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Conceptual Analysis of Gender Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation of Trade Facilitation Programs in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual discourse covers the critical implementation gap of the trade policy and programs in Kenya where gender barriers in trade facilitation remain prevalent despite the documented national trade commitments to inclusivity. The paper explores insufficiency of existing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, posing the question about what it would mean to have a gender-responsive framework that would reveal these obstacles, quantify them, and act upon them. The study uses a conceptual research design to synthesise policy documents, scholarly literature and institutional reports using a feminist political economy lens. This, in turn, questions the ability of gender-evasive M&E frameworks to unearth the structural dimensions of gender inequality that women traders experience including gendered corruption, border harassment, and a lack of access to institutional recognition. The analysis reveals that the current assessment approaches are mainly accommodative as they are structured around the participation of women instead of institutional shifts in terms of power or access. As a result, the valuable contributions and limitations of women in cross-border trade remain statistically obscured which undermines policy accountability. To this end, this study suggests a change towards a gender-responsive transformative approach to M&E (GRM&E). This model gives more emphasis to the aggregation of sex disaggregated information and utilises measures that monitor the variations in trader security, economic empowerment and bias in the system. The main contribution of the study is that it provides a conceptual roadmap on how GRM&E practices can be aligned to Kenya's and Africa's inclusive trade ambitions including within the AfCFTA. It suggests institutionalising gender-disaggregated data gathering, incorporating transformative indicators into program development and establishing capacity to facilitate evaluation at county levels to make sure that trade facilitation produces equitable and measurable results to all Kenyans.

Keywords: Gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation, trade facilitation, feminist political economy, gendered institutions, AfCFTA

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the critical gap of gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation (GRM&E) in the trade facilitation ecosystem in Kenya. The national vision of economic transformation as developed by Kenya, and contained in both Kenya's Vision 2030 and the Bottom-Up Economic

Transformation Agenda (BETA), makes it clear that inclusion and export led growth with empowerment of women and youth is the key focus of the country (State Department for Trade, 2025; Vision 2030 Delivery Secretariat, 2022; The National Treasury and Economic Planning, 2024; Republic of Kenya, 2023). This vision covered in the constitution involves a multi-faceted process of balancing between the development agenda of 47 semi-autonomous counties with the national priorities that are difficult to achieve, in addition to the realisation of coherent trade policies (Manyala, 2021; Masenge et al., 2024; Mujema & Wandiri, 2023; Kiriti-Nganga, 2025; Mutua & Felix, 2023; Ogutu, 2022; Muhia, 2023).

The main focus of this vision is efficient execution of trade facilitation interventions to simplify cross-border operations, reduce expenses and incorporate Kenyan enterprises into regional and global value chains (Ndung'u et al., 2025; Nyile et al., 2025). Nevertheless, not all of the advantages of these technical and policy reforms are distributed fairly. It has been shown that women, comprising a significant part of small-scale traders and cross-border traders, experience a distinctive set of challenges (Mutinda et al., 2025; Desiderio, 2025). These encompass complicated and opaque bureaucratic practices, restricted access to essential trade data and finance, and high-levels of personal insecurity, such as harassment and corruption at border points (Desiderio, 2025; Kiptum et al., 2025).

These gendered barriers remain insurmountable, which highlights a weakness of the current systems of accountability. Although Kenya has shown political willingness to trade in an inclusive manner by signing international trade agreements with the rest of the continent, specifically the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, as well as a separate AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, there is a sharp mismatch between principle and reality (International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024). One of the fundamental aspects of this mismatch is lack of strong gender sensitive mechanisms for measuring progress and impact. Current frameworks for M&E of trade facilitation are often gender evasive, and based on aggregate indicators that obscures the variations in female and male experiences (UNECA, 2020). As an example, the analysis of the mean time of cargo clearance at the Mombasa port tells little about whether women-managed SMEs are subjected to a longer wait due to discrimination issues or their unfamiliarity with the procedures (Nyile et al., 2025). As a result, such systems do not diagnose

particular issues, do not demand the implementing agencies to be accountable to gendered outcomes, and cannot offer the kind of evidence required to effectively update policies (Mogeni, 2025).

Thus, this study focuses on this urgent national research and policy concern by conducting a conceptual study of GRM&E regarding trade facilitation programs in Kenya. This inquiry centres on what a responsive conceptual framework of GRM&E should entail to address the policy-implementation gap within the particular context of Kenyan trade. This research is based on the assumption that in the absence of a conceptually sound, custom-made GRM&E system, the transformative objectives of the inclusive trade agendas in Kenya cannot be achieved or plausibly evaluated. Although the continental AfCFTA framework has offered facilitative normative mandate, it ultimately needs nationally based solutions (Africa, 2025; Kyereboah-Coleman, 2025). This discussion critically syndicates the current research in Kenya policy context, documented instances of challenges women traders have encountered, and emerging international standards of gender-responsive evaluation to develop a new conceptual framework. The desired result is a consistent framework that goes beyond tokenistic measures of participation to transformative measures that can quantify shifts in power relations, access and security to women in the Kenyan trade environment.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

A robust study of trade policy points out how there has been a long history of transformation of the gender-evasive models of economy into models that are more concerned about inclusion. The old paradigm of trade liberalisation, which was predominant in the late 20th century, mostly measured success with aggregate measures such as Gross Domestic Product growth and total export levels, largely overlooked redistribution effects among various social groups (Van Leeuwen et al., 2025). Such a method made the significant role of women in production and cross-border commerce, especially the informal sector, statistically insignificant and politically excluded (Melo, 2019; Zenebe Ede'o et al., 2020). At the turn of the century, this situation changed dramatically with the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where the idea of economic growth has been explicitly combined with targets on gender equality (UN Women, 2023). This international movement

triggered an incorporation of gender aspects in national planning in Kenya, the most notable being the Kenya Vision 2030 blueprint and Medium-Term Plans which positioned women economic empowerment as a growth driver, albeit generalised in most aspects (Kemboi, 2025; Agaya, 2025). Such a historical development preconditions the main debate today, and that is how to transition the identification of gender inequality as a concept to its practical quantification and solution within a certain economic sector such as trade facilitation.

The present environment of the study is that of a narrowed research question on the particular obstacles to trade confronting women and the policymaking that would result in the reduction of these obstacles (Kiptum et al., 2025; Agarwal et al., 2025). There is a significant amount of research over the intricate problems facing women traders in Kenya and the rest of the East African region (Oloo & Onyango, 2023; TradeMark East Africa, 2015; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Banyan Global, 2017). These issues have not only been accidental but are structural and include arduous bureaucratic procedures, gross information asymmetries, and most importantly, a personal security risk at the border points (Kiptum et al., 2025; Oloo & Onyango, 2023). Studies have been pointing to the disproportionate burden on women entrepreneurs, who frequently lack access to legal and procedural expertise on complex customs practices and business licensing regimes (Kiptum et al., 2025; Oloo & Onyango, 2023; TradeMark East Africa, 2015).

Additionally, research on cross-border dynamics shows shocking trends of abuse and bribery, as women are often on the receiving end of requests to obtain sexual favours or to make irregular payments to clear goods, which serves as a perverse form of gender-based tax (Ngonidzashe, & Titeca, 2022; Stern, 2024; GI-ACEP, 2021). To counter this, Kenyan policy has changed, and documents such as the National Trade Policy and the Kenya National AfCFTA Implementation Strategy have been updated to include areas of commitment to empower women traders (State Department for Trade, 2025; African Union, 2024). Nevertheless, the greatest debate in the literature revolves around the efficacy of these policies. Some are notably critical suggesting that without strong systems to monitor execution and outcomes, such promises may never be converted into real benefits to women, which establishes a consistent ‘policy-implementation’ gap where well-intended proposals will never be realized as actual outcomes in the ground (International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024; Draper et al., 2022; Odijie, 2024).

The conceptual frameworks applied in interpreting and examining this gap have strong theoretical bases in feminist political economy and gender analysis theories. Feminist political economy offers an essential insight as it challenges the mainstream economic beliefs and identifies how gender relations mediate access to resources, power, and economic gain (Hannah et al., 2021; Ojo, 2023). One such idea is to criticize the 'invisible' economy of unpaid labour, which anchor's women's time and restricts their ability to participate in complex and time-consuming trade processes (Njuki et al., Maame & Abor, 2024). And to this, the concept of 'gendered institutions' is a potent instrument of analysis (Kenny, 2007; Acker, 1992). According to this philosophy, institutions, such as customs authorities, trade ministries, and financial systems are not neutral, but are constructed to maintain gendered norms, biases, and results (Melo, 2019; Zenebe Ede'o et al., 2020). In relation to trade facilitation, this theory guides the examination of how apparently technical regulations and administrative prejudice can simply marginalise women in a systematic manner. Such theoretical approaches require an analysis method more complex than mere headcounts of female participants. In its place, they demand a transformative model of assessment that considers whether programs transform institutional prejudices, redistribute authority, and alter the foundational principles, or generate inequality to the extent of simply "fitting" women to the existing broken systems (Gains, 2020).

An overview of relevant studies about M&E shows that there is a remarkable change in the approach, but there is also a serious gap in its use regarding trade facilitation. In general, gender-responsive evaluation has come of age, and such organizations as UN Women and the International Labour Organization have developed extensive guidelines that focus on sex-disaggregated data, participative approaches, and intersectionality (Götzmann & Bainton, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Richards et al., 2022; Joshi et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there is scanty technical work on applying these high-level concepts to the realms of trade. Trade programs are often assessed based on accommodative metrics, including how many women were in attendance at a given customs workshop training, without evaluating if the training material was relevant, whether the women were able to utilize the knowledge, or more fundamentally, whether the custom processes were simplified and clear (de la Puente Pacheco et al., 2025; Abid et al. (2020). Several mainstream trade performance indicators, including the World Bank doing Business indicators, are also

criticised as gender-evasive aggregation, which hides the varying effects and offers no information about gendered access or outcomes (UNECA, 2020; Dommen, 2021). This divide between advanced evaluation theory and practice, in the trade, creates a vacuum. It is here, in this vacuum, where the necessity of a special conceptual framework emerges, that can convert the insights of feminist political economy into real-world functions of M&E indicators on border management, logistics, and trade information systems.

This collection of literature sheds light on five research gaps, that are definite, that this study is meant to fill. To begin with, there is a strong conceptual research gap. Although gender-responsive evaluation frameworks do exist, and trade barriers are recorded, there is no single conceptual framework in which these two areas of expertise are integrated to create a specialised GRM&E framework to support trade facilitation programs. Second, there is a contextual research gap. The majority of research about gender and trade in Kenya is general and policy-focused or concentrated on tabulating obstacles, with little intellectual effort made to determine how well Kenya has created, or is capable of diagnosing and rectifying these obstacles as part of active programs of national trade. Third, there is still a methodological research gap. Examples of practical and context-sensitive instruments and measures of rigorous gender responsive assessment of complex trade facilitation initiatives, such as National Single Window systems or the adoption of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, are lacking. Fourth, the gap of theoretical application is still identifiable. The extensive body of theoretical work in relation to gendered institutions are rarely put into practice in challenging and enlightening the technical architecture of M&E systems and, as a result, there is a gap between the fields of critical social theory and practice of evaluation. Lastly, there is a sharp gap in empirical evidence. Published, in-depth case studies to evaluate the consequences of particular trade facilitation programs in Kenya through a rigorous, gendered-evaluative prism are especially scarce, which poses a restriction on the quantity of evidence that can be used to investigate and improve policies. Through a conceptual assessment to fill these intertwined gaps, this study offers a model by which the success of trade facilitation can be redefined so as to be truly indicative of the achievement of inclusive and equitable economic integration in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a conceptual research design to develop a systematic conceptual framework on Gender-Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation (GRM&E) in the trade facilitation context of Kenya. Being a conceptual study, the research does not involve the collection of new empirical or primary data, instead synthesising and re-interpreting the available knowledge to generate new insights and models (Kulesa et al., 2024; Kamal, 2019). Its main aim is to synthesise the divergent undercurrents of literature, cutting across the areas of trade policy, feminist economics, gender studies and evaluation theory to generate a sound, context-based framework. The design is specifically appropriate in the context of the purpose of the study to fill existing conceptual gaps and offer a background model that can inform subsequent empirical studies and policy development (Jaakkola, 2020; Passey, 2020). It is theoretically based on a feminist political economy approach, which stipulates that economic systems and policies cannot be viewed as gender-neutral and require to be studied through the prism of power relations, social reproduction, and structural inequality (Syed, 2021; Rao & Akram-Lodhi, 2021). This is the lingua franca that guides the analytic questions posed of the literature with the aim to understand how trade facilitation initiatives can recreate, adapt, or modify an already existing system of gendered power within Kenyan institutions and cross-border sites.

The study solely depended on gathering and extensive examination of secondary information spanning a large number of credible published materials (Wickham, 2019). Multistage sampling design was used to collect materials that render strong evidence on the Kenyan context and the theoretical frameworks related to the topic. The initial layer consisted of national policy and legal documents, such as the Kenya Vision 2030, the National Trade Policy, the AfCFTA Implementation Strategy, as well as the applicable gender equality frameworks. Such documents lay down the official purpose and normative undertakings of the Kenyan state (State Department for Trade, 2025; Mwenzwa & Misati, 2014; African Union, 2024). The second layer was a systemised search of academic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR and Scopus. The main search terms were ‘gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation’, ‘trade facilitation Kenya’, ‘feminist political economy Africa’, and ‘informal cross-border trade’. The search produced peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and theoretical texts containing a critical analysis and empirical findings (Hannah et al., 2021; Ojo, 2023; Melo, 2019; Zenebe Ede’o et al., 2020). The

third layer concentrated on institutional and grey literature by reputable international and local organizations. Empirical findings, case studies, and practical recommendations on gender and trade in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the World Bank, UN Women, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Kenyan state institutes were added (UNECA; 2020; Götzmann & Bainton, 2021). No actual interviews or questionnaires were used, which is appropriate since the study is conceptually based.

The interpretation of the collected secondary data was performed in the framework of a qualitative iterative procedure of thematic synthesis and critical conceptual combination (Eachempati et al., 2022; Naeem et al., S2023). The process started with a first phase of open coding during which documents were thoroughly read to detect common themes, concepts, contradictory issues, and silences concerning gender, trade facilitation, and M&E (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022; Morgan, 2022). Subsequently, there was a targeted coding phase, which was informed by the general research question of the case-study and had the groups of data classified under the study thematic areas of: policy-implementation gaps, gendered institutional barriers, and, accommodative versus transformative evaluation (Morgan, 2022). The analytic work was primarily composed of constant comparative analysis, in which the theoretical knowledge, including feminist economic criticism of unpaid care work, was directly employed to interpret and provide greater meaning to the empirical evidence presented in policy reports and case studies (Njuki et al., Maame & Abor, 2024). This dialectic of theory and evidence made it possible to build a crafted argument. The last and most important phase was conceptual modeling where the associations among these themes were drawn to advance a new GRM&E framework. This framework strategically connects the structural obstacles found in the literature, such as harassment at the borders, with particular, transformative M&E indicators that quantify progress in eliminating it, and thus goes beyond the descriptive synthesis to the generative conceptualization.

The main object of analysis is the general policy and programmatic approach to incorporating gender considerations into the M&E of trade facilitation in Kenya. The research analyses not an individual discrete project, but critiques the conceptual underpinnings that ought to form the basis of M&E in the context of the Kenya trade ecosystem. This involves the study of logic frameworks and indicator subsets of key country-level initiatives in line with the application of WTO Trade

Facilitation Agreement (TFA) and the AfCFTA. The main reference points are the National Electronic Single Window System of Kenya, the reforms of the major One-Stop Border posts (OSBPs) such as Busia and Malaba, and the capacity-building programs for traders. These questions scrutinise the possibility that the design of M&E of these interventions is either motivated by an awareness of gendered institutions or simply monitors generic, gender-evasive project outputs (Draper et al., 2022; Odijie, 2024). It also focuses on how the inter-governmental nature of Kenya, with a national ministry and 47 counties, poses challenges to coherent GRM&E that are currently not examined in the extant literature (Manyala, 2021; Masenge et al., 2024; Mujema & Wandiri, 2023).

The protocol of the research was strictly followed in order to achieve transparency, rigor, and replicability as a key factor in building trustworthiness in conceptual research. Formal document search and selection procedure were observed. Each possible source was evaluated against explicit inclusion criteria, such as relevance to trade and gender situation in Kenya, publication by a reputable institution or peer-reviewed journal, and possible contribution to theoretical or empirical knowledge. To ensure keeping track of the ideas development and anchoring interpretations to the source texts, selected documents were assigned to a reference management system, and detailed analytic memos were prepared during the coding and synthesis stages (Bingham, 2023; Reyes et al., 2024). One of the most important reflexive practices was to ask the question of how the continental AfCFTA was reflected within national texts, which made the analysis revolve around Kenyan applications instead of continental ambitions. The main limitation of this approach is that it is dependent on the depth and the range of published works. Nonetheless, its great strength lies in its capacity to bring together different areas of knowledge in order to come up with a new conceptual tool, capable of directly informing policy design, auditing the current systems of M&E and offer a clear roadmap to future primary research regarding gender and trade facilitation in Kenya.

FINDINGS

The section describes the main findings of the conceptual analysis on GRM&E in trade facilitation programs in Kenya. The study covered the fundamental research question of the continued lack of institutional attachment between Kenya's progressive policy commitments to inclusive trade and

gendered blockers that persistently obstruct their application in a real-life context (International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024; Draper et al., 2022; Odijie, 2024). A synthesis of policy documents, scholarly literature, and institutional reports had a number of conclusive and interrelated findings. These findings describe, in systematic detail, the nature of gendered barriers of trade facilitation, critically analyse the inefficacy of current accountability instruments, and clarify the basics needed to create a transformative GRM&E framework (Kulesa et al., 2024; Kamal, 2019; Götzmann & Bainton, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

One of the most notable and strong results was a profoundly rooted and structural character of the gendered restrictions presented in the trade facilitation environment in Kenya. The analysis established that women traders encounter an enhanced set of barriers that go way beyond standard bureaucratic ineffectiveness, confirming that traditional trade models have historically overlooked redistribution effects among social groups (Van Leeuwen et al., 2025; Melo, 2019; Zenebe Ede'o et al., 2020). One such critical observation was the ubiquitous nature of corruption and gender-based violence as a major non-tariff barrier (Oloo & Onyango, 2023; TradeMark East Africa, 2015). Main cross-border locations such as Busia showed empirically that most women traders experience corruption regularly, and these relationships often have a more gender-based nature, involving sexual harassment and exploitation (Klopp et al., 2022; Wiseman, 2020; Akaezuwa et al., 2020; Ngonidzashe, & Titeca, 2022; Stern, 2024; GI-ACEP, 2021).

This unfriendly atmosphere directly promotes informality as a good proportion of women use dangerous informal crossing routes to bypass predatory officials in formal border posts, a very reasonable behaviour that margins them further out of legal protection and support services (Abayisenga, 2024; Mvunga & Kunaka, 2021; Bucekuderhwa et al., 2023). Also, design and functioning of trade facilitation infrastructure including One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) were gender-evasive. Key examples were the extreme information asymmetries, in which reduced literacy rates and lack of procedural expertise among female traders complicated paperwork as a major challenge, and the imbalanced timing of formal procedures against the trade in perishables which is a disproportionate obstacle of small-scale trade run by women (Nugent & Soi, 2020; Siu, 2020; Kapkai et al., 2020; Kiptum et al., 2025; Banyan Global, 2017).

This investigation revealed a critical discovery about the extreme lack of functional accountability and redress mechanisms in the existing system. Although policy frameworks like the National Trade Policy and the Kenya National AfCFTA Implementation Strategy realise the importance of inclusion (State Department for Trade, 2025; African Union, 2024), the means of operationally executing accountability practices turned out to be relatively inefficient or even non-existent. The examination of formal complaint mechanisms, including trade barrier reporting mechanisms and ministry hotlines, turned out to be virtually useless at engaging the everyday reality of female traders (Klopp et al., 2022; Wiseman, 2020; Akaezuwa et al., 2020). Two critical weaknesses were noted: risky absence of anonymity in reporting procedures, which makes traders submit evidence that may subject them to retaliation, and a deep lack of political commitment to systematically combat petty corruption and intimidation of small-scale cross-border trade. This institutional inefficiency establishes a culture of impunity and enables networks of corruption to exist unchecked in the bureaucratic framework, thereby cancelling out the expected outcomes of trade facilitation policies, reinforcing the 'policy-implementation' gap (Wiseman, 2022; Klopp & Trimble, 2022; International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024).

Regarding the subject of data and measurement, the analysis revealed a very basic empirical void that paralyses evidence-based policy-making. One of the most notable findings in all the reviewed literature was the acute lack of systematic, sex-disaggregated trade flows, trader experiences, and the gendered effects of facilitation programs (UNECA, 2020; Dommen, 2021). It was discovered that national statistical systems and customs databases do not collect or separate data in terms of gender, making the role of women in intra-African trade statistically invisible (International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). This information gap implies that the achievements or failures of the policy to help in supporting women traders cannot be empirically confirmed. This results in a lapse to superficial and accommodating measures, including the number of women who attained a workshop, instead of evaluating transformative results, including the growth in income security, decrease in the incidence of harassment, or the rise of formalisation (Gains, 2020; de la Puente Pacheco et al., 2025; Abid et al., 2020). This absence of pertinent information was found to be the key technical bottleneck in the way of development of meaningful GRM&E.

The conceptual analysis also generated a considerable finding on applicable theoretical frames and comparative policy models. It was identified that the use of the feminist political economy lens was necessary to diagnose the underlying aspects of perceived barriers as it views issues such as harassment and informality not as individual problems but as consequences of structural asymmetries of power and institutional prejudice (Hannah et al., 2021; Ojo, 2023; Njuki et al., 2024). The analysis supports the theory of 'gendered institutions,' suggesting that customs and financial systems are not neutral but maintain gendered biases (Kenny, 2007; Acker, 1992; Melo, 2019; Zenebe Ede'o et al., 2020). The COMESA Simplified Trade Regime (STR) offered evidence of a potential optimal practice in regional models, such as introducing special support desks and simplified processes to small-scale traders, which effectively reduced the time of crossing borders and the security of traders (Desiderio, 2025; Gondwe, 2021; Chola, 2021). On the other hand, the overview of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade has identified one universal regional trend: the protocol defines a robust normative framework but does not talk about its self-realisation and does not provide any strict and binding requirements regarding the national-level M&E systems to monitor adherence and impact (International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024; African Union, 2024). This was an indication of a repeat failure of aspiration on a high level and a grounding on the implementation.

Lastly, the synthesis highlighted a conceptual void in the design of existing trade facilitation M&E frameworks. The general implication was the fact that the existing evaluation paradigms are essentially out of sync with the purpose of having gender equality. They were reportedly built mainly to evaluate economic efficiency and aggregate amounts of trade by means of indicators which are by default gender evasive (UNECA, 2020; Dommen, 2021). The assessment systems do not integrate the main pillars of gender-responsive evaluation, including participatory design, intersectional analysis, and the measurement of power dynamics changes (Götzmann & Bainton, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Richards et al., 2022; Joshi et al., 2023). Consequently, they are incapable of capturing whether trade facilitation programs are restructuring gendered institutions or simply adapting women to an imbalanced system. This conceptual disconnect was found to be the primary cause of the policy-implementation gap continuing uninterrupted, and unquantified, thus enabling gendered barriers to be entrenched despite progressive policy rhetoric (Gains, 2020; International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The discussion interprets the main results of this conceptual analysis and explores their underlying implications to achieving gender equality in the context of trade facilitation in Kenya. The inquiry established that there exists a substantial implementation gap between high-level policy pledges and lived lives of the women traders, a gap that is supported by M&E systems which are poorly equipped to diagnose or respond to highly entrenched gendered barriers (International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024; Draper et al., 2022; Odijie, 2024; State Department for Trade, 2025). The fundamental results demonstrated a trade environment in which women are systemically subjected to corruption and harassment via gender evasive institutions and systems, and are rendered invisible due to a critical lack of sex-disaggregated data, and without an effective accountability system (Klopp et al., 2022; Wiseman, 2020; Akaezuwa et al., 2020; UNECA, 2020; Dommen, 2021; Oloo & Onyango, 2023). This part of the argument contends that these are not one-off failures, but indicators of an underlying conceptual issue, namely that the current M&E paradigm was built to measure aggregate economic efficiency, such as GDP and overall export levels, rather than innovative social change or equity (Van Leeuwen et al., 2025; Gains, 2020; Hannah et al., 2021; Ojo, 2023; Melo, 2019).

These results are best understood in the context of feminist political economy. The widespread harassment and 'sextortion' at border crossings do not simply remain a criminal anomaly but are, in fact, a reflection of established power relations and a sort of gendered rent-seeking which serves as a punitive tax on women economic participation (Hannah et al., 2021; Ojo, 2023; Klopp et al., 2022; Wiseman, 2020; Akaezuwa et al., 2020; Ngonidzashe and Titeca, 2022). Likewise, informality among women traders might be reimagined not as a compliance failure, but conversely, as the logical strategy of survival in the face of hostile, gender insensitive and discriminatory formal institutions (Melo, 2019; Zenebe Ede'o et al., 2020; Acker, 1992; Kenny, 2007). This interpretation is a direct indictment of the accommodative tradition of existing policies which tend to merely attempt to add women to systems that are already broken. These results have connoted that trade facilitation programs can never be transformational in the absence of M&E structures that could be used to quantify changes in these underlying power arrangements, including a reduction in cases of corruption or a change in organisational culture (Gains, 2020; Götzmann &

Bainton, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). The reported inefficiency of grievance mechanisms also highlights this argument, showing that it is a system that safeguards institutional behaviour at the expense of personal rights, thus, continuing with the culture of impunity (Wiseman, 2022; Klopp & Trimble, 2022).

These interpreted results are very significant to policy and practice. First of all, they emphasize that the success of technical trade facilitation measured in aggregate clearance times or volumes cannot be an adequate goal when it is accompanied by and even contributes to gender inequality (UNECA, 2020; Dommen, 2021). In the case of Kenya, it directly conflicts with its National Trade Policy and Kenya National AfCFTA Implementation Strategy, whose goals are to achieve economic growth and inclusive development (State Department for Trade, 2025; African Union, 2024; Agaya, 2025). The discussion suggests that the lack of the integration of a solid GRM&E framework can lead to jeopardizing the social pillars of this strategy and the wider constitutional obligation to equity. Moreover, the inter-governmental nature of Kenya, necessitating a balance between the national trade priorities and the agenda of 47 semi-autonomous counties, is an added layer of critical complexity (Manyala, 2021; Masenge et al., 2024; Mujema & Wandiri, 2023; Kiriti-Nganga, 2025; Mutua & Felix, 2023; Ogutu, 2022; Muhia, 2023). An effective national GRM&E system should thus be constructed in a manner that it will be used to monitor the outcomes at various governance levels, whereby the county-based trade initiatives should also comply with and promote gender equality. In the absence of this, decentralisation may unknowingly result in fragmentation of accountability over gender issues.

Limitations of this conceptual research need to be recognised. Being a study paper that relies on the synthesis of available literature and policy documents, the results are limited by the scope, quality, and availability of the secondary data used. Although the study cites the lack of sex-disaggregated data, which is crucial, the nature of its findings is predetermined by the same paucity of evidence (UNECA, 2020; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2018; International Monetary Fund, 2019). The proposed conceptual model is theoretical and deductive. Its practical efficacy and effective operationalisation of indicators need to be confirmed in future empirical studies. The interest of the study also lies in a macro and meso-level approach to systems and policies, which, although they disclose structural problems, do not reflect the complete and detailed heterogeneity

of the experiences of all women traders in all sectors, counties, and socio-economic lineages (Kiptum et al., 2025; Agarwal et al., 2025). These limitations are, however, a clear direction in the line of further research.

Thus, some specific recommendations arise in the course of this discussion. To begin with, the empirical action research necessary to pilot and refine the proposed GRM&E framework is urgently needed. This ought to entail joint research with other agencies such as the Kenya Revenue Authority and State Department of Trade to come up with and pilot context-specific, transformative indicators in chosen border points. Second, one of the central policy changes is the compulsory establishment of gender budgeting and gender-robust audits in all trade facilitation schemes, whereby funding is directly attached to the desired outcomes about gender equality (UN Women, 2023). Third, future studies should take an intersectional stance of examining the role of gender barriers in addition to other variables such as disability, ethnicity, or abject poverty, so that M&E systems are not operationalised to consider women traders as a homogeneous group (Richards et al., 2022; Joshi et al., 2023). Lastly, researchers and practitioners ought to formulate and share useful toolkits and training modules on the concepts of GRM&E with trade officers in counties, to create capacity at the local level to apply the ideas expressed in national and continental policies. With such steps, Kenya can start bridging the implementation gap which is ever-present and create a trade environment in which M&E will become a tool of accountability and equitable development and whereby the fruits of trade facilitation benefit everyone.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research aimed to provide a vital answer to the crucial question on the interplay of trade policy and gender equality in Kenya on what comprises an effective conceptual framework of GRM&E of trade facilitation programs. The research problem rested on the longstanding lack of connection between Kenya progressive policy pledges to inclusive trade, and those expressed in frameworks such as the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade and the national commitment to follow through on sustainable trade in practice (International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024; State Department for Trade, 2025). To tackle this, the research adopted a conceptual research design, which involved the synthesis of evidence based on policy documents, scholarly literature, and institutional reports with the aim of diagnosing systemic failures and providing a new

evaluative model based on feminist political economy (Hannah et al., 2021; Ojo, 2023; Kulesa et al., 2024; Kamal, 2019). The main thesis was that trade facilitation will not be equitable but a compromising endeavor until there is a transformative GRM&E system that will render the gendered power dynamics visible and measurable.

The analysis established that there are a number of mutually dependent factors that ensure the perpetuation of the implementation gap. One of the most crucial conclusions was the acute lack of data, in which the practically complete lack of sex-disaggregated trade data makes women participation and limitations invisible to policy makers, and a vicious circle of gender-evasive planning emerges (UNECA; 2020; International Monetary Fund, 2019; UNOSAA, 2024). Moreover, the very trade climate was discovered to be structurally discriminatory. Women traders encounter an augmented web of obstacles, such as institutionalized corruption in the form of sexual harassment or 'sextortion', sex-neutral infrastructure, such as One Stop Border Posts, and inefficient accountability systems, which leave no safe recourse (Klopp et al., 2022; Wiseman, 2020; Akaezuwa et al., 2020; Nugent & Soi, 2020; Siu, 2020; Kapkai et al., 2020). Most importantly, the study has found that current M&E frameworks are conceptually incompatible with gender equality objectives. They are created to capture aggregate economic efficiency based on gender-neutral indicators, thereby not evaluating the programs to determine whether they change institutional biases or simply fit women to an unbalanced system (Gains, 2020; UNECA; 2020).

One of the fundamental personal conclusions drawn after this study is the understanding that technical solutions are not enough. The study enlightened the realisation that gender-responsive trade facilitation is not just a logistical issue, but a fundamental governance issue. It involves taking on the status quo of power in institutions and shifting political will so as to place economic rights of women traders as a priority. This paper has been successful in fulfilling its objective of developing a conceptual base to bridge feminist political economy with practical design of M&E. Nevertheless, it is paramount to mention that the study is also characterised by certain limitations. Being essentially a conceptual study, its results and suggested model are based on synthesis, not on new empirical evidence. Their usefulness in practice and the technical operationalisation of suggested indicators need testing in applied research. Moreover, the high-level analysis, despite being able to identify systemic problems, fails to reflect the diversity of experience of all women

traders in Kenya across counties and sectors which is a complexity that next-generation work must acknowledge (Manyala, 2021; Masenge et al., 2024; Mujema & Wandiri, 2023).

The policy, practice and future research recommendations are based on these conclusions. First, the Government of Kenya ought to make it a standard procedure to collect and analyse sex-disaggregated information in all trade-related agencies, starting with pilot projects in major border posts such as Busia and Malaba. This information is the indisputable basis of evidence-based policy (UNECA; 2020). Second, trade facilitation programs should be inclusive of definite, transformative GRM&E indicators since their inception. They must go beyond tallying participants to quantifying shifts in trader security, access and economic empowerment using the examples such as the COMESA Simplified Trade Regime (Desiderio, 2025; Gondwe, 2021; Chola, 2021). Third, since Kenya has a devolved system of governance, capacity-building programs on the principles of GRM&E should be expanded to county trade officers so that a unified implementation in each level of the country can be supported (Manyala, 2021; Masenge et al., 2024; Mujema & Wandiri, 2023; Kiriti-Nganga, 2025; Mutua & Felix, 2023; Ogutu, 2022; Muhia, 2023).

To the academic and research community, the study presents a number of new opportunities. Future studies must conduct empirical case studies to implement and improve the proposed framework and employ mixed methods to describe the gendered effects of particular interventions. Intersectional analyses examining the common congruence of gender barriers with other aspects of disadvantage such as disability, ethnicity, or poverty to form compound handicap are also urgently needed. Lastly, researchers may help create practical GRM&E toolkits and standardised metrics that may be implemented by governments and regional organisations such as the AfCFTA Secretariat. More broadly, this work shows that to make the most of the AfCFTA by engaging in a process of inclusive development in Kenya, GRM&E can no longer be viewed as a technical consideration but as a means of accountability and social justice. Through turning gender equality into a quantifiable goal instead of an ideological dream, Kenya can turn its trade facilitation ecosystem into a real driver towards equitable and sustainable economic development.

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