

Determinants of Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women Traders in Nairobi County: Case of Kenya Trade Policy Financial Inclusion Strategies.

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Abstract

Financial inclusion is important for socio-economic empowerment. Globally, Trade policies are promoting financial inclusion for all, including women. The sustainable development goals 5 calls for women empowerment on all areas of growth and development. Despite progress in gender equality, women, especially, traders in Kenya still face financial challenges to their participation in and benefiting from trade. Raising the question on how trade policies' financial inclusion strategies impact the socio-economic empowerment of women traders. Therefore, this research investigated the determinants for socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Nairobi County, Kenya, focusing on the Kenya National Trade Policy's financial inclusion strategies. The study used a qualitative approach applying thematic literature review. It thematically reviewed 23 materials for the period between 2017 and 2024. Content analysis was used to analyse and organise data which was presented in prose form. Findings highlight the critical role of financial inclusion initiatives, including mobile banking and microfinance programs, in socio-economic empowerment of women traders. Further, it revealed need for gender-responsive policies addressing unique challenges faced by women traders. The study provides policy recommendations to foster an enabling environment for socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Kenya, contributing to the broader goal of gender equality and women empowerment.

Keywords: Financial Inclusion, Socio-Economic Empowerment, Women Traders, Nairobi County, Kenya National Trade Policy

Introduction

Socio-economic empowerment is the process of enabling individuals or communities to gain control over their economic and social circumstances (Kabeer, 2024; Yunus, 2023). It involves improving access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power, which in turn leads to poverty reduction, improved quality of life, social stability, sustainable development and ensures more equitable wealth distribution (Chatterjee, 2024; Kabeer, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2024; Yunus, 2023). Furthermore, empowered individuals, particularly women, contribute to economic growth by participating in the labor force, businesses formation and promoting innovation (UNESCO 2023). Empowered people are more likely to contribute positively to society, resulting in greater social cohesion and stability (Kabeer, 2024).

Socio-economic empowerment is composed of several aspects. The first component is economic which manifests through access to resources, employment opportunities and income generation among others (Chatterjee, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2024; Yunus, 2023). Access to resources more so for women traders, implies access to capital, skills, and knowledge necessary for economic participation through access to markets, self-employment and sustainable livelihoods. Leading to increasing income, reducing poverty, and improving living standards (Chatterjee, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2024; UNESCO 2023). The other component is social, which is promoted through education and knowledge, healthcare access and social inclusion. Education is a key factor in empowering women traders as it enables them to make informed decisions, become aware of their rights, and participate fully in economic, social, and political life (UNESCO 2023). Furthermore, access to healthcare contributes to better physical well-being and the ability to engage in trade activities. Similarly, removing barriers related to gender, ethnicity, disability, or other forms of discrimination, and promoting social justice and equality is paramount for women's participation in growth and development (Kabeer, 2024; Moyo, 2023).

Political empowerment is another component of socio-economic empowerment which is fostered through participation in decision making and having legal rights and protection (Nussbaum, 2024; Moyo, 2023). There is also the component of community empowerment which involves collective action, networking and partnerships (Kabeer, 2024). Communities that work together can leverage resources, advocate for their interests, and develop solutions that promote sustainable development. Furthermore, collaboration between individuals, organizations, and governments can help amplify efforts towards socio-economic empowerment (Kabeer, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Finally, Sustainability is a key component of socio-economic empowerment. Empowerment is not just about immediate improvement but also ensuring long-term development by building capacity within communities and individuals to manage and sustain economic and social growth (FAO, 2024).

Nonetheless, women socio-economic empowerment face barriers including poverty, gender and social discrimination, limited skills and education, poor infrastructure among others (Kabeer, 2024, United Nations, 2023). Limited financial resources prevent them from accessing essential services like education and healthcare, which in turn hinders their empowerment (Klapper, & Singer, 2024). Moreover, without access to quality education and skill-building opportunities, women remain stuck in low-income, low-skill jobs (United Nations Women, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Discrimination based on gender limit opportunities for women in areas like education, employment, and leadership, more so in trade development (United Nations Women, 2023). Ethnic, racial, and class-based discrimination restricts social mobility and

access to resources hindering women participation in trade (World Bank, 2023). Inadequate infrastructure such as transportation, electricity, and technology stifle women participation in economic activities and pose a hindrance to their development efforts including trade (UNCTAD, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

Therefore, Socio-economic empowerment is a multifaceted approach that combines economic, social, and political elements to improve the well-being of individuals especially women. By addressing these barriers, we can create a more equitable and sustainable future for women, and in particular women traders. This calls for intervention through Public policies that promote gender equality, social inclusion, and human rights, develop social safety nets, promote participation in decision-making, access to information and communication technologies (ICT); hence creating opportunities for women economic participation and knowledge sharing. Thus, this study sought to investigate the determinants for socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Kenya, focusing on the role of the Kenya National Trade Policy's financial inclusion strategies. This owes to the fact that access to financial services such as credit, savings, and insurance, particularly for women traders as well as support for small businesses and entrepreneurs through microfinance and business development services has been highlighted to be a key in socio-economic empowerment of women traders (Boghossian, 2023; Mathee et al; 2022; Ngozi, 2022; World Bank, 2018).

Financial inclusion has been identified as a key driver to growth and development globally (Mathee et al; 2022). This involves promoting access for traders to financial products essential for boosting their economic activities and individual well-being (World Bank, 2018). A position that has received general consensus amongst the academia as well as the development practitioners. Nonetheless, financial inclusion has proved to be a complex issue in need of strategy to ensure effectiveness. Thus, public policy has been highlighted to mitigate on the strategic gap in managing this complex issue towards growth and development. Trade policies are coming in handy in promoting financial inclusion amongst traders which is reflected in their economic empowerment as well as their social well-being (Kuhlmann & Bahri, 2022).

However, the policies have been identified to impact the two genders differently; disproportionately affecting women (Boghossian, 2023; Ngozi, 2022). Hence the emphasis on the need for gender responsive policies which explicitly foster Women Empowerment which has become a global development indicator (World Bank, 2018). The Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 5 targets to achieve gender equality and Women Empowerment (World Bank, 2018). Certainly, trade policies are key drivers if we are to leverage on trade for women empowerment (Ngozi, 2022). Therefore, this study undertook to establish how the Kenya National Trade Policy Financial inclusion strategies determine the socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Kenya, taking the case of Nairobi City County.

Notably, there is need for policy to bring out the intricacies and critically capture the necessity of financial inclusion as a strategy to women socio-economic empowerment. Therefore, it is crucial to assess the trade policy interventions and their effectiveness in fostering an inclusive financial system. In this vein, the study sought to identify the indicators for measuring the effectiveness of the policy strategies in mainstreaming social economic empowerment of women traders to provide information and guidance for policymaking. The resultant effect is to mainstream the indicators in the analysis of the trade policy's effectiveness in achieving the goal of financial inclusion in its implementation. Other than have a broad focus that considers many dimensions of monitoring and evaluation, this study shifts the focus to specifically highlight the unit

of analysis approach and establish how the policy impacts on the individual women traders as target beneficiaries of the policy implementation. Through utilising qualitative research method, applying thematic literature review and content analysis, the study identified several indicators to financial inclusion and their impacts on economic activities and social well-being. To further highlight the impacts, selected demographic factors were applied which include age, marital status and level of education.

Evolution of Trade Policy Frameworks in Kenya

The evolution of Kenya's trade policy has been shaped by historical, economic, and political factors, reflecting the country's development goals and global trade dynamics. Here's an overview of key phases and milestones in the evolution of Kenya's trade policy: The Colonial Era (1895-1963) during this period trade was largely focused on the export of raw materials, such as coffee, tea, and sisal, to benefit colonial interests (Mazrui & Tidy, 2023; Ochieng, 2023). Local industries were limited, and the economic policies favoured British companies and interests (Mazrui & Tidy, 2023). Women were rarely involved in trade and the few who participated had to face the challenges of male domination.

The Post-Independence Era (1963-1978) after independence in 1963, Kenya adopted an import substitution industrialization (ISI) strategy aimed at promoting local industries and reducing dependency on foreign goods (Ndegwa, 2022; Ochieng, 2023). The government nationalized key sectors and implemented protectionist measures (Ochieng, 2023). The first development plans emphasized industrial growth, with trade policies designed to support local manufacturing through tariffs and import quotas (Hyden, 2023; Ochieng, 2023). Women traders in this era faced not only the challenge of male domination in trade, but also lacked access to finances due o lack of collateral (land and property ownership discriminative policies; (Njeri & Makena, 2023; UNDP,2022) for trade capital, banking rights among others.

The period of Economic Challenges and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) (1980s-1990s) was signified with Economic Decline. By the late 1970s, the ISI strategy faced challenges, including inefficiencies, corruption, and a lack of competitiveness. The economy entered a period of stagnation with implementation of SAPs. In the 1980s, Kenya engaged with the Bretton wood institutions for SAPs, which promoted liberalization and privatization of public enterprises. This led to reduced tariffs and a shift towards a more market-oriented trade policy (Ndegwa, 2023). The SAPs, while intended to reform Kenya's economy and promote growth, had negative consequences for women traders (Kabeer, 2023). The liberalization of markets, reduction of public services, and focus on privatization increased economic inequality, exacerbated informal sector vulnerabilities, and reduced women's access to critical resources such as credit and affordable services (Akinyi, 2022; Kabeer, 2023; Mbilinyi,2023; Mbilinyi, & Nnko, 2021; Ndegwa, 2023).

The period of Economic Reforms and Liberalization (1990s-2000s) signified by Trade Liberalization. The 1990s saw a significant shift towards liberalization, with the removal of many trade barriers. The government encouraged foreign direct investment (FDI) and increased participation in global trade (Chant, 2023; Nyamweya, 2023). This was closely intertwined with the period of Regional Integration whereby Kenya became a member of the East African Community (EAC) in 2000, promoting regional trade and economic integration with its neighbours, Uganda and Tanzania (Chant, 2023). While trade liberalization and regional integration created new opportunities for women traders in Kenya by providing access to larger markets and enhancing competition, it also presented significant challenges, particularly related to

competition, access to finance, and economic vulnerability. Women traders, who were often operating in informal sectors, struggled with the pressures of competing against cheaper imports and were frequently excluded from the benefits of liberalization due to their limited access to formal financial systems (Akinyi, 2022). These dynamics highlighted the need for more gender-sensitive economic policies to support women's participation in the liberalized economy (Akinyi, 2022; Chant, 2023; Mbilinyi, 2023; Nyamweya, 2023).

The period of economic recovery through strategic planning marked by the long-term development plan commonly referred to as the Kenya Vision 2030 and development of Trade Policy Framework (2008-Present) (Chant, 2023; Nyamweya, 2023). Kenya launched Vision 2030 in 2008, this long-term development plan aims at transforming Kenya into a newly industrializing, middle-income country by the year 2030. Trade policy was aligned with the flagships of economic growth, job creation, and sustainable development (Nyamweya, 2023). The Kenya National Trade Policy (2017) was published to enhance competitiveness and promote exports (Chant, 2023; Nyamweya, 2023; Ochieng, 2023). The policy emphasizes the need for a conducive trade environment, including infrastructure development, access to finance, and innovation. The Kenya Vision 2030 and the Trade Policy Framework have created both opportunities and challenges for women traders. On the positive side, these policies have facilitated greater market access, improved infrastructure, and financial inclusion. However, women traders continue to face barriers to formalization, gendered constraints in market access, and regulatory challenges that limit their ability to fully benefit from these reforms (Chant, 2023; Mbilinyi, 2023; Nyamweya, 2023; Ochieng, 2023). In 2021, Kenya ratified the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, aiming to foster intra-African trade and reduce barriers for cross border trade in the continent (Ndegwa, 2023). Kenya's ratification of the AfCFTA in 2021 has the potential to significantly benefit women traders, offering new market opportunities, reducing trade barriers, and increasing access to regional value chains (Karanja, 2022; Mbilinyi, & Mutua, 2023). However, challenges such as the need for capacity building, the predominance of women in the informal sector, and the gender-specific barriers to trade must be addressed in order for women to fully benefit from the agreement. With targeted policies and support, AfCFTA can become a powerful tool for women traders in Kenya to expand their businesses, access new markets, and contribute to the broader goal of economic integration on the African continent.

The current trade policy trends show that Kenya is actively seeking to diversify its export markets beyond traditional partners, targeting new markets in Asia, Europe, and North America (Ndegwa, 2023). Current trade policy objectives are increasingly focusing on harnessing digital trade and e-commerce to facilitate trade for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Chant, 2023; Mbilinyi, 2023; Ochieng, 2023).

Notably, Kenya's trade policy has evolved from a protectionist approach in the early years of independence to a more liberalized and competitive framework (Ndegwa, 2023). The focus has shifted towards regional integration, sustainable development, and leveraging digital technologies to enhance trade (Kimani, 2022). However, challenges such as infrastructure deficits, economic fluctuations, and competition in a more open trade environment continue to shape the landscape (Ochieng, 2023). To ensure that women traders benefit from these changes, Kenya will need to focus on capacity building, infrastructure improvements, and targeted financial support for SMEs to level the playing field.

In this light, the KNTP acknowledges the barriers to women socio-economic empowerment through trade and has established the strategies to their mitigation which includes financial inclusion amongst others (section 6:11). Despite, this policy provisions and the witnessed significant progress in gender equality, women traders have continued to suffer from limited financial inclusion barring their meaningful participation in trade. Raising the question on how these KNTP financial inclusion strategies impact the socio-economic empowerment of women traders. Therefore, this study sought to establish the determinants for socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Nairobi County, Kenya, focusing on the role of the Kenya National Trade Policy's financial inclusion strategies.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Economic Theory

This study was guided by the feminism Economic theory. This theory critiques traditional economic frameworks for neglecting the roles and contributions of women in the economy. It advocates for a more inclusive understanding of economic activity, emphasizing unpaid work, informal economies, and the importance of recognizing women's contributions. Feminist economics supports financial inclusion initiatives as a means to address the historical economic disadvantages faced by women. This theory best suited the study as it elaborates how the evolution of gender and women empowerment leverage on gender responsive public policies. The theory addresses the historical and systemic inequalities faced by women and advocates for change. The assumption is that women have been side-lined through such aspects like patriarchy which allocates primary power to men through socialization institutions such as the family, education system, division of labour, allocation of resources as well as the State. Moreover, these inequalities are further entrenched through ungendered public policies which assume that policy impact both genders similarly ignoring the existing social structures and role disparities that have negatively affected women over the time.

Empirical Review

This literature review synthesizes previous studies on the socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Kenya, with a focus on the interplay between trade policy and financial inclusion strategies.

Socio-Economic Empowerment and Women Economic Contribution

The global experience of women's socio-economic empowerment, particularly in the context of trade and financial inclusion, reveals a range of successful strategies, challenges, and lessons learned from various regions. Many countries have implemented policies aimed at enhancing the socio-economic empowerment of women: Sustainable Development Goal 5 seek to promote gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. It targets to attain this through women involvement in resources access and ownership, decision-making and technology. Regional trade partnerships and Agreements such as the AfCFTA seek to advance intra-African trade, with provisions that encourage women's participation in trade sectors.

Women traders are integral to Kenya's economy, significantly contributing to the informal sector. Kibera et al. (2023) highlight that women comprise a substantial portion of the informal trading workforce, playing a vital role in food distribution and retail, thus ensuring household food security and community sustenance. For example, Kibera et al. (2023) indicates that women traders account for approximately 60% of the

informal sector workforce in Nairobi. Their involvement in food sales, particularly in low-income areas, is crucial for local food security. According to Muriuki (2022), women traders' impact on market presence cannot be ignored for they significantly contribute to the local economy, generating over KES 10 billion annually through sales in markets and street vending, which supports not only their families but also local suppliers and producers. Moreover, their household impact is critical. According to Muthoni et al. (2021), women traders contribute to household income, enhancing food security and education for their children, thus influencing community well-being. Despite these contributions, they often face significant barriers to their socio-economic empowerment. Therefore, understanding their socio-economic empowerment determinants, is crucial for formulating effective trade policies and financial inclusion initiatives.

Barriers To Financial Inclusion for Women Traders

The KNTF acknowledges existence of cultural norms and gender biases as significant obstacles to women trader's financial inclusion (Objective 11.6). This is supported by studies as exemplified by Njeri (2021) who found out that women traders frequently navigate societal resistance, which affects their business operations. These are embedded through societal expectations as reflected through traditional gender roles which often restrict women's mobility and access to markets. In many regions, traditional gender roles and legal restrictions hinder women's access to financial services (World Bank, 2017). Moreover, according to a study by Wambui (2023) there exists Socio-Cultural Challenges including cultural norms and gender expectations which confine women to lower-risk business ventures, limiting their potential for growth. The study notes that 65% of women traders reported facing discrimination based on gender in their business dealings.

Women traders have been facing barrier physical and systemic to market access (Wambui, 2023). These are exemplified by such issues like inadequate infrastructure and safety concerns inhibiting women from effectively participating in trade. Moreover, cultural norms in various communities restrict women's mobility and access to markets, thus limiting their economic engagement. Furthermore, despite progress in financial inclusion, Wambui, (2023) established that women still experience challenges such as lack of collateral, financial literacy gaps, and patriarchal norms that influence decisions related to finance and investment in households. A significant proportion of women traders have overtime been confirmed in the informal trade whose dynamics prove a challenges as far as legal protection and social security are concerned. ILO, (2018) notes that, women in informal sectors tend to have lower income security and face challenges in scaling their businesses.

Information and awareness are key tools to inclusivity. However, lack of access to market information remains a constraint for women traders. Moyi and Ndung'u (2020) avers that comprehensive trade policies should include provisions for training and information dissemination to empower women traders through access to market intelligence. Practical access to formal credit has been cited to be a barrier to women empowerment. A study by Ngugi and Muiruri (2022) established that only 22% of women traders in Nairobi have access to formal credit, compared to 35% of their male counterparts which challenge their capability to invest in inventory and diversify their businesses. The study emphasizes that women are often required to provide collateral, which they typically do not have (Ngugi & Muiruri, 2022). Additionally, a lack of financial awareness and literacy can impede women's ability to navigate financial systems (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018).

Ochieng and Njuguna (2021) examined the bureaucratic challenges women face when obtaining licenses. They reported that 78% of women traders experienced harassment from local authorities, which further complicates their ability to operate legally. These regulatory and legal barriers hinder women access to formal financial services further exacerbating their financial exclusion. These bureaucratic inefficiencies, coupled with corruption, create significant obstacles for women traders seeking to operate legally (Ochieng & Njuguna, 2021).

Financial Inclusion Strategies

The relationship between trade policies and women socio-economic empowerment through financial inclusion is an area of growing interest in literature. Financial inclusion has proved to be a pivotal determinant of socio-economic empowerment. It refers to availing financial services to all, especially marginalized groups. There have been different strategies to financial inclusion which aim at making trade credit available and accessible for traders. This includes start-up capital as well as expansion capital for traders. The different policies have utilised such strategies as the Microfinances,

Fatima and Iqbal (2019) highlight that microfinance initiatives have positively impacted women traders. This is through their provision of the capital needed to start and expand their businesses. This is regardless of the complexity surrounding them as highlighted by Bång, (2018) who claims that not all microfinance initiatives are beneficial due to their high interests charged leading to indebtedness to most of the traders. A study by Gachanja (2023) found out that, access to microloans enables women to scale their businesses, leading to increased income levels. Microfinance has emerged as a critical tool for fostering financial inclusion among women. Research shows that microfinance institutions (MFIs) provide essential capital for women to start and boost their businesses. Khandker (2005) found that access to micro-credit significantly increases women's income and economic participation in Bangladesh. Women reported enhanced decision-making power within their households due to increased financial contributions (Khandker, S. R. (2005).

Khan et al. (2020) found that women participating in microfinance programs in Pakistan reported increased business activities and higher incomes. The study indicates that microfinance not only provides financial resources but also fosters entrepreneurship among women. In Mexico, financial inclusion initiatives targeting women have yielded positive results. Buvinic and Furst-Nichols (2016) report that women in Mexico who accessed financial services through targeted programs showed increased participation in economic activities, with greater control over household spending (Buvinic, & Furst-Nichols, 2016). In India, self-help groups (SHGs) have been instrumental in providing financial services to women. Kumar and Sinha (2017) showed that SHGs not only provide credit but also enhance women's entrepreneurial skills, leading to increased household income and empowerment.

The Digital Financial Services have been identified as another key strategy to financial inclusion. Morawczynski & Pickens (2009) identified that mobile money services have significantly reduced transaction costs, enabling women to engage more actively in trade. The rise of mobile banking has transformed financial access for women in various regions. Zins and Weill (2016) analyzed the impact of mobile banking on women's financial inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa, noting that women with access to mobile banking reported increased savings and business investments. Aker et al. (2021) demonstrated that women in West Africa using mobile banking experienced improved economic resilience and business

growth. The study highlights that mobile money platforms enhance financial inclusion by providing women with easier access to savings and credit. In Kenya, the introduction of mobile money services like M-Pesa has significantly impacted women's economic activities. Mas and Radcliffe (2011) found that women using M-Pesa experienced increased economic activity and income, primarily due to improved access to savings and credit.

Moreover, there have been Integrated Strategies which involves integrating trade policies with financial inclusion initiatives. According to Bhana et al. (2017) the promotion of partnerships between financial institutions and trade agencies have been viewed to create a more enabling environment for women entrepreneurs and further fostering their empowerment. Gonzalez et al. (2020) studied the effects of the pandemic on women entrepreneurs and found that those with access to digital financial services were more resilient, adapting quickly to changing market conditions. This adaptability highlights the critical role of financial inclusion in crisis situations.

Concerted effort on Capacity Building through undertaking of Training initiatives targeting financial literacy are vital. Njeru & Macharia (2020) argue that enhancing the financial skills of women traders, alongside favorable trade policies, can lead to sustained socio-economic empowerment. In India, initiatives aimed at enhancing financial literacy among women have shown promising results. Rao et al. (2020) conducted a study showing that financial literacy programs significantly improved women's ability to manage finances and engage in economic activities, leading to higher incomes and improved family welfare. Kumar et al. (2020) noted that socio-cultural norms and a lack of financial literacy continue to hinder women's access to financial services in various regions. Vogel et al. (2020) explored the relationship between financial literacy and the business performance of women entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa. Their study found that higher levels of financial literacy led to improved business practices and increased profitability among women-led enterprises. Their findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions to address these barriers.

Methodology

The study espouses a qualitative thematic literature review to assess the implications of the KNTP financial inclusion strategies on the socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Kenya. The study thematically reviewed existing literature on women traders' financial inclusion; financial inclusion and women socio-economic empowerment and trade policies in Kenya for the period between 2017 and 2023; the period within which the policy has been in implementation. The material reviewed included peer-reviewed journal articles, published books and conference papers on trade and Gender thematic areas within Kenya. At inception, a search from google scholar, the keywords phrased as "women traders' financial inclusion", "trade financing in Kenya and women traders' socio-economic empowerment", and trade policy financial inclusion strategies in Kenya" resulted to 37 articles. Further search through the study question phrased as "implications of trade policy to socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Kenya" resulted to 21 articles. This was meant to increase dependability of the knowledge from the study and bring forth any literature left out through the key word search. The question search identified similar 13 related articles.

Thus, the cumulative number of related articles were 45 all of which were in english language. These articles were taken through a "topic" and "abstract" preliminary overview through a scanning process prior

to their download. The scanning process lead to the exclusion of 21 articles. These were excluded on specific and relevance to the study basis as they focused on other areas outside the combination of trade policy, women empowerment and financial inclusion. The sampled materials were analysed through content analysis by creating themes with the content of each examined, analysed and summarized as per their relevance to trade policy financial inclusion strategies and socio-economic empowerment of women traders. Themes on financial inclusion and socio-economic empowerment of women traders were organised and substantiated with evidence from the sampled articles.

Findings and Discussions

Socio-economic empowerment is often defined in terms of economic independence, access to resources, decision-making power, and overall social status. Recent studies highlight how these factors are interlinked with trade policies and financial inclusion efforts in Kenya. An assessment of the impact of KNTP on women's empowerment showed that the policy emphasizes inclusivity and recognizes the unique challenges faced by women traders. Studies reveal that policy aim at improving market access, reducing trade barriers, and enhancing capacity-building for women make significant contributions to their empowerment.

The study established that financial inclusion is critical for the socio-economic empowerment of women. However, there exist multifaceted bottlenecks to women traders' access to financial services. Thereby, tailored financial products, such as microloans and savings programs, enable women to invest in their businesses. Access to microfinance has been transformative for many women traders. Moreover, the rise of mobile banking has significantly improved access to financial services. The study showed that women who use mobile financial services report higher levels of business growth and income.

On Market Access, the study established that Women traders often face obstacles in accessing larger markets due to regulatory challenges and lack of information. Hence, Policies that simplify registration and compliance processes can enhance their participation in trade. This corroborates a study by Wanjiru (2021) which found out that streamlining business registration and tax compliance processes can reduce barriers for women traders. It was further established that, Capacity Building on financial literacy was key to financial inclusion. Thus, Programs that provide training in negotiation, marketing, and business management skills have shown positive impacts on women's confidence and ability to operate successfully. Thus, in concurrence with Mwangi (2020) who avers that initiatives designed to connect women traders with larger markets have shown positive outcomes. Mwangi (2020) argued this by highlighting that targeted trade fairs specifically for women improve visibility and networking opportunities.

Additionally, the study found out that social capital is crucial in the empowerment of women traders. The emphasis on the essence of associations and networks among women entrepreneurs. This is important for: - foremost, Collective Bargaining since it was established that Women who are part of trading associations often benefit from collective bargaining, allowing them to negotiate better prices and access resources more effectively. Secondly, for Mentorship and Peer Support since it was identified that mentorship programs can enhance women's business acumen and resilience, facilitating their socio-economic empowerment. This agreed with previous studies which emphasizes the need of women's associations and cooperatives. According to Ngoya (2022) indicates that women who participate in trading groups benefit from collective bargaining, which improves their market position. Mentorship has been argued to have a profound impact

on the entrepreneurial journeys for women. According to Omondi (2023), structured mentorship initiatives not only provide guidance but also enhance women's confidence and business acumen.

The study established that COVID-19 pandemic has broadened existing hurdles but also initiated brand new opportunities for women traders. Studies indicate a shift towards e-commerce, which, although challenging, has opened new avenues for business. Many women traders have adapted by utilizing online sales platforms, which has diversified their income sources. This was in support to a study by Odhiambo (2023) highlights how many women traders pivoted to online sales during the pandemic, which has opened new revenue streams. Furthermore, the crisis has prompted discussions on resilience and sustainability in women-led businesses, underscoring the importance of supportive policies in times of economic stress. Especially, women who adopted digital tools during the pandemic exhibited greater resilience and adaptability in their businesses. Zambrano et al. (2020) highlighted how women entrepreneurs in Latin America adapted their businesses during COVID-19, primarily through digital channels. Their research found that those with prior access to financial services were better positioned to navigate the crisis.

The study established the need for funded by government Capacity-building efforts. Training programs in financial literacy, marketing, and business management significantly boost women's confidence and business success. This concurs with Menkhoff et al. (2021) study findings on the impact of gender-sensitive financial products in Southeast Asia, which indicated that products designed with women's needs in mind significantly increased their financial inclusion and empowerment. On the same note, Abubakar et al. (2020) evaluation on the impact of women-focused financial products in Nigeria findings that tailored financial services significantly improved women's access to capital, leading to increased business activity and household income. Furthermore, a report by UN Women (2022) discusses various training programs implemented in Nairobi, showing a marked increase in business sustainability among participants.

The study established that the rise of mobile banking in Kenya, specifically through the M-Pesa platforms, has seen a revolution in promoting financial access. This was in support of several previous studies. Kamau et al. (2023) shows that women using mobile banking report higher business growth due to improved cash flow management and access to funds for investment. Digitalization is reshaping how women traders operate and connect with customers. For instance, a study by Kamau et al. (2023) found that women traders using e-commerce platforms reported a 50% increase in sales during the COVID-19 pandemic. Macharia (2022) established that mobile money services have improved transaction safety and efficiency, with 80% of women traders preferring mobile payments. On the same note, Kibera & Mwangi (2023) found out that social media has become a crucial marketing tool for women traders, enabling them to reach a wider audience and build customer loyalty.

The study established a need for an Integrated Policy Approaches whereby Policies holistically address trade, finance, and social issues affecting women traders. This was in line with Chege (2023) suggestion on creating multi-stakeholder platforms for collaborative policy formulation. In the same vein, the study highlights the need for Data-Driven Solutions and policies. Enhanced data collection on women's participation in trade is crucial for tailoring interventions. This was in corroboration with the UN Women (2023) emphasizes the need for gender-disaggregated data to inform policy decisions effectively.

Nonetheless, the study established that the policy financial inclusion initiatives including the Vision 2030 flagship projects such as the Women Enterprise Fund, Youth Enterprise Funds and the Uwezo Fund were

not meeting their expected outcome due to lack of involving the women in their formulation. There implementation has been a challenge due to systemic challenges and other administrative expectations which are tied to the societal structure of patriarchy for instance expecting women beneficiaries to have family consent or collateral in order to qualify for funding.

Conclusion

Financial inclusion has a profound impact on the socio-economic experiences of women traders globally. The body of research post-2020 illustrates that financial inclusion continues to be a powerful driver of socio-economic empowerment for women traders worldwide. Access to financial services empowers women, enhances their economic contributions, and improves their status within their households and communities. However, continued efforts to address barriers to financial inclusion are essential for achieving gender equality in economic participation. The socio-economic empowerment of women traders in Kenya is influenced by a complex interplay of trade policies, financial inclusion, social networks, and cultural contexts. Studies underscores the significant impact of financial inclusion on the socio-economic experiences of women traders. Access to financial services, particularly through microfinance and digital platforms, has been shown to enhance women's economic participation and empowerment. However, addressing barriers such as cultural norms and financial literacy is essential for maximizing these benefits. Development should be understood as a multidimensional process that includes economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Women's empowerment is a critical component of holistic development. Policies should integrate various sectors, including education, health, and economic development, to create an enabling environment for women's empowerment.

Recommendations and Implications for Public Policy

The study highlights the importance of comprehensive and adaptive approaches to foster an environment that supports women traders, enabling them to thrive in the marketplace. Continued focus on these areas will be essential for promoting gender equity in trade and economic participation. These include:-
Designing Gender-Sensitive Financial Products: Financial services should be created within the specific needs of women, recognizing their unique challenges and contexts. This includes considering factors such as mobility, literacy, and social norms.
Secondly, promoting Women's Economic Activities: Policies should focus on supporting women-led enterprises through access to credit, training, and market linkages. Empowering women economically not only benefits them but also contributes to broader economic growth.
Thirdly, Challenging Societal Norms: Gender and Development (GAD) in feminism theory, encourages policies that challenge harmful social norms and promote gender equality in both economic and social spheres. This may include community education and awareness campaigns.
Fourthly, Enhancing Women's Agency: Empowering women to be involved in decision-making on issues related to their economic activities is crucial. This can be achieved through training programs that build confidence and skills in negotiation and business management, and **Monitoring and Evaluation.** Finally, a Gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be established to assess the implications of financial inclusion initiatives on women's empowerment. This will ensure that programs are effective and accountable.

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