

Southern Africa: Women traders "blocked" from the "big business"

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WINDHOEK: "Africans do not believe women can do big business," fumes Zambian trader Angelica Rumsey. She is referring to the routine harassment of women traders by border officials throughout the southern African region but her statement is also reflected in the nature of goods on display at the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Women in Business Trade Fair in Windhoek from 12-18 August 2010.

A variety of crafts, inexpensive jewellery, kaftans and other African wear, cosmetics and hair products dominate the exhibition that is frightfully quiet.

Just days before the regional bloc throws its 30th birthday bash, the question that arises is how far women have come in the past three decades. Does the collection of goods at the fair sum up the position women have in regional trade?

"The aim is to move women away from 'traditional women's' products, such as clothing or jewellery, into more mainstream business," comments Sirkka Ausiku, permanent secretary in Namibia's ministry of gender equality and child welfare.

"One of the participants is SADC Women in Mining, which is an example of an organisation that does advocacy for women throughout that sector. In coming years we would love to see more regional groupings like that. Tourism would be a logical next one."

Zimbabwean Gugu Usumani, a member of SADC Women in Mining, believes that, "small businesses can easily expand into larger companies. This is not something that is just for men.

"In Zimbabwe, women miners are affected by government policies. It is, for instance, hard to take diamonds out of the country. They also face problems, such as acquiring machinery for drilling, cutting and polishing. Yet it is a good business for women, especially since most are from rural areas with little opportunities."

Usumani thinks the SADC trade fair and the women's investment forum that preceded it will help businesswomen. "Women will get some great exposure here for their products."

Some 300 women from 14 SADC-states - Madagascar is still suspended - came to Windhoek to showcase their businesses and undergo training at the three-day women's investment forum.

"It opened our eyes to many things," Rumsey says about the forum. "Women often lose out because they are not

knowledgeable about regulations. For instance, they will unnecessarily pay duty on goods."

Women are keen on doing business, Rumsey told IPS, but there are many impediments to especially cross-border trade, a sector dominated by women.

"There are major non-tariff barriers that need to be removed. Border officials, who are simply trying to find fault where there is none, will harass women even if their papers are genuine. It has a lot to do with our cultural backgrounds."

Namibia's deputy finance minister Calle Schlettwein acknowledged during his opening address at the women's investment forum that the implementation of the SADC trade protocol needs to be gender sensitive for the protocol to benefit women.

Although women are slowly establishing and strengthening their presence in the formal sector in the region, "the majority of trading activities by women are still within the informal and small-scale sectors", he said.

"Hence, there is a need to look at the provisions of all our legal instruments to make sure that gender matters are mainstreamed. The ultimate objective must be equality in all trade opportunities between men and women," he added.

Mercy Timbe, who works with women beekeepers in Mzuzu in Malawi, regards the removal trade barriers as an important issue: "Why is it so difficult for me to get my commodities into a shop in Mauritius?" she asks.

She also suggests the compilation of a regional database or directory of women entrepreneurs that can be used for networking. "And there should be chambers of commerce that consist of women. The present structures are mostly dominated by men."

For Rumsey, governments in the region should step up to the challenge: "Only three countries sent representatives to the investment forum. From Zambia only traders attended. Where is our government official who sits in the meetings and hears about the challenges that businesswomen face in SADC?"

"Where are the deliberate SADC policies that favour women in trade?"

Namibian gender equality and child welfare minister Doreen Sioka noted at the opening of the investment summit that, "it is a well-known fact that women form the backbone of many African economies and also play key roles in the economies of each SADC member states".

She emphasised the economic independence of women as being crucial "because it counteracts exploitation, feminisation of poverty, discrimination and disregard of their fundamental human rights".

But Sioka still felt it necessary to justify her support for women's economic independence by saying, "women spend a higher percentage of their income on feeding and educating their children, which is aimed at the wellbeing of their families".

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