

Promoting Women's Small Scale Cross-Border Trade in agricultural goods in West Africa

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Abstract

Small-scale cross-border trade in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region is immensely carried out by women informally in agricultural products. The trading activities of women positively affect employment, income and food security of countries in the region. However, the position of women in the societies of West Africa has resulted in unfavourable policy initiatives which make cross-border women traders face poor conditions in formalizing their trade and encounter challenges when crossing the border. Hence, small-scale cross-border trade challenges are gender-specific and not general. This paper aims to investigate practical considerations of gender influencing trade policies for women in agricultural Informal Cross-border Trade (ICBT) in the ECOWAS region. This informs the research objectives to assess the barriers to women in ICBT and policy measures planned, recommended, or existing, in response to the barriers women encounter in small-scale cross-border trade. A systematic review using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) was used to identify studies to answer the research questions. The included studies provided challenges faced by women which emanated from gender inequality issues. The policies and measures put in place, planned and recommended were gender sensitive but it is recommended that the trade policies should be border-specific in the ECOWAS region.

Keywords

Women; Informal Cross-border Trade; Agricultural goods; Policies; ECOWAS

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1. Introduction

The agricultural sector has been the backbone of economies in the ECOWAS region in which women play a major role in the processing and marketing of its products. Employment, income and food security are positively affected by this sector (Salifou, 2008). The signing of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment in 1979 Article 27 was executed effectively (ECOWAS, 1979) and has resulted in the free movement of people and goods across borders for trading purposes (Aduloju, 2017). Cross-border

trade can either be formal or informal when the trade is legally registered (Njiwa, 2013) and exempted from regulatory requirements respectively (Lesser & Moisse-Leeman, 2009). Small-scale cross-border trade is mostly informal and is carried out by individuals in limited quantities of legitimate goods (Njiwa, 2012). Agricultural and livestock products in Africa dominate small-scale cross-border trade of which the ECOWAS region is not an exemption. It contributes to 43% of the income of the African population as it strengthens livelihoods and creates employment (Brenton & Soprano, 2018). Statistics indicate that 64 different agricultural commodities such as maize and tomatoes were informally traded across the borders of ECOWAS in 2020 (CILSS, 2021). In West Africa, 60% of informal cross-border traders are represented by women (Afrika & Ajumbo, 2012; Sommer & Nshimbi, 2018). The mode of transport used by women in small-scale informal cross-border trade in agricultural goods includes using their heads, bicycles and motorcycles (Kareem & Wieck, 2021).

Despite the role women in small-scale informal cross-border trade (ICBT) play towards their households and Africa as a whole, their contributions are considered

marginal and are not able to improve and formalize. This is as a result of policy measures that hinder the progress of women in agricultural trade (Brenton & Soprano, 2018; Soule, 2018; Randriamaro, 2008). Trade policies are formalized rules and measures to govern trading activities from national to international levels (ECOWAS, 2015). The ECOWAS Trade Liberation Scheme (ETLS), which covers agricultural, artisanal, handicraft, and unprocessed goods coming from member states, was adopted in 1979. It has been expanded to include industrial products with Rules of Origin, for which a product must be accompanied by a Certificate of Origin that requires documentation and approval procedures. This is ideal for large-scale formal trading processes, but as most women work in small-scale informal trade, it severely restricts their options. Majority of government ministries are found in cities where women have to travel long distances for paperwork and other formalities. This is one of the reasons why women engage in informal cross-border trade. Again, there are several obstacles such as difficulties in obtaining travel documents; trading licenses; excessive tariffs by customs officials, and a lack of understanding of official procedures that hinder women in cross-border trade. Also, Small and Micro Enterprises, which dominate in informal cross-border trade, receive virtually little attention from ETLS (UNECA, 2018). Regional experts from ECOWAS have endorsed a proposal to regulate unofficial trade to combat poverty and promote economic integration and growth. However, there are still practical issues that need to be resolved.

Women are most affected by the social and economic effects of these unfavourable policy initiatives (Fofana et al., 2019). Women especially in the rural areas bear the highest burden of trade policies due to their immense involvement in food production. They are categorized as the vulnerable group in Africa (Kareem & Kareem, 2021). Some of these challenges women face across borders include physical harassment, abuse, bribery and corruption, lack of access to capital, high cost of processing regulatory requirements (Brenton, Gamberoni & Sear, 2013), inadequate transportation, limited land and roadblocks (USAID, 2012a). Despite these challenges, officials have paid little attention to the challenges women face at the border posts (Aduloju, 2017) and also to governments who negatively stereotype these women traders as “petit hustlers” (Ityavyar, 2013, pg. 73). Even though men also face challenges in small-scale ICBT, by comparison, women are more vulnerable and suffer most of these challenges. The position of men and women in the economy and societies of West Africa determines the differences in challenges encountered by men and women informal traders (UNECA, AU & AfDB, 2010). The sociocultural norms in society are an example of such determinants that places women in a position to face more challenges than men (Fofana et al., 2019). This is an infringement

on the rights of women as provided for in the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (Aduloju, 2017).

The differences in the challenges encountered by men and women provide evidence that small-scale cross-border trade challenges are gender-specific (UNCTAD, UNECA & UNECE, 2023) but unfortunately, most trade policies are formulated based on the assumption that trade is gender neutral (ECOWAS, 2015). According to Brenton and Soprano (2018), government needs to recognize the essential role of women in cross-border trade and focus on removing gender-specific barriers to women growing their businesses to achieve the regional trade potential in Africa. Research on trade-related policies affecting women traders in agricultural goods in the ECOWAS region is scant (Fofana et al., 2019). Few studies have recognized the effect of gender-insensitive policies and this has led to researchers (eg. Yusuff, 2014; USAID, 2012) and organizations (eg. ECOWAS, 2015; World Bank, 2020) providing policy recommendations and action plans respectively to target women in ICBT. The background of this phenomenon informed this research to investigate the existing policies and recommended gender-sensitive policies and action plans for women in agricultural ICBT in the ECOWAS region. The barriers to women in ICBT, and policy measures planned, recommended or put in place in response to the barriers of women from relevant studies were assessed in this study. The study will be beneficial to governments and policymakers in the ECOWAS region to appropriately assess the positions of women in society to inform trade policies in promoting their cross-border trade businesses. However, the population of the ECOWAS region is projected to be 787 million by 2050 which is a doubled population of 397 million in 2019 with a 2.35 annual growth rate (UNCTAD, 2021) implies that there would be a need for improvements in trading activities to ensure food security for the increasing population.

1.1 Women and trade in Africa

Trade amongst African women extends back to the pre-colonial era, but according to the World Bank, women in Africa are currently at a lower economic progress level than men in the twenty-first century. The entrepreneurial activities of women in Africa are faced with obstacles. These obstacles include lack of economic resources, finance, participation and inclusion decision-making. Women are unable to develop their full potential in trading because entrepreneurship turns out to be gendered in Africa (Jaiyeola & Adeyeye, 2021). Trade is examined on this score to lift people out of severe or moderate poverty via the progressive elimination of both conventional impediments and barriers against women in Africa. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), one of the largest free trade areas in the world has been described as a ‘game changer’ and a springboard for African economies to improve Intra

trade among its over 1.3 billion citizens (Woode, 2021). Since the creation of AfCFTA in 2018, the community of African countries has shown high commitment and determination to harness the benefits of a trade-liberalized system (Tucker, 2022). While the operational phase of the AfCFTA was launched in 2019, and the start of trading began on 1 January 2021. One of the AfCFTA's strategic objectives as enshrined in the enabling Agreement is to "promote and attain sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, gender equality and structural transformation of the State Parties"(Woode, 2021). Trade's impacts are not just borne disproportionately by the most vulnerable and impoverished communities; there are also gender discrepancies. The links between trade, gender equality, and women's rights are not only complex but also multifaceted. In contrast, most existing gender and trade studies provide a limited understanding of what gender equality and women's rights entail in the context of trade agreements.

The concept of gender equality has been enshrined in international human rights law (Bali Action Plan, 2007). This demonstrates how important it is for trade agreements to consider gender equality issues. Gender equality and trade from a human rights perspective may achieve AfCFTA's goals based on access, participation, and inclusion since human rights legislation places the preservation and fulfilment of fundamental human rights and collective interests at its centre. International and regional human rights law entitles every person to active, free and meaningful participation in, contribution to and enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural development through which guaranteed rights can be fulfilled (Addaney & Moyo 2018). According to this notion, women must actively engage in national and regional trade responses and discussions. The idea serves as a foundation for assuring that trade policies permit the active participation of women and other marginalised groups. The achievement of inclusive development, as outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, will result from integrating gender concerns and women's rights into trade deals, financing, and capacity-building.

2. Method

This review and analysis of studies examined the barriers that women encounter in informal cross-border trading in agriculture and suggest gender-sensitive trade policies for the ECOWAS area.

2.1 Identification of included studies

A systematic review using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) was used as a guide to conduct the study (Figure 1). PRISMA is a minimal set of elements with an evidence-based approach that helps in reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. To identify relevant studies for the study,

inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to a total number of 122 studies (18 journal articles, 6 books, 36 discussion papers, 21 policy briefs, 20 reports, 11 working papers, 7 organizational articles, 3 student dissertations) retrieved from search engines such as google.com, google scholar, and books.org. The inclusion criteria include up-to-date studies in the English language (a range of 10 years), studies conducted in ECOWAS member states (Cape Verde, Benin, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Ghana), and publications with small scale ICBT involving agricultural commodities. The exclusion criteria include publications with formal and large-scale cross-border trade. This is because ICBT is the common type of cross-border trade practised among women in West African borders (Yusuff, 2014). Recent studies (Panel, 2020; Karoff, 2021) also indicate that, due to the small sizes of women's ICBT in agricultural goods, they bore most of the challenges in informal trade. The study seeks to investigate the barriers women faced in informal small-scale cross-border trade. Other exclusion criteria are gender-insensitive studies and publications with unclear policy measures.

The application of the outlined inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study led to the removal of 25 irrelevant studies out of the 122 total retrieved studies. Afterwards, 87 studies were excluded through two forms of screening that are screening on study titles, abstracts and executive summary and screening on the full text of the study. The 87 studies removed did not meet the inclusion criteria through the screening process. After the screening process, 10 studies remained. A quality assessment was conducted for eligibility on the remaining 10 studies to ensure the accuracy of the data that will be extracted from the included studies. A study is deemed quality when the study is well conducted to provide reliable results (Torgerson, 2008). A total number of 5 studies consisting of 4 grey literature (1 working paper, 2 reports, and 1 policy brief) and 1 journal article, that met the inclusion criteria used for the systematic review.

2.2 Characteristics of included studies

The included studies were both written by individuals and organizations and publication dates ranged from 2014 to 2021 (Table 1). Two studies (Kareem & Wieck, 2021; World Bank Group, 2020) employed a mixed-method approach, Yusuff (2014) used a qualitative approach, Ayilu et al. (2016) used the illustrations of case studies and ECOWAS (2015) used discussions from stakeholders and expert meetings as the method for the study. Most of the studies were conducted in all member states of ECOWAS except for two studies (Ayilu et al., 2016; Yusuff, 2014). Women in Kareem and Wieck's (2021) and Yusuff's (2014) study engaged in the trade of a few selected number of agricultural commodities with Ayilu et al. (2016) being the least as the study discussed the trade of only

fish by women. All the included studies provided challenges women encounter in their informal ICBT in the ECOWAS region. The policy plans and recommendations provided by the studies were in the form of strategies, initiatives and mechanisms to govern activities in promoting women's small-scale ICBT.

3. Results and Discussion

This section analyses the challenges women face in ICBT in existing policies and the policies planned or recommended by the included studies to address them. Low or lack of awareness of the ECOWAS Trade Liberation Scheme (ETLS) which consists of regional trade rules and regulations was mentioned by all the included studies (Kareem & Wieck, 2021; World Bank Group, 2020; Ayilu et al., 2016; ECOWAS, 2015; Yusuff, 2014) as a challenge women face in their trading activities. This leads to the exploitation of women traders by border officials as they are harassed and forced to make illegal payments (ECOWAS, 2015). Women in fish processing and trading lack information on trading rules and are not able to understand and comply with standards of quality and hygiene which are needed to comply to cross the border (Ayilu et al., 2016). For several years, women who trade across the Nigeria-Benin border do not have legal documents such as ECOWAS passports and international identity required in trade rules (Yusuff, 2014). The non-acquaintance with ELTS by women traders was attributed to the high illiteracy rate of women in the region. For instance, Ayilu et al., (2016) study cited in Anoh et al. (2016) claims that 80% of female cross-border fish traders in Cote d'Ivoire are illiterates. Tsikata (2009) study explained the reason for women's high illiteracy rate as a gendered construction since the colonial period among societies in West Africa, allowing males access to formal education and restricting females to small-scale trade. The included studies provided plans and recommended awareness creation, public education, training and capacity building by governments, regional institutions and civil society organizations for women traders as a policy measure to educate women in ETLS and other essential information on ICBT. Channels for awareness creation recommended were mass media (Yusuff, 2014) and radio stations (Ayilu et al., 2016). Concerning education and training, Kareem and Wieck (2021) study also recommends collaborating with women groups. Karkare et al. (2021) claim that the policy of awareness creation on the rules might have implications for traders complying with the rules only based on the condition that, requirements are simplified, less time-consuming, tolerance of border officials and access to information.

Finance was another challenge mentioned by all the included studies. The low or lack of finance for women traders (Ayilu et al., 2016) was illustrated in terms of inaccessibility to loans (Kareem & Wieck, 2021), lack of

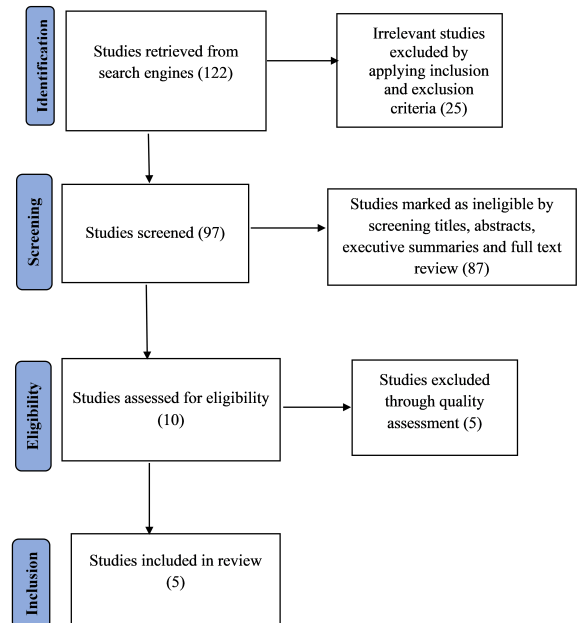


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Chart showing Identification of Included Studies

Source: Authors' own construct

information on financial avenues, poor financial management of women (World Bank Group, 2020), and limited or lack of access to credit (Ayilu et al., 2016; ECOWAS, 2015). Women do not get access to loan facilities because of inadequate fixed assets/collateral, high-interest rates and illiteracy. This is because their businesses are not viable to request a loan (ECOWAS, 2015). Illiteracy and socio-cultural inequalities attribute to the limited or inaccessibility to agriculture trade finance of women than men (Kareem & Kareem, 2021; Brenton et al., 2013) affecting their business growth and intentions to formalize. Due to limited access to finance women trading in rice across Benin, Niger and Nigeria are adversely affected by low production and profit (SWAC/OECD, 2021). In Yusuff's (2014) study, a respondent with limited resources who traded across the Nigeria-Benin border reported fear of paying taxes due to corruption, the tiny scale of their operations, and their low financial situation. An existing agriculture trade finance scheme (Kareem & Wieck, 2021) provides specific financial institutions that make money accessible to women through an individual or joint application which requires no fixed collateral, low premiums of protection insurance, and favourable terms and conditions but a government guarantee is strictly required. Other policy measures aimed at facilitating the ease of finance to women are having dialogues with financial institutions to create new credit products to meet the financial needs of women traders, educating them on safe methods of keeping money such as electronic mobile money (World

Table 1. The characteristics of included studies

| Author(s) / Organization & year | Study type | Title | Aim | Method & Country | Agricultural commodities | Challenges of women traders | Existing Policies/ Policy Plans and Recommendations |
|---|-----------------|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| Kareem & Wieck, 2021 | Working paper | Mapping agricultural trade within the ECOWAS: Structure and flow of agricultural products, barriers to trade, financing gaps and policy options | To map the status of agricultural and food trade, trade barriers and identify the gaps that exist in the agricultural trade finance and quality infrastructure. | Mixed-method approach. All the Member states in ECOWAS | Fruits and vegetables, fish, nuts, sunflower seed oil, palm oil, cassava, fisheries, onions, cowpea, cotton seeds, sorghum and rice | Low level of education and training, inaccessibility to loans, lack of awareness of policies | . i. Agricultural trade finance. ii. Training and capacity building. iii. Collaboration with women's organizations. iv. Collaboration with trader associations |
| World Bank Group, 2020 | Report | Regional gender assessment Report | To inform the design of Trade Facilitation West Africa (TFWA) Program program activities to improve the free and efficient movement of goods in West Africa | Mixed-method approach All the Member states in ECOWAS | All agricultural commodities | Lack of access to finance, abuse, and lack of awareness of rights. | i. Awareness campaign and capacity building. ii. Dialogue with financial institutions and adopt electronic money transactions. iii. Reporting mechanism and provision of surveillance equipment |
| Ayilu, Antwi-Asare, Anoh, Tall, Aboya, Chimatiro & Dedi, 2016 | Policy brief | Informal artisanal fish trade in West Africa: Improving cross-border trade | To recommend options that should be considered for policy formulation and implementation by national and regional policymakers towards the challenges being experienced by main value chain actors in fish trade in West Africa. | Case studies. Ghana, La Cote D'Ivoire, Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso | Fish (frozen, dried and smoked) | Lack of access to credit, time, health, lack of knowledge of regional trade rules and regulations | i. Awareness creation of cross-border trade procedures. ii. Promote women fish mongers voice. iii. Simplify regulatory requirements |
| ECOWAS, 2015 | Report | ECOWAS Plan of Action on Gender and Trade 2015-2020 | To contribute to the socio-economic development of West Africa through mainstreaming gender into trade policies | ECOWAS expert meeting, All the Member states in ECOWAS | All agricultural commodities | Limited access to credit, land and technology, insecurity, lack of awareness | i. Low-interest rates. ii. Training and capacity building. iii. Sanctions |
| Yusuff, 2014 | Journal article | Gender Dimensions of Informal Cross-Border Trade in West-African Sub-Region (ECOWAS) Borders | To examine the dynamics of women in cross border trade along the ECOWAS sub-region. | Qualitative method Nigeria, Ghana, Togo and Benin | Rice, pastry, cooking oil, beef and chicken and fruits. | Abuse, health, time, lack of knowledge, lack of finance | i. Public Education. ii. Production and dissemination of innovative knowledge products |

Source: Authors' own construct

Bank Group, 2020), low-interest rates (ECOWAS, 2015), and collaborating with trader associations to improve access to finance (Kareem & Wieck, 2021). In the absence of trader associations, influential people among women traders can be involved. For example, market queens in Ghana who represents most ethnic groups, have long experience and networks with traders and authorities can lobby for better conditions (Scheiterle & Birner, 2020).

Insecurity and abuse against women traders (World Bank Group, 2020; ECOWAS, 2015; Yusuff, 2014) inhibited trading activities in the form of sexual harassment, robbery, and physical assault. In Yusuff (2014) study at the Nigeria-Benin border, there was an agreement by all the respondents that uniformed personnel sexually harass women but there was no one among the participants of the study who claimed to have been sexually harassed by them. Their claim was attributed to the fact that, in Yoruba culture in Nigeria, women are not able to boldly speak up and report sexual harassment because of stigmatization. Societies in West Africa assign roles of men to be breadwinners and provide for the family whilst females are to stay home and perform household chores (Tsikata, 2009). These women traders are unable to carry out business successfully because their husbands abuse them and do not value their contributions (Ityavyar, 2013). An observation made in Yusuff (2014) study at Seme Border, Iyana-Iba and Mile- Two motor parks which are paths for conveying goods coming from Abidjan, through Ghana, Togo and Benin to Nigeria witnessed a physical assault of women by a customs officer at the checkpoint. Women were also attacked by robbers and drivers who pretend to help them load their goods. Kareem and Wieck (2021) recommend organizing a training session for border officials on the rules and the importance of gender-sensitive cross-border trade. The policy measure of organizing training and capacity building for women and border officials was adopted in Dr. Congo and Rwanda and had some few achievements but led to other new challenges. The incidence of bribes and harassment being reported by women declined but there was no improvement in the demand for bribes by officials. Women traders in turn adopted a new strategy of not reporting bribes and harassment but crossing the border before official border working hours to avoid the officials, though, operating outside official working hours may increase the vulnerabilities of women traders (Croke et al., 2020). Ayilu et al. (2016, Pg.15) study on fish trade recommends the promotion of women fish mongers' voices with the help of non-governmental organizations who can identify "women champions" to foster women empowerment and fight for change in cross-border trade. World Bank Group (2020) plans for the design of reporting mechanisms and the provision of surveillance equipment such as Closed-circuit Television (CCTV) cameras.

Time constraints of women hinder them from effec-

tively operating in their trading activities (Ayilu et al., 2016; Yusuff, 2014). Women do not have enough time to satisfy the required processes needed to formalise their businesses. Due to the assigned role of women in society to perform house chores, they perform their business activities quickly and return home to take care of their children and husbands (Yusuff, 2014). The process of performing regulatory requirements entails regular trips to government offices, obtaining export permits, and obtaining a certificate of origin. These processes are costly and take much time especially when women live far away from destinations of regulatory processes (Brenton et al., 2013). Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Ghana are known to have the most stringent document requirement among the ECOWAS member states (Kareem & Wieck, 2021). The culture of most societies in West Africa ascribes women to ask permission from their husbands before performing any activity outside the home. Women traders also have to seek the permission and help of their husbands or any male relative before they could acquire all the necessary documents and adhere to regulatory requirements (Brenton et al., 2013). Ayilu et al. (2016) recommend a simplification of regulatory requirements. An example cited in simplifying fish trading is the integration of two border stops into One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) to reduce travel time.

Lastly, the ill health of women as a result of trading activities is a challenge (Ayilu et al., 2016; Yusuff, 2014). In fish processing, women were found to suffer from respiratory diseases due to the use of poor hygienic conditions of processing equipment leading to exposure to heat and smoke (Ayilu et al., 2016). Women in West Africa lack access to resources more than men such as land, technology and tools needed to increase productivity (Tsikata, 2009). Ayilu et al. (2016) study mentioned the decrease in productivity of women fish traders is a result of the low working capital of women to select appropriate wood for smoking fish. Another health challenge related to ICBT is stress (Yusuff, 2014). In the course of travelling and anxiety caused by theft and seizure of goods by customs officials, women become stressed. Therefore, policies to produce and disseminate innovative products and knowledge are recommended.

4. Conclusion

The included studies provided five different forms of barriers (lack of knowledge of trade rules and regulations, limited or lack of finance, insecurity and abuse, time constraints and health problems) women trading across borders in agricultural goods in the ECOWAS region encounter. Policy measures planned and recommended in the study to tackle such barriers were explored. It can be deduced that the influencing factors informing the policy measures, gender action plans and recommendations were practical considerations centred on gender inequalities.

Unequal access to education, resources such as land, technology, tools and credit, household responsibilities, and stigmatization, were the root causes of women's challenges in cross-border trade. It is recommended that gender action plans and policy measures should be border-specific in the ECOWAS region since issues of gender vary from country to country. Individual governments should make it their responsibility to simplify and educate their citizens concerning the policies and regulations of AfCFTA. It should be in simple tenses and pictorial form for easy understanding. Welfare issues should be the concerns of individual countries since gender equality has been enshrined in international human rights law. Citizens must be aware of their level of involvement and what they can legitimately demand, regardless of gender.

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