

# Rethinking the Nature, Implications and Challenges of Informal Cross Border Trade by Women from Cameroon across the Cameroon-Nigeria Southwestern Borders

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## Abstract

Women's participation in informal cross border trade (ICBT) in Cameroon has progressively become a popular and vital safety net to unemployment. While it has been acknowledged that earnings from women's ICBT activities contribute to reductions in poverty and women's empowerment, scant evidence reports the patterns of ICBT carried out by women. This paper seeks to examine the activities of women cross-border traders along the Cameroon-Nigeria border. Using questionnaire and interview guide, the study examines how ICBT is effectively carried out, and the nature and trends of ICBT across the Cameroon-Nigerian border. Findings noted that women involved in ICBT between the Cameroon-Nigeria border are young between 21 - 40 years and married with large families. While the women involved come from diverse demographics and trade with assorted goods, they started off as informal traders with access to business capital through informal thrift channels. By and large, women are motivated into ICBT by capital constraint to start a formal business and the possibilities to make more profit due to tax evasion and smuggling. While women's ICBT impacts on reductions in household poverty and women's empowerment, these activities affect state custom revenue. A better policy framework that increases women's profitability and protects state revenue by addressing custom and police corruption is indispensable for the sustainability of the economic impact of ICBT.

## Keywords

Informal Sector, Women, Transborder Trade, Smuggling, Empowerment, Cameroon and Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

Prior to European colonization and the creation of nation states and borders, trade was mainly carried out in the form of barter across African tribal groups. Colonialism introduced national borders, trade regulations between colonies, which later served as the beginning of customs, tariffs, and other trade regulations between the new African countries. The application of these trade regulations applied even among the same ethnic or linguistic groups who have been arbitrarily separated by European interest. Trade therefore that operated outside these rules or/and across various geographical and institutional boundaries, including between separated villages became regarded as informal. These rules hindering trade across European created borders encouraged smuggling or were generally resisted by Africans. In some cases, informal cross border trade was used in South Africa to dismantle the predominance of colonial structures (Mijere, 2009).

Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is not however new in post-impudence Africa. Njikam and Tchouassi (2011) describe ICBT as an important cash-earning activity that dated many years back. In West Africa, it has been dominated by women (Morris & Saul, 2000; Marphatia et al., 2000), just like most other informal sector activities, especially following rising unemployment after the 1980s economic crisis. The 1980 crisis forced many women and men (women especially) most of whom lost their jobs to enter the informal economy to support their households (Brenton and Gamberoni cited in World Bank, 2013).

Informal cross-border trade contributes substantially to the economies of many African countries and plays a vital role in alleviating poverty and promoting women's economic empowerment (Chen et al., 2006). It is a source of income for about 43% of the total African population (Afrika & Ajumbo, 2012). In southern Africa, it amounts to some US\$20 billion per year or about 30% - 40% of total recorded formal trade between countries in the region. Nonetheless, it could also pose a security and revenue concern because of the types of goods involved, immigration, smuggling, and tax evasion (Njiwa et al., 2013; Schneider, 2006; Ogalo, 2010), especially as it is carried out through unofficial routes. Although many studies exist on the ICBT across Africa, understanding the nature, challenges, and economic and social implications of these activities on women is critical both to the course of women's economic emancipation and national policies at the borders.

Cameroon and Nigeria are important trading partners. The United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade estimates that Nigeria exports to Cameroon was US\$888.58 Million during 2019 while Cameroon exports to Nigeria was US\$75.69 Million during 2017.

The Cameroon-Nigeria borders provide an interesting case because it is accessible both by land and water and involves two countries belonging to separate regional economic blocs, Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),

respectively. Thus, while ICBT may generally be lucrative as studies across the continent suggest, it could also be challenging, especially in this case where many fundamental odds such as differences in currencies, trade blocs, languages, etc. exist between Cameroon and Nigeria. However, these odds and other risks, irregularities and tensions that arise from trading under complex conditions may also create avenues for criticism and formalization of cooperation between the two neighbours. It is against this backdrop of a complex trading environment that this study explores the nature, challenges, and economic and social effects of ICBT between Cameroon and Nigeria on Cameroonian women from the Southwest region.

To attain this objective, the paper is broadly subdivided into two sections. The first section frames the study in the light of the scholarship on informal cross border trade informal trade in Africa. In this section, the question of women in ICBT and the opportunities offered by the Cameroon Nigeria border for this activity for women is analysed. After a brief transition on the methodology of the study, the second and final section presents its key findings. It highlights the characteristics of women involved, the sources of their capital, the role of smuggling, and the impact, challenges, and implication of ICBT along the Cameroon/Nigeria western border on women's empowerment and cross border trade between the two countries.

## 2. Informal Cross Border Trade in Africa

Studies (Muzvidziwa, 2010; Ndiaye, 2008; IOM, 2010; Malaba & Chipika, 2012) have focused on the economic empowerment of informal cross border traders, while Muzvidziwa (2007) examines how cross-border trade has been a strategy to climb out of poverty for some families in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. Sub-Saharan Africa is considered the world's most expensive region to do business. This, the World Bank, and International Finance Corporation (2011) assert, can be attributed to the fees and official custom charges, and other business costs and delays, which are three times higher than elsewhere in the world. Could this be partly responsible for the scale and pattern of ICBT in the region?

Formal and informal cross-border trade in West Africa has increased since the 1990s because of economic liberalization policies, population growth, urbanization, and regional integration (Morris & Saul, 2000). The origin of ICBT may differ across the continent but Afrika and Ajumbo (2012), associate their practice to three common factor: the pull factors in the form of low or no tariffs and cross-border price differential in the country where the goods are sold; conditions (poor infrastructures, limited access to finances, high tariff, delays, etc.) in source countries discouraging formal trade; and personal considerations (level of education, available knowledge and information, opportunities, and business networks of those involved in the trade.

Although Ogalo (2010) noted that ICBT is the source of income to about 43% of Africa's population, it is still generally regarded as an illegal activity. Lesser

and Moisé-Leeman (2009) and Kimenyi et al. (2012) believe that ICBT is instrumental against poverty, offer consumers many choices and competitive and affordable prices, and foster entrepreneurial prosperity in the short and mid-term. In the long term however, ICBT can create unfair competition with formal traders with likely effects on the private sector, and diminish state's ability to collect revenue, fight against countertrade, border insecurity, and ensure the overall economic development of the country. Afrika and Ajumbo (2012) add that foodstuff traded in informality is risky and hazardous as they have not been subjected to standard health and hygienic measures. Because of the non-declaration of imported products and non-payment of duties and taxes, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, (2009) notes that ICBT breeds endemic corruption among tax officials and police where collected revenue does not end up in the state coffers.

Nevertheless, other studies (Chani, 2008; Kachere, 2011; Muzvidziwa, 2005) have highlighted the significant contribution of ICBT to poverty reduction, especially at the household levels. Average income earned from ICBT amounted to 25% of the volume of goods and services traded through (Nakhumwa, 1998). This represents a gain of about US\$ 11 million to Tanzanian ICBT households, as Muzvidziwa (2005: p. 31) maintained that ICBT is a major source of employment and livelihood that acted as safety net for the reduction of unemployment under Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). It provides an opportunity for many unemployed people to earn an income considerably higher than the minimum salary in the formal sector for those involved, as in the case of the triangular cross border trade between Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia (Tekere & Ndlela, 2002).

Mwakisale & Magai (2015), and Njikam & Tchouassi (2011) describe traders involved in ICBT as mostly retailers who according to Ogolo (2010) come from both the informal and formal sectors. Formal firms get involved to evade trade regulations and duties by avoiding official border crossing posts. Most goods traded by informal cross border traders are generally regrouped under non-processed, manufactured and re-export goods. These goods are not the same everywhere but are fundamentally influenced by the market forces (Ndlela, 2006). For example, among the goods Zimbabwean Informal Cross Border Traders export to other Southern African countries include crafts, agricultural products basketry, crotchet, clothes, bed and seat covers and import electrical and non-electrical house-hold items, motor vehicles spares, industrial equipment, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, clothing, and blankets from South Africa (Zata, 2016).

## 2.1. Women and Informal Cross Border Trade

Most women involved in ICBT live around the borders (Njikam & Tchouassi, 2011) and benefit from the common characteristics that border communities of the trading countries share together. Gor (2012) notes that border communities tend to speak the same language, intermarry, and own land on either side of the

borders. These socio-cultural characteristics including their long-standing knowledge of the customs, products, and networks of each other, give them an added advantage to succeed. As a result, these female traders may not need huge business capital. Brenton & Gamberoni (2013) believe that the start-up capital for the women involved can be as small as \$50 or less obtained most often from family rather than financial institutions.

Almost all types of goods are involved with ICBT. In East Africa, UNCTAD (2019), reported that female cross border traders in Tanzania, deal mostly with manufactured products, hand-made items, raw agricultural goods, processed foods, livestock, fish, and other mixed services including hairdressing and mobile phone-based micro-financial services. The literature outlines many important benefits of this trade to women, especially in the execution of their domestic and public roles.

Within the context of feminization of poverty, the ICBT appears to play a vital role in alleviating poverty and promoting women's economic empowerment (Chen et al., 2006). The ICBT is often considered as offering a lot of employment and income opportunities to women traders (Jackson, 1999; Cagatay & Ozler, 1995). At micro level, ICBT ensures food security, creates employment and income opportunities, and hence a better living standard for the families (Njikam & Tchouassi, 2011) and participation of women in decision-making within the household. There is however, more to the impact of ICBT as to the nature of the activity. Women's access to opportunities both in the formal and informal sectors reduces the likelihood of household poverty since resources in women's hands have a range of positive outcomes for human capital capabilities within the household. This also increases the distributional dynamics of need within the household (Kabeer, 2013: p. 3).

Yet, the general and gendered importance of ICBT especially after its dramatic development in the aftermath of the 1980s economic crisis notwithstanding, the situation of women and men cross-border traders has received little empirical attention in the Central Africa Region (Njikam & Tchouassi, 2011). Worst still is the fact that this activity has been characterized by challenges that affect both the traders and the nations involved as a whole. This paper on ICBT between Cameroon and Nigeria falls within the general attempt to understand how women are important actors and other important dynamics of an activity that has not only micro and macro but also regional socio-economic and political implications.

## 2.2. Cameroon and Nigeria Borders

Cameroon and Nigeria share a common border which runs for some 1975 km in length from north to south (CIA, 2020), passing through the land and water bodies in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The present western and eastern borders of Cameroon and Nigeria respectively share a common ethnicity and colonial history. Historically both regions were governed by the British colonial empire until 1961 when northern Cameroon gained independ-

ence by joining the Federal Republic of Nigeria and southern Cameroon did same by joining la Republique du Cameroun to form the present-day Cameroon.

The south-western border is dominated by the Banyang, Ejangham, Iroko, and others are tribal groups found on both sides of the borders. However, cross border trade here has historically been dominated by the Igbo ethnic groups of eastern Nigeria with established trading networks with free movements of goods and people (Budd et al., 2005). For Example, by the early 1960s, Budd et al. (2005) estimated that the Igbos from Nigeria controlled about 85% of commerce in Cameroon localities of Tiko, 75% in Kumba, and 70% in Mamfe. The success of the Igbos during the British colonial administration rested on their relatively higher levels of education and business knowledge than their southern Cameroonian counterparts. They put in place a well-organized wholesale and retail trade in cocoa and palm oil trade from Southern Cameroon and brought manufactured goods from Nigeria to Anglophone Cameroon (Konings, 2005).

While recognizing the historical trade across this border, this paper takes a step further by current changes especially with the growing numbers of women involved. While Cameroon and Nigeria border cut across five different political regions of Cameroon, we have focused just on one, the Southwest region. Although the exact numbers of Nigerians living in Cameroon are not known, there is a huge population of Nigerians in the Southwest region, especially Ekok, Ekondo-Titi, Kumba, Idenau, Limbe and Tiko, majority of whom are traders. Trade is therefore an important element binding both countries.

### 3. Methodology

Participants for the study included both Nigerians and Cameroonians living in the Southwest region of Cameroon. They were selected from Ekok, Ekondo-Titi, Kumba, Idenau, Limbe, Buea, and Tiko, which are some of the boarder localities, ports, and trading points. Initial field trips were carried out along the borders to observe the activities of cross-border traders and identify potential villages and towns for fieldwork. This was followed by data collection lasting for four months in 2017, just before a major conflict (the Anglophone crisis) engulfed the region.

Two hundred questionnaires (50 each) were administered to the female traders using a snowball technique in systematic sampled border towns of Idenau, Limbe, Ekondo-Titi and Ekok., with 164 effectively completed and retained. Based on information from the literature and earlier reconnaissance field trips, some of the women involved in ICBT were identified and through them, a pool of other were contacted through the snowball technique. This reconnaissance field trip alongside three different other trips to Buea, Muyuka, and Tiko for protesting, further provided an opportunity to test our research instruments for consistency and accuracy and incorporate feedback into final revised questionnaires.

The questionnaire that was administered to participants by trained research assistants focused on a broad range of cross-border trade issues. It touched on

the profile, motivation of the women to this activity, how ICBT is effectively carried across the Cameroon-Nigerian border, including the types and volume of goods involved, their challenges and impact of this activity on the women. Additional data on the nature, trends, challenges, and other aspects of the trade was obtained from in-depth interviews with Cameroonian senior custom and transport officials working directly with these border posts.

In addition to the stratified sampling and random sampling techniques, the snowball techniques were also applied to identify participants for the study. Stratified and random sampling enables us to ensure that the population targeted came from different localities, included women trading with their types of goods and operating using different border ports (land or water) to capture the different dynamics involved. Once these distinctions were made, they were randomly selected for the study. We also depended exclusively on those who expressed their willingness to participate in the study to direct or recommend fellow traders which facilitated our task. We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to analyze information from closed ended questions or quantitative data and thematic analysis for the open-ended questions, in depth interviews, and other information collected during field observations.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Diversity of Women Involved in ICBT between Cameroon and Nigeria

Informal CBT between Cameroon and Nigeria is mostly carried out by young Cameroonian women, 57% within the ages of 21 and 40, who are married (50.1%) with large families (63% dependents), and without tertiary education. As **Table 1** indicates, most of them (70.3%) were originally local petty traders and 44% have been involved in this activity for about a decade.

More women (36%) engaged in ICBT get their business capital from informal thrift (*Njangis*) and personal savings, and just 13.4% from formal financial institutions (**Table 2**). Studies by *Aryeetey (2011)*, *Fonjong (2002)*, and many others have highlighted the difficulties of those in the informal sector from accessing credit.

Capital is an important determinant of the types, volume of trade, and profitability but women involved in ICBT as seen above do not have access to bank credit. As a result, they have limited capital, with no dominant capital range reported. However, the capital for most traders (82%) falls below half a million FCFA (\$1000) and just 17% above these figures. A few trends are noticed when the capital ranges are analyzed across the various categories of women involved in the trade (**Table 3**). Educational levels of women play a role but not so significant in the amount of capital as the majority of those with and without education were concentrated in the capital range of 101,000 to 300,000 FCFA. However, women with secondary education were better represented (24%) in the

capital range of 500,000 above than any other educational group. Similarly, civil servants (50%) and students (25%) were also the dominant groups in this 500,000 FCFA range. This is not surprising for civil servant, most of whom could easily raise business capital from their monthly salaries than the other groups surveyed, as was the case with more Nigerian than Cameroonian traders.

**Table 1.** Profile of women involved in ICBT between Cameroon and Nigeria.

(a) Age distribution		
Age group	Frequency	Percent
21 - 40 years	93	56.7
41 - 50 years	54	32.9
51 - 60 years	13	07.9
60 years and above	03	01.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100.0</b>
(b) Marital status		
Marital status	Frequency	Percent
Married	84	51.2
Single	40	24.4
Widow	23	14.0
Separated/Divorced	17	10.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100.0</b>
(c) Level of education		
level of education	Frequency	Percent
No formal education	14	08.6
Primary education	52	31.9
Secondary education	72	44.2
Higher education	25	15.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>100.0</b>
(d) Previous activity of women		
Previous activity of women before ICBT	Frequency	Percent
None	15	10.3
Civil servant	02	01.4
Private sector employee	17	11.7
Petty trading within the national territory	102	70.3
Student	09	06.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Missing</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11.6</b>



## (e) Length of time in business

Length of time spent	Frequency	Percent
1 - 5 years	67	43.2
6 - 10 years	68	43.9
11 - 15 years	20	12.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source of capital for women involved in ICBT.

**Table 2.** Source of capital for ICBT.

Sources of capital	Frequency	Percent
Informal money lender	10	06.1
Bank loan	22	13.4
Husband	11	06.7
Njangi	59	36.0
Other family members	19	11.6
Personal savings	31	18.9
Friends	12	07.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 3.** Relationship between traders and business capital.

## (a) Level of Education

	Business capital			
	≤100.000 FCFA	101.000 - 300.000 FCFA	301.000 - 500.000 FCFA	Above 501.000 FCFA
No formal education	0.0%	54.5%	27.3%	18.2%
Primary education	30.0%	32.0%	26.0%	12.9%
Secondary education	21.4%	30.0%	24.3%	24.3%
Higher education	21.7%	56.5%	13.0%	08.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>22.7%</b>	<b>36.4%</b>	<b>23.4%</b>	<b>17.5%</b>

## (b) Previous activity before ICBT

	Business capital			
	≤100.000 FCFA	101.000 - 300.000 FCFA	301.000 - 500.000 FCFA	Above 501.000 FCFA
None	15.4%	38.5%	23.1%	23.1%
Civil servant	00.0%	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%
Private sector	44.4%	22.2%	16.7%	16.7%
Petty trading	23.3%	35.9%	27.2%	14.6%
Student	37.5%	37.5%	0.0%	25.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>34.7%</b>	<b>23.6%</b>	<b>16.7%</b>

(c) Nationality

	Business capital			
	Less than 100.000 FCFA	101.000 - 300.000 FCFA	301.000 - 500.000 FCFA	Above 501.000 FCFA
Cameroon	24.1%	36.1%	25.6%	14.3%
Nigeria	19.0%	38.1%	9.5%	33.3%
<b>Total</b>	23.4%	36.4%	23.4%	16.9%

Exchange rate: 1 USA \$ = 500 FCFA.

## 4.2. Reasons for Women Involvement in ICBT

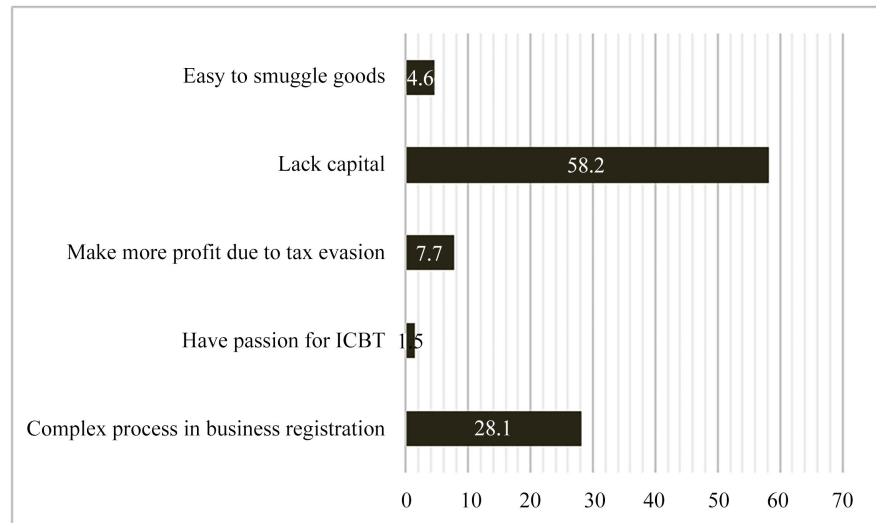
As indicated in **Figure 1**, women outlined the following as reasons for involving in ICBT between Cameroon and Nigeria: 1) lack of sufficient capital to start a formal business, 2) the complex process in business registration in Cameroon, 3) their passion for ICBT, 4) possibilities to make more profit due to tax evasion and 5) the ease with which they can smuggle goods. Poverty and women particular difficulties to access capital constrain over 58% of them engaged in ICBT where they require capital to hire space, labor and business registration. There were no strong associations between the reasons advanced by the women and their age, educational or social categories.

Many studies, on East and Southern Africa (Masheti, 2009; Brand et al., 1995; Muzvidziwa, 2010; Peberdy, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Peberdy & Rogerson, 2000) have acknowledged that ICBT contributes to the development of informal and formal sector retail markets; provides employment opportunities to traders and their employees; for those with access to some capital it provides a significant opportunity for poverty alleviation.

## 4.3. ICBT between the Two Countries Is Defined by the Complex Nature of the Local Socio-Economic and Geographical Landscape

The patterns of women involvement in ICBT include goods sold; reasons for buying from the markets, reasons for selling in the markets, rate of buy and selling, how the goods are sold in Cameroon and Nigeria, main customers of the women, people who influence the choice of goods bought and sold. Although the women trade in basic food stuff, assorted drinks, dresses, and vehicle spare parts, the volume of exchange between the two countries is not the same. The women indicated that food stuff and drinks represent 67% and cloth 25% of the volume of goods sold in Cameroon, as against 93.4% and 6.6% respectively in Nigeria. This discrepancy is no surprise given the large population and market offered by Nigeria.

Several reasons were advanced by women for the pattern of trade observed. A vast majority (91%) stated that they are guided by profit and just (9%) by customers' relation. A cross-tabulation of some of the variables tested reveals that majority of the women irrespective of their age brackets or marital status bought



**Figure 1.** Reasons for women participating in ICBT.

from specific markets to make more profit. Similarly, 86% of the women confirmed that they are also driven by the same profit motive to choose the markets where they sell.

While about 70% of the women determine the type of goods to be involved with, the periodicity and type of customers they sell to are diverse. More women carry out ICBT on monthly than weekly basis. This can be explained by the fact that in **Table 4**, up to half (47%) of their customers are individual consumers responsible for 41% of their goods compared to the other half who buy (58.6%) of their goods in bulk to later retailers.

#### 4.4. Factors Promoting ICBT and How Women Sell Their Goods

High business prospect, high dividend, short distances involved and easy to evade custom duty, and availability of a ready market were identified among important drivers of women participation in ICBT. Although the study did not find any of these factors as dominant determinants, 36.4%, 28% and 27% of the women respectively indicated that high business prospect, high dividend and short distances involved, were critical. Over 9% also believe the ease to evade custom duties encouraged them to get into this activity because custom evasion increases their profit margin. These motivations broadly fit into *Afrika and Ajumbo (2012: p. 9)*'s six determinants of ICBT in Africa which are limited finance, corruption and insecurity, border infrastructures, lack of trade facilitation, and limited market information.

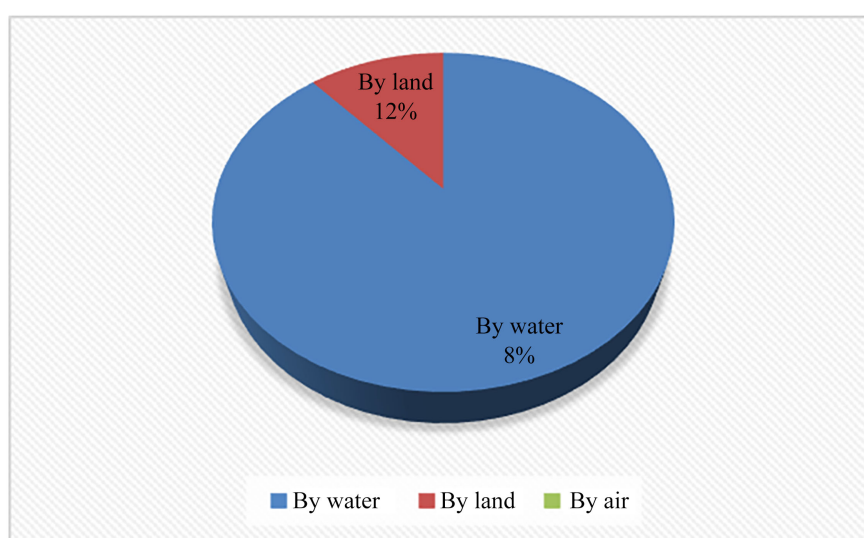
##### **Mode of transportation used by women in ICBT**

Cameroon and Nigeria are linked by air, road, and water but 88% of ICBT by women between the two countries is carried out largely through water transport (**Figure 2**).

There is a strong link between area of residence and mode of transportation used by women in ICBT. Most of the traders came from Manyu, Meme and

**Table 4.** Market characteristics of women in ICBT.

Periodicity of transactions or trade	N	Percent
Weekly	08	04.9
Twice per week	22	13.4
After two weeks	32	19.5
Monthly	57	34.8
After 1 - 3 months	12	07.3
After 4 - 6 months	23	14.0
After 9 - 12 months	10	06.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100</b>

**Figure 2.** Mode of transport use by women in ICBT between Cameroon and Nigeria.

Fako Divisions, which are each linked to Nigeria by either road, water, or both. Traders from Meme are equally split (50%), each use water transport while the majority (97.1%) of the women use water transports system. Fako is linked to Nigeria by the sea and so traders tend to use both the Tiko and Idenau ports for trade. This is not the case with traders from Meme not directly link to Nigeria and therefore have the choice of using both land (Ekok, Manyu) and water (Ekodo Titi in Ndian, Tiko and Idenau in Fako) ports for trade. But when the data is further analyzed in term of longevity in ICBT, all who have less than 6 years in the business use water irrespective of their areas of origin while those who have spent 11 years and above were equally split between water and land. This suggested that security and distance are important factors for the women when considering the mode of transportation.

#### 4.5. Impact on Women and Women' Empowerment

USAID (2016: p. 9) observes that the benefits of ICBT while improving the well-being of women in the household, go beyond the household by impacting eco-

conomic growth. Women involvement on ICBT has far reaching impact on poverty and women empowerment. Over 65% of participant reveal that their income has increased from the trade. Changes in women income as the study reveals, has impacted other areas of family life within and out of the home. In fact, 38% of participants considered themselves as the main bread winners of their families followed, alongside an impressive 30% and 12% who now own personal houses, and bank accounts respectively. Some of the women (8.7%) are sponsoring children abroad and a few (4%) have bought their first cars. UNCTAD (2019) averred that cross-border trade activities are a source of income for most women and provide them with essential earnings. It enables women to actively contribute to the subsistence and well-being of their families, including paying for the education of their children. This is partly because a significant proportion of the female cross-border traders are single mothers or widows or have been abandoned by their husbands. Njikam & Tchouassi (2011: p. 206) report that a larger percentage of male and female traders reported spending some of their income from ICBT on household consumption.

With women increasingly involved in family economic and social life, they have become decision makers. Majority of the women in ICBT take decisions on where and what goods to be traded and most of them equally make decisions on how to use the profit from their businesses. However, the degree to which women can make this decision in the case of business profit differs across marital status as men still play a role, particularly in the case of married women. While 57% of the women indicated that take decisions alone on where and what goods to be traded, some 34.6% of their colleagues make these decisions in consultations with their husbands and (8.3%) other relatives. Lesser & Moisé-Leeman (2009), Bracking & Sachikonye (2006), and Meagher (2003), have all reported that cross-border trading contributes positively to the empowerment of women and food security. As Peberdy and Crush (1998) reported, many see themselves as entrepreneurs and do not seek formal employment

#### 4.6. Challenges Women Face in the Informal Cross-Border Trade

The common challenge faced by women in ICBT is that of high custom duty at the port of entry and departure. Within Cameroon the most common challenge is that of many Police Check Points. In Nigeria the greatest challenge is that of goods and money being stolen from the women. Equally the women have limited capital to start up business. The challenges intend to affect ICBT by reducing the profit margin of the women (Table 5).

Table (a) reveals that majority (74%) of women face major challenge at the port of entry or departure is that of high custom duties. Although the degree of these challenges is different in Cameroon and Nigeria, they are impediments to profitability and business growth or expansion. As a result, these women have been pushed into both orthodox and unorthodox coping strategies, smuggling of goods, and bribing of custom officials, to remain in business. Table 6 indicates that 42.0% of the women in ICBT smuggle goods and bribe customs.

**Table 5.** Challenges women face in ICBT.

(a) Challenges at port of entry or departure		
	Frequency	Percent
Delays to open borders	13	09.1
High Custom duty	106	74.1
Many check points	02	01.4
Porters charges high transportation fees	20	14.0
Risky at sea	02	01.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Missing	21	12.8
(b) Challenges within Cameroon		
	Frequency	Percent
Difficult to buy around villages	07	05.9
Many check points	85	72.0
People borrow and don't pay	03	02.5
Political instability	08	06.8
Poor roads	15	12.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>100</b>
(c) Challenges within Nigeria		
	Frequency	Percent
Limited mastery of the market	8	16.7
Many check points	5	10.4
Problems with loaders	9	18.8
Sometimes goods and money stolen	19	39.6
There is cheating during sales	7	14.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Missing	116	70.7
(d) Challenges relating to business capital or family issues		
	Frequency	Percent
Family responsibility	23	42.6
High custom duty	04	07.4
Limited capital for business	27	50.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Missing	110	67.1

## (e) How these challenges affect business activities

	Frequency	Percent
Affect business expansion	46	31.9
Affect kind of products bought	04	02.8
Loose customers	10	06.9
Reduce profit	75	52.1
Sell at a loss	03	02.1
Stressful	03	02.1
Use bank card to send money	03	02.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>100</b>
Missing	20	12.2

**Table 6.** Coping strategies to overcome challenges encountered in ICBT.

	Frequency	Percent
Have a Nigerian friend who buys for me at much more reduced prices	05	3.8
Husband, family relations and house help take care of children	13	9.9
Increase prices of goods	20	15.3
Smuggle goods and settle customs	55	42.0
Take loans	10	7.6
Trade in a variety of goods	10	7.6
Trade in local markets	18	13.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## 5. Conclusion

Women from all demographics, social and economic classes are involved in ICBT. While there are some slight differences in their sizes of business capital, motives, opportunities, the challenges they face are the same. ICBT is part of self-employment strategy adopted by women to fight unemployment and search for livelihood opportunities. It acts as a safety net for those who otherwise did not have employment in the formal sector. For many traders, cross-border business generally provides more profits than buying/selling locally. In fact, traders aim to expand their activities beyond the saturated local markets where many businesses of the same nature proliferate and seek opportunities for diversification across the border. Moreover, the quality of the merchandise available in neighbouring countries may also appeal to neighboring consumers. Informal cross border trading creates a chain of other service providers such as transport and commuter operators.

There is no doubt that the socio-economic benefits from ICBT are enormous. It is interesting to note how informal cross-border trading has shifted female identities and social roles in their day-to-day life experiences (Muzvidziwa,

2012). Of the 2000 women informal cross border traders surveyed by UNWOMEN in 2007-2009 in Cameroon, Liberia, Mali, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, a great majority stated that, the proceeds from their trading activities are the main source of income for the family; they use their income to buy food and other items for the household, pay for school fees, health care services and rent, save in their rotary meetings and banks and reinvest in their businesses.

The benefits from ICBT notwithstanding, one cannot also be blind to the dangers of smuggling, border insecurity, revenue leakages for the states, among many others, that come along with it. Cameroon, Nigeria, and other African governments should focus on developing better economic framework that reduces informality by making formal cross border trade attractive to both women and others involved in it. By making cost and information on business registration available and accessible, fighting down custom and police corruption, and making duties affordable, more women and traders are likely to move away from informality to formality. In fact, Bensassi et al. (2019)'s study on ICBT in Benin found that a 10% increase in tariff of a good has a 12% chance of driving the product into informality.

### Availability of Data and Material

Confidentiality of data was promised participants who took part in the study but could be made available.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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