, and people is consistent with the growth aims of integration in general. The creation of a continent-wide customs union would be extremely helpful for small and medium-sized firms and consumers allowing for the quick calculation of any import duties and could make calculating payment for goods or services more standardised and easier to complete. The other issues outlined in the first column of Figure 1 could help build the capacity of firms to trade and work across borders. The areas of concern centre around the objective to substantially increase liberalisation which prioritises profit maximisation. When liberalisation is combined with incorporating “informal” economic activity within the “formal” economy the additional regulation and taxation that will be experienced by firms where women are overrepresented can further produce gender disparities. Women may be able to access the markets; however, the chances that they benefit at the same rate as their male counterparts are severely reduced. The structural

transformation of state parties into government structures that have the capacity to implement the agreement is not the same as changing them to be more democratic representative structures. The shift in power required to augment domestic state institutions at each level (national, subnational, local) needs to be part of the conceptualisation of transformation.

The second column in Figure 1, specifies that gender equality is defined as economic participation. Even the human rights language used ties those provisions to the increased economic engagement of women. For example, addressing gender inequalities in political participation is connected to the ability of women to use these efforts to help facilitate participation in markets. There are other political issues on the agenda e.g., addressing gender-based violence, gaps in education, and limited access to health care, all of which are important in their own right. Connecting political agendas to external labour force participation should be a foundational component of how we theorise gender equality in the context of politics to avoid being overly reductionist.

The third component described in Figure 1, which focuses on decision-making authority given to stakeholders shows that women's organisations ranging from non-governmental organisations to community-based groups and other civil society organisations were not substantively included in the drafting of the original articles or agreements. It also indicates that there will be a stakeholder meeting of women-led and youth organisations to design a protocol on women and youth. The format and frequency of these meetings and selection criteria for participation will have a direct impact on the ability of the AfCFTA to materially improve the lives of citizens equally across and within member states. Clearly, the variations in economies of scale mean that the amount of revenue streams may vary; however, they should be proportional rather than skewed in favour of groups and individuals already well positioned within political and social systems.

The ways in which gender equality is measured consist of descriptive metrics, i.e., the presence of women participating in regional and global markets as summarised in the fourth section of Figure 1. The commitment to “progressive liberalisation” requires women to be active agents in these systems. The market integration preoccupation can obscure the ways in which it may lower wages and income, come with hidden costs not necessarily absorbed by the state, and be accompanied by additional management by political and economic systems that already have biases. The lack of inclusion of women's organisations in the creation of the AfCFTA across levels of privilege makes it difficult to represent and monitor the protection of the interests of multiple groups of women.

Figure 2: Neoliberal Approaches to Gender Equality Mainstreaming in ECOWAS

Broader Goals of Economic Agreements	Conceptualisation of Gender Equality	Policy Decision Making Authority	Measuring of Successful Gender Mainstreaming	Monitoring & Institutional Accountability	Presence of Unit/Division to Implement Gender Mainstreaming
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Regional economic integration ➤ Increased flow (goods, services, people) ➤ Common currency ➤ Harmonization for protection of the environment ➤ Common market (liberalization) ➤ Harmonization of standards and measures ➤ Increase information flows women, youth, professional sectors ➤ Development fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Human rights ➤ Economic participation ➤ Gender equality and equity ➤ Enhance economic, social and cultural conditions of women ➤ Identify impediments to women making maximum contribution to integration ➤ Dialogue on projects and programmes for women ➤ Framework to incorporate women's concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Resides among member states ➤ Limited representative civil society participation ➤ Limited professional or trade association participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Descriptive inclusion ➤ Full integration of women into sub-regional economies ➤ Quantitative metrics ➤ Efficiency ➤ Increasing women's SMEs ➤ Capacity building institutions and organizations ➤ Equal access to basic services ➤ Economic empowerment ➤ Human rights, conflict, governance, peace and stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To member states ➤ No explicit role for women's groups ➤ No explicit role of civil society ➤ No explicit role for workers associations or unions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Gender Development Centre, emphasis on existing approaches (network with women's civil society organisations)

The goals of the economic agreement include full integration of labour markets and local markets plus goods and services being offered as described in the first section of Figure 2. There is a commitment to the development of a common sub-regional currency. The increased flow of goods, services, and people is a part of the liberalisation processes used to create a common market. The interest in harmonising the standards and measures across industries and member states is important and can become part of the fiscal costs of expanding bureaucratic measures. Specifying how these additional expenditures will be covered is very important because of the different capacities of member states. Delays in developing the capacities of states can lengthen the process of integration for some states making it more difficult for those members and their populations to benefit. The prioritisation of increasing information flows among women, youth and a range of professional sectors could be beneficial in terms of sharing best practices and lessons learned for groups that are often excluded. The net positive benefits of establishing a development fund are contingent on whether the definition of development is Pan-African or neoliberal.

The last section of the figure illustrates that to date the AfCFTA lacks the type of institutional mechanisms for oversight that are present in ECOWAS and SADC. The AfCFTA is still in the process of developing those organisational capacities and there are plans to hold stakeholder meetings for women's civil society groups and women entrepreneurs. The selection criteria for participation of those groups have not been publicly released. The AfCFTA does rely on member state structures and discusses the importance of transforming them. There is no mechanism designed or specified for monitoring the progress of that transformation. The capacity building of the state is focused on the economic goals rather than the political or social justice aims of inclusion. The development of a monitoring arm for gender mainstreaming could be established later.

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

The ECOWAS components that are examined include the 1993 revision of the original articles of formation. Figure 2 summarises the key findings for ECOWAS. Each of the six metrics for assessing the presence of neoliberal frameworks is described in detail below. The presence of any institutional mechanisms for implementation is outlined to determine if they have the capacity to challenge or resist the presence of neoliberal ideologies present in the agreements themselves. The conceptualisation of gender equality in the second section of Figure 2, links the social justice dimensions of equality directly to the ways they support economic engagement. The enhancement of the cultural, economic, and social conditions for women in member states could provide key insights if the diverse perspectives of these groups are used to determine if constraints have been adequately remedied. Even though gender equality and equity are included in the language of the articles of agreement, the terms are not very clearly defined. The proposed dialogue on programmatic issues listed in this column could be essential depending on who is included or excluded from the conversation. The frameworks to establish a collective set of interests for women need to have a method for addressing points of contention in ways that don't obfuscate the experiences of the most vulnerable groups of women.

The absence of women's civil society groups in initial advocacy efforts to create the economic community has implications for how gender equality is being operationalised. Section 3 of Figure 2 depicts the limited decision-making power given to women's groups. The overreliance on member states and limited participation of civil society groups with varying levels of privilege is problematic. Having groups that typically occupy space outside of institutions

determine when policies work well and when they do not is a game-changer in consolidating institutional power among marginalised populations.

The metrics used in the ECOWAS agreement according to the fourth section of Figure 2 are almost exclusively quantitative. The goals are to ensure that most of women's labour is in the formal sub-regional marketplaces. The priority areas for women include equal access to basic services, peace, stability, and good governance. The role of human rights and cultivating more women-headed firms are key agenda items. Similar to the AfCFTA the construction of human rights is liberal and explicitly connected to economic participation and engagement. This agreement does specify that access to basic services is a metric that will be measured. The emphasis on economic empowerment is not completely operationalised within the agreement and appears to be another measure of work activism.

Monitoring and institutional accountability are consolidated within member states themselves as outlined in the fifth column of Figure 2. The capacity building of structures and the organisational capacity of political institutions could be beneficial if the definitions of gender equality as well as the priorities and metrics reflect the diverse interests of women's groups. There is no explicit role outlined for civil society and/or women's groups or professional associations. The presence of unions is noticeably absent as well.

Finally, the last section of Figure 2, indicates that there is no separate gender protocol even though there are two bodies within ECOWAS that are responsible for monitoring the success of gender mainstreaming i.e., the Gender Development Centre, and the Special Agency on Gender and Development. Although the bodies exist, they use a liberal approach in addressing gender inequalities which does not fundamentally place women in decision-making positions. ECOWAS has more administrative bodies tasked with monitoring gender mainstreaming than SADC – such as the centre and special agency mentioned above. The Gender Development Centre was established to collect data on gender equality and potentially establish contact with civil society. The direct networking with civil society has not been undertaken systematically. The ability of groups to contact ECOWAS is reflective of the social capital of their leadership and proximity to regional officials rather their how representative they are of the variations of needs and priorities of women in member states. The special agency is not institutionally distinct from the centre. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how ECOWAS is distributing the work of gender mainstreaming and providing oversight, contact with women, and a special agency.

Southern African Development Community (SADC)

The SADC components examined include the original articles of formation and in the last section I evaluate the presence of a gender office or unit. Figure 3 below summarises the key findings for SADC and makes some key distinctions from ECOWAS.

Figure 3: Neoliberal Approaches to Gender Equality in SADC

Broader Goals of Economic Agreements	Conceptualisation of Gender Equality	Policy Decision Making Authority	Measuring of Successful Gender Equality Mainstreaming	Monitoring & Institutional Accountability	Presence of Unit/Division to Implement Gender Mainstreaming
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Regional economic integration ➤ Increase flow goods, services, people ➤ Promote peace and security ➤ Promote self-sustaining development ➤ Harmonise socio-economic policies ➤ Promote the development of human resources ➤ Promote development of technology ➤ Remove barriers to capital, goods and labor flows 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Human rights ➤ Economic participation ➤ Declaration on gender & development ➤ Gender equality is a human right ➤ Elimination of gender-based violence ➤ Legal areas, power sharing, decision making, access to and control over productive resources, education, health ➤ Sectoral gender equality integration approach, limitations integration and cohesiveness of framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Resides among member states ➤ Limited representative civil society participation ➤ Limited professional or trade association participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Descriptive inclusion ➤ Full integration into sub-regional economies ➤ Quantitative metrics ➤ Efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To member states ➤ No explicit role for women's groups ➤ No explicit role of civil society ➤ No explicit role for workers associations or unions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Gender Unit, tasked with gender mainstreaming, ➤ Separate protocol on gender and development

The first section of Figure 3 illustrates that blending the economies of the region and making it as easy to move goods, services, and labour across member states as it is within those states is a primary goal of SADC. The promotion of peace and security is listed as an important aim of the agreement. The mutual development and sharing of technology are a part of the provisions. The reference to technology is viewed as inextricably tied to the goal of promoting self-sustained development in the sub-region. Harmonisation of socio-economic policies including the removal of barriers to capital and labour flows are other key components of the treaty.

In column two of the Figure 3, there is a declaration on gender and development and gender equality is defined as a human right. These contentions are important; however, if they are not paired with access to domestic and sub-regional institutions then it is difficult to address the root causes of inequalities. There is an explicit commitment to addressing gender-based violence which is significant. The elimination of gender-based violence as a part of gender equality does represent a more expanded understanding of the impacts of the

construction of socio-cultural factors on inequalities. Power in decision-making in addition to control over productive resources and access to education and health care are all part of the conceptualisation of gender equality. The equal protection under the rule of law is also listed as essential. Including all of these objectives for addressing gender disparities is a requirement.

Section three of Figure 3, which describes the stakeholders that have decision-making authority, does not include women's organisations substantively in the process even though they are acknowledged as critical in the preceding section where gender equality is defined. This represents a substantial solvency gap. The SADC members are responsible for the framing of these integration efforts and if they have undemocratic elements, it prevents the collective agenda of the RECs from representing the interests of all parties.

Figure 3 details the metrics that continue to rely almost exclusively on quantitative measures in section four. They include the same priorities of counting the entry of new women-owned firms into the marketplace. The listing of these key factors does not get fully integrated into a comprehensive set of policies that can be closely monitored and evaluated as depicted in section five. Once again, the domestic governments are responsible for assessing the progress toward attaining gender equality and reporting back to the REC. The limitations in the ability of the state to have feedback mechanisms in place to contact multiple women's groups make it very difficult to rely exclusively on them for monitoring.

The last metric covered in column six of Figure 3 shows that the Gender Unit was created to help with continuous assessment of the gender mainstreaming initiatives. SADC has a specific gender equality protocol that has been designed, unlike ECOWAS which has some specific gender policies for certain sectors like energy. SADC has both a gender protocol and a gender mainstreaming monitoring unit. The Gender Unit has a specific provision to examine gender-based violence unlike the ECOWAS centre and special gender agency. The Gender Units are significant because their job is to evaluate the progress in securing gender equality in every unit of SADC which means there is a body independent of member states with this responsibility. Given the limitations of the state, this is important. The limitation of the Gender Unit is that the focus is on policy harmonisation with no direct outreach mechanism for women's groups.

Data Analysis Of Gender Mainstreaming Approaches To Integration

There are several ways in which regional trade agreements and RECs' gender equality policies reinscribe neoliberal frameworks. Based on the data, I organised

my analysis to highlight the three critical ways in which this occurs. First, by utilising liberal feminist definitions of gender inclusion (overreliance on quantitative data, counting measures, as opposed to other measures of quality of life and the satisfaction of people with their labour conditions and associated income); second, the homogenising of gender mainstreaming needs and experiences of women; third, women do not hold the institutional capacity required to evaluate and monitor integration and hold REC institutions accountable if the provisions are not generating the desired result.

Liberal Feminist Definitions of Gender Inclusion in Regional Integration

All three agreements define gender equality primarily through the number of women who are counted as beneficiaries in the trade agreements. In this sense, the number of women-owned businesses that are registered as firms is treated as sufficient. These neoliberal features consist of descriptive inclusion, just increasing the number of women involved in economic activities or work that is under the purview and control of the state. This is problematic because it does not augment any of the structural reasons responsible for women's absence or limited participation in the first place. The overreliance on quantitative measures for assessing the attainment of gender equality goals does not include measures of changes in women's power to make decisions around labour and work. My findings align with the viewpoints of other African feminist scholars and the AAPC proceedings which served as the basis for my theoretical framework. The AAPC proceedings explored the limitations of the participation of women in the global economy without protectionist policies. When women who have been exploited by globalisation have little influence over policies that integrate them into markets, they have less economic security overall and the aggregate levels of growth are neither inclusive nor sustainable. The counting of women across economic sectors does little to explain the leadership roles that women have in these sectors. Based on studies of best practices, the most effective way to understand any shifts in women's daily lived economic experiences and potentially connect them back to the adoption of gender mainstreaming frameworks in RECs and the AfCFTA is through interviews, participant observation, and other metrics (Spring, 2009; Tsikata, 2014).

Homogenising the Gender Mainstreaming Needs and Experiences of Women

Many of the regional and sub-regional integration efforts, which use collective bargaining, do not provide space for different groups of women to shape gender mainstreaming goals or definitions. Examining the quality of women's

experiences economically, politically, and socially as a result of the impacts of regional economic groups provides ways to contextualise the statistical data being collected (Kameri-Mbote, 2009; Kayizzi-Mugerwa et al., 2014). The centring of women's experiences allows a deep dive to identify obstacles and issues preventing them from benefiting from gender equality policies that could be addressed by regional and sub-regional groups. The groups can play a pivotal role in safeguarding women who are participating in multiple markets. The organisations can act as a site of additional resistance to economic exploitation when they have the institutional capacity to make changes to domestic, sub-regional, and regional political structures. When RECs based the objectives of their gender equality policies on small groups of women, the regional bodies a) fail to fully protect women, b) expose women to neoliberal market forces, and c) mitigate the ability of women to negotiate favourable trade and labour policies on their own terms. Moreover, these agreements remain heavily dependent on the state parties that are often exacerbating gender inequalities in the national contexts. Failing to make these modifications renders gender mainstreaming little more than counting the number of women who are engaged in economic activity ignoring the qualitative components of integration such as increases in revenue, better working conditions, more negotiating power for tariffs, input into safety standards and regulations, and the ability to generate policies that reflect short, medium, and long-term needs.

Constraints on Grassroots Women's Institutional Power within RECs

A reimagining of the relationships between gender and economic production is essential to move beyond the current growth models. The regional integration approaches utilised make access the goal rather than the transformation of existing institutions that are responsible for the marginalisation in the first place, or the creation of new ones. Removing the barriers that place restrictions on the economic activities that women undertake requires identifying the subtle ways in which the policy outcomes focus on descriptive (quantitative) increases rather than substantive (qualitative) increases in women's participation and engagement. Equipping the institutions with the capacity to respond to the needs of different constituencies ensures that women's voices become the impetus for policy and the key to evaluating the efficacy of economic agreements. For example, a rotating schedule could be created for women-headed NGOs, CBOs, and professional associations to have different groups for each category and serve as observers for each agreement. I would also add a role for two academics and

two activists not affiliated with any single civil society group to have observer status as well. These groups and individuals could be embedded within the organisations housing the treaties with two-year term limits. This could help eliminate solvency gaps, such as the one in SADC, where, despite there being some holistic components in the conceptualisation of gender equality they do not translate into the Gender Unit as a structural monitoring arm.

Conclusion

The introduction of AfCFTA marked a critical attempt to attain regional economic integration of the continent partly aimed at inclusive and sustainable growth. The reduction in tariffs, increased ease in the mobility of goods, services, and people among member states, integration of information communication technology infrastructure, increased access to domestic, sub-regional, regional, and global markets and finally changing the position of the continent in global value chains are critical focal points of the AfCFTA and other integration efforts. Women comprise a key demographic that has been identified as an essential stakeholder in these regional integration efforts. Prioritising gender equality has been championed as a mechanism to help ensure that women are incorporated into these processes. While the overarching goals of making sustainable growth include everyone in society (not just individuals and groups that are already affluent) is critical, the AfCFTA is unlikely to attain these aims if it is based on the same neoliberal logics responsible for the existing global domestic, sub-regional and regional gender inequalities. This paper used a qualitative content analysis of the gender mainstreaming provisions of the AfCFTA, ECOWAS and SADC to assess their relative resistance to and/or accommodation of neoliberal frameworks. My work confirms and empirically illustrates the impacts of the African feminist and Pan-African integration approaches and decolonising development literature critiques.

This paper examined how gender equality is defined and operationalised in regional and sub-regional cooperative agreements. It assessed the role of regional economic communities and a continent-wide trade agreement in perpetuating or challenging neoliberal approaches to financialisation. There are four key findings in this study: 1) regional integration policies primarily include liberal approaches to regional economic integration and addressing gender equality; 2) there is little transformation of underlying state structures and institutions that cause global economic inequalities and gender inequalities at all levels; 3) diverse priorities of women are not fully included; and 4) women and other most vulnerable and marginalised groups are not formally incorporated

into institutions in order to control the monitoring or evaluation mechanisms. This highlights the need for integration policies around gender equality to use the diverse experiences of women within and across national and sub-regional contexts. Providing an empirical study that centres on the experiences of women will uncover institutional barriers to attaining inclusive sustainable growth through regional integration.

The impact that these agreements have on the lives of women highlights the importance of examining and challenging the adoption of neoliberal approaches to gender mainstreaming within and across national, sub-regional, and regional contexts. It is important to understand if women-owned micro, small and medium enterprises are gaining access to new markets or having an increase or decrease in revenue streams. The increased participation of women in decision-making and the adoption of alternative cooperative economic strategies can serve to buttress and resist the neoliberal approaches to integration. The local gender dynamics and priorities of women domestically should serve as the central point of theorising regional integration policies and shaping the norms around women's participation. The ability to incorporate multiple definitions of gender equality and the economic priorities of different groups of women into regional economic agreements is required to establish necessary structural changes. This expanded conceptualisation of gender equality that centres local (and national) feminist agendas of activists and scholars as the impetus for economic priorities at the national, sub-regional, and regional levels should be adopted to deconstruct neoliberal integration logics and transform institutions.

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