



Women in Africa's Services Trade:

A spotlight on representation in the Aviation sector



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Introduction

Services trade is thriving in Africa, with average contributions of around 55% of GDP between 2013 and 2019¹. In 2019, services accounted for 65% of value added to global GDP and 49% of value added to Africa's GDP². However growth in the sector contracted to -34% in 2020 as a direct consequence of the pandemic³, with services exports in 2020 dropping to US \$82.7 billion⁴. Travel accounts for

the largest share of services exports in every sub-region except West Africa where other services – mainly banking, insurance and business services – play a more prominent role. Yet there is tremendous potential for future growth and improvement in many services sectors, both at continental level and between Africa and the rest of the world, even though the continent's role in global services trade is peripheral, compared to Latin America and South-East Asia⁵, and intra-African trade is also low.

That said, trade in services can help to create opportunities for African countries to expand their productivity outputs in sectors where they have comparative advantage, thereby creating jobs, contributing to increased GDP and generating foreign exchange, through improvements in connectivity, logistics, energy, information communication



technology (ICT), business and financial services both as tradable sectors in their own right and as contributions to production of manufacturing and agribusiness. In addition, imports of services can significantly improve performance by bringing greater competition, international best practice, better skills and technologies, and investment capital. Services complement manufacturing and will be critical enablers of increasing production of value-added goods in African economies. Unlocking intra-African trade in services can lead directly to increase in Africa's GDP and economy and enhance levels of employment and skills transfer across the continent, as well as acting as an enabler for the development of regional and continental value chains.

1. Women's participation in the African services liberalisation agenda

The AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Services (Services Protocol) was designed to change Africa's dismal performance in services trade: the legal instrument represents an important services trade vision and a strategic framework for further negotiation to deepen regional integration in Africa. Its aim is the progressive liberalisation of trade in services, allowing companies across the continent to easily operate across borders. The Services Protocol takes a hybrid approach to liberalisation, with State Parties obliged to make commitments in all service sectors through Schedules of Specific Commitments (SSCs) on the one hand, and broad regulatory frameworks for cooperation on the other.⁶ Five (5) priority services sectors (business; communication; financial; tourism and transport), are the subjects of the first round of liberalisation under the Services Protocol.⁷ The choice of these sectors was strategic: first, communication, financial and transport services are backbone services to many economic activities, with business services (particularly professional services) substantially contributing to services delivery through the movement of persons; second, most African countries have liberalised tourism in some form either in the World Trade Organisation or in their Regional Economic Communities (RECs), making it the most liberalised of the services sectors and presenting 'low hanging fruit'

¹ United Nations conference on Trade and Development (2019), UNCTADStat Data Platform available at <https://unctadstat.unctad.org>

² Assessing Regional Integration in Africa, Volume X, Chapter 2 The Status of Services Trade and Services Trade Policies in Africa p. 16.

³ Beatrice Chaytor and Ify Ogo, Recovery from the Economic Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Africa: What Role for Trade? Tralac newsletter, Issue 18, April 2020 available at [file.html\(tralac.org\)](file.html(tralac.org))

⁴ UNCTADStat <https://unctadstat.unctad.org>

⁵ Africa's contribution to global services trade has consistently lagged around 2% of global trade. See Services Exports for Growth and Development: Case Studies from Africa, African Union Commission, December 2015; and UNCTADStat <https://unctadstat.unctad.org>

in terms of the potential socio-economic impact on micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs), women and youth.⁸

Indeed, services trade in Africa has an important gender dimension: more women are employed in the services sector than in agriculture or manufacturing, but this tends to be at the lower end of the value chain or in informal capacities. Also women tend to be heads of a large number of MSMEs which account for 80% of African business, yet they do not enjoy the same access as men to the full spectrum of services jobs and occupations.⁹ Through liberalisation and regulatory reform, trade in services could address constraints, eliminate or mitigate barriers and ultimately, move women up the value chain into more sophisticated manufacturing processes or service delivery, providing greater opportunities for their participation in economic activities and generally empowering them in the AfCFTA market place. The case of aviation provides huge potential in this regard.

As part of the AfCFTA legal architecture, the Services Protocol should be implemented in line with the objectives of the AfCFTA Agreement which provides in Article 3 for promotion of gender equality. Article 27 of the Services Protocol specifically provides that the export capacity of women services suppliers should be improved. It should be read together with Article 4, which gives AfCFTA States the right to regulate



in accordance with their national policy objectives. Where those national policy objectives include gender parity and equality, then the domestic regulation that the State enacts can provide the foil through which the implementation of the Services Protocol can be achieved. That notwithstanding, the entire Services Protocol should be read through the lens of Article 3 of the AfCFTA Agreement, promoting gender equality in the overall implementation of the Protocol.

Indeed, it is in the implementation of the commitments, using national AfCFTA Strategies, where they exist, that the State Parties can ensure that women participate fully in the trade space of the AfCFTA. For instance, State Parties can create such spaces for women through their national AfCFTA Strategies where

⁶ AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Services, Articles 18-22.

⁷ Assembly/AU/Dec.690-712 (XXXI) found at [36130-assembly_au_dec_690_712_xxxi_e.pdf](#)

⁸ Beatrice Chaytor, Creating a Single African Market on Trade in Services: Negotiating the Schedules of Specific Commitments under the Protocol on Trade in Services, Tralac Newsletter, Issue 14, October 2019, available at [tralac Newsletter | October 2019 \(mailchi.mp\)](#)

⁹ See Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs in the Context of the African Continental Free Trade Area, UN Women, June 2019.



specific actions and policies can be outlined to assist women entrepreneurs and professionals to take advantage of the AfCFTA.¹⁰ The gender provisions in the Services Protocol represent a direct call to action to the State Parties to ensure that women's participation in the AfCFTA through enhancement of export capacity can be assured in the same way as those of men. It is then dependent on the national level authorities to use specific measures and policies, and through collaborative efforts (either with

the private sector or across government departments, or with other AfCFTA State Parties), to ensure that this aspiration (indeed, obligation) can be achieved.

Women would therefore need to be empowered, enabled and educated to take advantage of the openings that will emerge from the implementation of the Services Protocol through the SSCs, but also through the regulatory frameworks. So for instance, women engineers and IT professionals would need to be constantly upskilled to use the trade space; their qualifications would need to be recognised in other territories through the use of mutual recognition agreements or similar arrangements between professional bodies.¹¹ Such access to the trade space may also be enabled by removing trade barriers through the SSCs and developing regulatory frameworks to enable policy and regulatory coherence and synergy, that specifically benefits women entrepreneurs and professionals. Where barriers are removed in non-traditional sectors such as air transport or fintech, this can also impact positively on the upskilling of women professionals and entrepreneurs and enable them to compete in the same space with their male counterparts.

Moreover, the advent of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade is likely to buttress the efforts of AfCFTA State Parties in their implementation of the gender aspects of the Services Protocol. The Protocol on Women makes provision for supporting measures to

¹⁰ Nadira Bayat and Thokozile Ruzvidzo, Empowering Women for an Equal AfCFTA, 2021 <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/international-womens-day-2021-empowering-women-for-an-equal-afcfta/> Gender mainstreaming in African Continental Free Trade Area national implementation strategies, Working Paper 2020, UNECA [gendermainstreaming_wp_en.pdf \(uneca.org\)](https://www.uneca.org/gendermainstreaming_wp_en.pdf)

¹¹ See Article 10, Protocol on Trade in Services.

be taken by State Parties in their efforts to expand trade and deepen regional integration across the continent. Overall, it seeks to “support the implementation of the AfCFTA as set out in Article 3 (e) of the Agreement by promoting and attaining sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, equality for Women and Youth and structural transformation of State Parties”.¹²

2. Women’s participation in the Aviation sector

It is clear that the AfCFTA will only live up to its economic and social potential if the benefits from trade liberalisation and regional integration are inclusive and shared equitably. This section explores the aviation sector which tends to be a non-traditional arena for women’s participation, particularly since it is a technologically advanced industry. Initiatives for increasing women’s representation in the sector are largely industry driven. Such initiatives could be supported by specific government-led measures described in the first section of the article.

In 2019, aviation contributed US \$63 billion to Africa’s GDP, while supporting 7.7 million jobs. In 2021, due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the figures were drastically reduced to US\$27 billion in GDP and 3.8 million jobs supported.¹³ That said, there is an upward trend in aviation on the continent, which provides immense opportunity for AfCFTA State Parties to develop their competitiveness in the industry.

2.1. Challenges in effecting change

The African aviation landscape is still quite male dominated, particularly in technical and managerial aspects, although the precise numbers for women’s participation across the industry are not fully known. However, gender equality and representation in the industry have been specifically identified as a desired outcome in the aviation industry, through calls at the global level in the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).¹⁴ Industry stakeholders report a number of challenges that traditionally hinder women’s participation in the industry, including access to education and skills development; perceptions of more traditional roles for women; work/life balance considerations; lack of awareness about diverse career paths in the industry, lack of scholarships, mentorship and sponsorship programmes; inadequate recruitment processes; and generally unconscious bias. The industry initiatives that have recently been launched to address these challenges from international organisations such as ICAO and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), and regional organisations such as the African Airlines Association (AFRAA) and the African Civil Aviation Commission (AFCAC) speak to the understanding that there has to be either a critical mass of voices and initiatives that foster change or a deliberate choice within the industry to make a change that supports women’s wider representation

¹² Article 2, Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade (on file with author).

¹³ [Data & Statistics - AFRAA - African Airlines Association](#)

¹⁴ See ICAO’s Resolution A-39-30 on Gender Equality, available at https://www.icao.int/Meetings/a39/Documents/Resolutions/10075_en.pdf. ICAO’s 2018 Gender Summit challenged the industry to reconsider and improve gender diversity in the global aviation industry.



in the industry. AFRAA specifically aligns itself with the 50-50 goal of women's participation set by the UN.¹⁵ Intentional action in this regard has been reflected in more industry measures, such as IATA's 25by2025 – Advancing Gender Balance by 2025, launched in 2019 to provide easily quantifiable metrics for intentionally increasing women representation in aviation.¹⁶

At the Africa level, AFCAC's recently launched African Women and Youth in Aviation Initiative (AWIA), aims to develop a clear road map of actions and activities that will strengthen and increase the participation of women and youth in aviation on the continent. The objective is to gather the available data for Africa on diversity and inclusion among the broad spectrum of the aviation ecosystem, including women's representation in careers in environment,

legal, management, engineering, safety and airworthiness, or air transport. AFCAC will aggregate the information on the activities which encourage women's participation in such roles to obtain clearer data about what is happening on the continent. The intention is further to create a platform for women in aviation that includes sponsorship, mentoring, capacity building and confidence building among women professionals and entrepreneurs, as well as outreach to governments, CAAs, airlines, ANSPs and other stakeholders to encourage them to use the platform to effect significant change in the aviation industry.

That change appears to gradually be taking place through the celebration of women such as Ms. Mercy Makau, Founder and President of the Young Aviators Club of Africa based in Kenya, who was recently inducted into the Women in Emerging Aviation Technologies Hall of Fame 2023. Through her Young Aviators Club of Africa, she has inspired and supported hundreds of young African aviators to develop their careers.

AWIA, which is designed to create awareness about the broad array of career paths for youth and women in the aviation industry on the continent, will gather data and analyse representation by women in the 16 domains of aviation across each African country, including in airworthiness, pilots and licensing, air transport, environment, air traffic control, as a way to assist governments and CEOs make informed decisions on the types of initiatives and actions to prioritise in changing the landscape for African

¹⁵ See UN Sustainable Development Goals; Agenda 2030.

¹⁶ <https://www.iata.org/en/about/our-commitment/25-by-2025/>

aviation to a more inclusive one. Such actions include those encouraging career succession and progression¹⁷, upskilling and reskilling, mentoring, coaching, promoting women's competencies, including the use of technologies to level the playing field in technical positions, and training and capacity building.¹⁸

2.2. Fostering leadership and technical roles

At the international level, out of the 33 states forming the ICAO Council, there were only 7 women representatives, and the objective is to move this number to a 50:50 ratio of men and women.¹⁹ There is promise on the horizon that women are taking their place in board rooms, upper management and technical and mechanical aspects of the industry.²⁰ Implementation of the Services Protocol should help boost the impetus that has already started with the various initiatives from AFRAA, AFCAC, IATA, and ICAO. A survey done by IATA in 2018 found that there were only 3% of women CEOs in the global aviation industry compared to 12% in other industries. Women account for 8% of aviation CFOs globally, against a world average of 12%. Conversely in the roles for human resource director roles, women account for 32%. Industry experts suggest that this points to women being more represented at senior roles in non-technical aspects of the aviation industry, than in those that represent more STEM related roles. The Secretary-General of AFCAC, Ms. Adefunke Adeyemi²¹, identifies significant under-



Ms. Mercy Makau



Ms. Adefunke Adeyemi

representation of women in technical and senior managerial positions.²² In her view, the industry must be more intentional about: a) moving women up the aviation ranks, and b) encouraging more women to choose careers in aviation. In this regard, AFRAA's 2018 Resolution was a call to action to the industry to consider the barriers to gender equity and balance and to take initiatives that will attract highly skilled professionals across all levels. At a 2021 AFRAA conference of development of youth and women, stakeholders addressed how to get more women into leadership positions in companies in aviation. A set of recommendations were suggested, which are reviewed annually and are the basis for an Action Plan on Youth and Women in Aviation.

¹⁷ For instance, the average age of an African aviation professional is 59, while the average age in Africa is 18 years.

¹⁸ AFCAC has launched a series of regional Centres of Excellence in collaboration with ICAO and IATA that will develop course content targeted at women in aviation leadership.

¹⁹ This number depends on countries specifically sending female representatives to ICAO and ultimately, the Council.

²⁰ For instance, the recent past President of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) was Ms Poppy Khosa, the first in its 80 year history; and the CEO of Rwandair, Ms Yvonne Makolo now chairs the Board of the International Air Transport Association, the first female to do so in the 70+ year history of the organisation.

²¹ She is only the 2nd female Secretary-General since the establishment of AFCAC in 1969.

²² Globally, women are less present in roles such as pilots at a rate of 4%, CEOs at 3%, maintenance and technicians at 2.6%, air traffic controllers at 16.8%, air worthiness roles at 11.6%. By contrast, women make up 79.2% of flight attendants, and are the majority in administrative and human resource roles.


In Africa, it is encouraging that out of the 53 African airline members of AFRAA, there are 5 women CEOs, including in Equatorial Guinea, Rwanda and Uganda. Industry experts also highlight that a number of women are represented as heads of civil aviation authorities, in airline company boards of directors, and in various management roles. They note an increase in the number of qualified women taking on leadership roles in maintenance, air traffic control, engineering, cargo operations, the flight deck, management, including in South Africa, Kenya, Botswana, Ethiopia, Cameroun, Rwanda and Uganda. And across the spectrum of leadership roles there are examples of companies such as Swissport Kenya, led by CEO Racheal Ndegwa, which has 33% of women in top management roles; Advantage Air and Dragonfly Air (Kenya) headed by a woman CEO (Patricia Matu), where women represent 50% of the workforce. In both these examples, not only have the companies met the IATA's 25by2025 target, but a conducive environment is provided for women at all levels.

The aim of 25 by 2025 is to increase women's representation across the board by 25% first in all senior roles, and second in under-represented categories of roles, particularly technical roles such as engineering, and maintenance or safety. The initiative is voluntary for industry operators and so far there are more than 200 signatories to the scheme, incorporating more than 50% of IATA membership, and including the

majority of airlines but also non-IATA members such as airports, manufacturers, ground handlers and associations. After a slow start, IATA reports that around 140 signatories now provide data on their progress. In senior roles, women representation has gone up from 24% to 28%, while in technical areas, there has been an increase from 12% to 18%. Out of 14 signatories from Africa, only 9 have reported on their progress in 2022, yet that still represents 50,000 jobs, out of which 22% are women in senior roles, while 6% are in the flight deck and 4% are in technical roles. This shows that while there is some progress, Africa is still lagging behind in terms of women representation in senior and technical roles. Nevertheless, IATA sees positive upward trends in the willingness of signatories to submit data and in the data themselves and points out that the goal is best practice sharing rather than enforcement of imposed quotas. A Best Practice Guide has been developed in this regard, which incorporates gender assessment surveys that signatories can use to track their progress in diversity and inclusion.²³ There is understanding that the move towards gender equality in the aviation workspace is a work in progress, which is being improved incrementally.

Conclusion

The success of the AfCFTA depends on its inclusive nature and the way the enormous opportunities for women's participation in the free trade area can be enabled. The Protocol on Trade in Services, part of the architecture of the

AfCFTA, is intended to be implemented in line with one of the core objectives of the AfCFTA Agreement: the promotion of gender equality. With the outline of the African single services market now becoming apparent, the adopted Schedules of Specific Commitments plus the regulatory frameworks in the five priority sectors, will add to the certainty and predictability of the African free trade zone, and further define the liberalisation agenda. Furthermore, State Parties can use their AfCFTA national strategies to implement the general provisions on gender in the Services Protocol, buttressed by the supportive provisions in the upcoming Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade to effect change in diversity and inclusion. In this way governments can be more intentional about providing specifically targeted measures to increase women's participation in the AfCFTA. The examples of industry initiatives in the aviation sector which are being used to increase women's participation in the industry, provide useful lessons that can serve as a launchpad for precise government action, as well as business network initiatives, to raise the productive capacities of women entrepreneurs and professionals that will empower them to take advantage of the opportunities in the AfCFTA. Such intentional measures and actions can go a long way to ensure that half the African population has equal access to the AfCFTA space, raising productivity levels, competitiveness and contributing to overall growth and development of the continent. 

²³ <https://www.iata.org/en/about/our-commitment/25-by-2025/#tab-6>