

Reflections on the Women's Empowerment Lab: Women Entrepreneurs in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The Women's Empowerment Lab was an opportunity for women entrepreneurs in Ghana and in the diaspora to gain insights into the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The AfCFTA and AGOA support intra-African and Transatlantic trade as well as small business development established by the African Union in 2012; the AfCFTA establishes a continental free trade area for goods and services, free of customs constraints like the European Union. As part of its programming for Women's History Month, the Center for Women, Gender, and Global Leadership at Howard University co-sponsored the Women's Empowerment Lab with the Center for African Studies, the International Trade Centre, the U.S. Embassy in Accra, Ghana, and the State Department's Providing Opportunities for Women's Economic Rise (POWER). The event took place virtually on March 15, 2022. This document is a report on the Women's Empowerment Lab, which aimed to increase awareness among women entrepreneurs about AfCFTA and AGOA and provide insights on the U.S. government and the Government of Ghana's tools to support them.

KEYWORDS

AfCFTA; AGOA; women's empowerment; entrepreneurship; Ghana

INTRODUCTION

As part of its programming for Women's History Month, the Center for Women, Gender, and Global Leadership at Howard University co-sponsored the Women's Empowerment Lab with the Center for African Studies, the International Trade Centre, the U.S. Embassy in Accra, Ghana, and the State Department's Providing Opportunities for Women's Economic Rise (POWER). The event took place virtually on March 15th, and over one hundred of the four hundred people who registered attended. The nearly four-hour-long event featured distinguished guests including Hajia Alima Mahama, Ghanaian Ambassador to the United States; Stephanie Sullivan, U.S. Ambassador to Ghana, Laurie-Ann Agama, U.S. Trade Representative, Anthony Wutoh, Howard University Provost; Pamela Coke Hamilton, Executive Director of

the International Trade Centre, and Prudence Sebahizi, Chief Technical Advisor on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The Women's Empowerment Lab was an opportunity for women entrepreneurs in Ghana and in the diaspora to gain insights on the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The AfCFTA and AGOA support intra-African and Transatlantic trade as well as small business development established by the African Union in 2012, the AfCFTA establishes a continental free trade area for goods and services, free of customs constraints like the European Union. As a flagship project to strengthen the economic integration of the continent, it will establish a common internal market with the aim of prioritizing intra-African trade, which remains the lowest rate of intra-continental trade in the world. With Africa being the consumer market, the AfCFTA sets up the continent to be a great actor in a world increasingly tempted toward economic globalization.

This document is a report on the Women's Empowerment Lab, which aimed to increase awareness among women entrepreneurs about AfCFTA and AGOA and provide insights on the U.S. government and the Government of Ghana's tools to support them. The event consisted of three parts including the opening ceremony and panel discussion followed by the workshop, which led to the concluding networking session.

EVENT SYNOPSIS

The event started with a brief introduction from Dr. Dawuni, who distributed the virtual mic between the speakers. Ambassador Sullivan showed appreciation of the Women's Empowerment Lab and said that the U.S. Embassy seeks to encourage connections between women entrepreneurs in Ghana and their American counterparts



Figure 1 Ambassador Sullivan, U.S.

and ensure businesswomen are aware of the various program offered by the U.S. Embassy in Accra. More importantly, Ambassador Sullivan invited women entrepreneurs to work together. She suggested, "we want to connect you with additional opportunities to broaden your skill set. And we want you to connect with each other to create a transatlantic network of businesswomen who will share challenges and best practices with one another, create new business partnerships, celebrate one another's successes, and support each other". While promoting export opportunities, Ambassador Sullivan reminded the audience that the AfCFTA will be the world's largest

free trade area when fully implemented. Before ending her speech, Ambassador Sullivan announced 4.2 million dollars of new co-investments by the U.S. Agency for International Development West Africa Trade and Investment Hub to five companies operating in Ghana. According to her, the allocation of the grants is a way of further

fostering the commercial relations between the U.S. and Africa. The recipient of the grants will increase exports and create over 2000 new jobs mostly for women and youth.

Ambassador Mahama kicked off her speech by acknowledging that the Women's Empowerment Lab is a timely initiative as businesswomen are still adjusting to the impact of Covid 19. Her Excellency also mentioned the role that the Ghanaian Government played in supporting and creating opportunities for women during the pandemic. The Ghanaian Government has also put in place programs to help women grow their businesses by focusing on digitalization. Other governmental programs offer training and funding for women entrepreneurs. Ambassador Mahama concluded her remarks by emphasizing the resilience of Ghanaian women whom she said to have the skills and the potential and are open to collaboration with businesswomen in the U.S. The Ghanaian Embassy stands ready to assist and support its women entrepreneurs.



Figure 2 Ambassador Mahama, Ghana

The next speaker was Laurie-Ann Agama, Deputy Assistant, U.S. Trade Representative for Economic Affairs. Dr. Agama started her remarks by highlighting President Biden's address to the 34th African Union Summit where he showed his intention to revitalize partnerships between the U.S. and Africa. The U.S. Trade Representative reported on tremendous efforts that U.S. officials are making to ensure the establishment of a U.S.-Africa two-way trade that delivers equitable and inclusive benefits. Dr. Agama concluded her remarks by emphasizing the numerous opportunities of AGOA and the AfCFTA and how they benefit women's businesses.



Figure 3 Deputy Assistant, U.S. Trade Representative for Economic Affairs, Dr. Agama

Dr. Agama's speech was followed by Provost Wutoh's who started his remarks by recalling the founding of Howard University and the institution's longstanding connections with Africa and people of African descent. In keeping with its history and mission, Howard University is proud to support the Women's Empowerment Lab and African women's businesses in the continent and in the diaspora.



Figure 4 Provost Wutoh, Howard University



*Figure 5 Pamela Coke-Hamilton,
International Trade Center*

Ms. Pamela Coke-Hamilton presented her remarks as the Executive Director of the International Trade Center (ITC). Ms. Coke-Hamilton emphasized the advantages related to intra-African trade by claiming that it “helps build a more integrated market, create continental value chains and secures decent jobs for women and youth”. According to the Executive Director of the ITC, the AfCFTA will help women formalize their activities, which, for the most part, are widespread in the informal sector. This, in addition to making the AfCFTA more inclusive, will allow African businesswomen to engage in international markets with improved product quality. Ms. Cokoe-Hamilton remarked that the ITC is working “to move Ghanaian women from the periphery of international trade to the heart of the continental project”. TheSheTrades project, for example, is an initiative launched by the ITC and aims at establishing a network facilitating women entrepreneurs to connect to markets. Ms. Coke-Hamilton concluded her remarks by making a call to collective action to create more women’s economic empowerment initiatives through the AfCFtA.



*Figure 6 Prudence Sebahizi,
AfCFTA’s Chief Technical Advisor*

Along the same lines, Mr. Prudence Sebahizi, AfCFTA’s Chief Technical Advisor, followed Ms. Coke-Hamilton’s advocacy for a more inclusive environment for trade. Mr. Sebahizi argued that “inclusiveness is pivotal to Africa’s development agenda. Aspiration number 6 in the Agenda 2063 seeks to create an Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children”. The AfCFTA Secretariat is committed to accompanying women in their journey to move from small scale business activities to high productivity. “It has put in place a private sector engagement strategy that focuses on identifying priority, value chains, and interventions in key sectors with potential for inclusivity of women and youth,” said Mr. Sebahizi.

Mr Sebahizi’s remarks concluded the opening ceremony, followed by a panel discussion moderated by Professor Elizabeth Asiedu. The attendees of the panel are active in various industries and mostly attended the event from Ghana as it is shown in the table below. Most of the participants in both the panel discussion and the workshop are in the manufacturing industry. The first panelist was Ayesha Bedwei, President of the American Chamber of Commerce based in Ghana. Ms. Bedwei highlighted the advantages of AfCTFA in the advancement of women’s economic empowerment. Mr. Michael Nicholson, USAID Representative in West Africa, presented the opportunities available for entrepreneurs and potential exporters. The next panelist was Dr. Afua Asare, CEO of the Ghana Export Promotion Authority. Beyond women’s economic empowerment, Dr. Asare called for the promotion of women’s access to

training and resources, including land. She also highlighted a number of initiatives for women to be able to efficiently export their products. The fourth presenter of the panel discussion was Ms. Adjo Asare, CEO of Alfie Designs. In her presentation, Mr. Asare demonstrated how the West African Trade Hub was instrumental in her success as an entrepreneur. The final panelist was Ms. Patricia Poku-Diaby, CEO of Plot Enterprise. Ms. Poku-Diaby provided insights into her success as a businesswoman and listed a few challenges women entrepreneurs encounter when trading internationally. “Despite the seeming beauty of our story, there are complexities in trading internationally. One main challenge we face is price volatility. Also, for a manufacturing concern, it is important to have adequate trade lines so as to give comfort to buyers in terms of reliability of supply”, said the CEO of Plot Enterprise. The panel discussion ended with a brief Q&A session.

Table 1 : Women’s Empowerment Lab Panel Discussion Registrants Industry

Sector	Number of Registrants
Education	4 ⁰
Consulting	3 ⁰
Agriculture	4 ¹
Medical, Pharma, Biotech	15
Retail	21
Other	78
Consumer Products	58
Manufacturing	77
Transportation & Distribution	3
Real State	7
Legal	7
Hospitality, Travel, Tourism	2 ⁰
Banking and Securities	2
Government - Federal	5
Hospital, Clinic, Doctor Office	7
Call Center Outsourcing	1
Software Healthcare	1
Advertising/Marketing/PR	13
Financial Services - Other	1
Telecommunications	1
High Tech Others	1
Energy, Chemical, Utilities	3

AfCTFA AND AGOA

The workshop sessions started after the panel discussion. Moderated by Dr. Krista Johnson, Director of the Center for African Studies at Howard, the sessions featured Ms. Anahita Vasudevan, Associate Economic Affairs Officer, ITC SheTrades

Initiative, and Mr. Shaun Lake, Senior Adviser, E-Learning - International Trade Centre. Ms. Vasudevan centered her presentation on identifying the challenges and opportunities for women under the AfCFTA. She also focused on ways in which women entrepreneurs can be a part of the trading dialogue. Ms. Vasudevan provided an overview of the SheTrades Initiative, a global platform that empowers women to engage in business. The initiative also helps remove inequalities that prevent women from sitting at the table where trade-related policies are discussed. While the AfCFTA has changed the trading landscape for women, there are still challenges that women face in trading. According to Anahita some of the challenges include the difficult transition from the informal to the formal sector, the access to market information, access to adequate training, the transportation of high-cost goods, making networks, and access to information about tariffs and ROO among other challenges. Ms. Vasudevan concluded her presentation by making a few recommendations inviting women to be part of the solution for the challenges listed above. In doing so, she urged women entrepreneurs to stay informed, to join the network and collaborate, and finally to identify and advocate for women's priorities.

Mr. Shaun Lake started his presentation by discussing how women entrepreneurs can export with AfCFTA. He described the free online training program developed by AfriXembank and the ITC to prepare entrepreneurs to navigate the benefits offered by the AfCFTA. The training program is offered in several languages and is comprised of seven modules that require twelve hours to be completed. After pulling up the training website, Mr. Lake demonstrated how to use it and answered several questions from the audience about the reasons why intra-African trade is low. Mr. Lake polled the audience on X, Y,Z which provided insights into how much businesswomen in Ghana know about AGOA and the AfCFTA. The results of the polls revealed that 47% of the participants did not know about AGOA prior to the Women's Empowerment Lab, and 47% of participants knew about the AfCFTA prior to the event.

CONCLUSION

The Women's Empowerment Lab was a successful event as it provided information on the tools needed for women entrepreneurs to export their products within Africa and internationally. The other benefit of the Women's Empowerment Lab is that it allowed businesswomen to connect and create networks. Throughout the event, there was a lively engagement in the chat and verbal interventions. Many businesswomen shared details of their business and reflected on their specific challenges. The response to the Women's Empowerment Lab was very positive and robust, supporting the notion that further programming is needed. To attract more participants and to better foster intra-African trade, future Labs should focus on more than one country so that businesswomen can gain more partners. The format in which the Women's Empowerment Lab took place is also adequate as it solved the issue of mobility that many may encounter especially in a world of Covid 19. These types of events, which support women entrepreneurs in their activities should foster more

collaboration between the Center for African Studies and the Center for Women, Gender, and Global Leadership. It will also be motivating for the two institutions to create an award for African women entrepreneurs who are efficiently using the tools provided during this workshop to export their products. The goal for this is twofold. First, it will encourage businesswomen to get to work and make good use of the workshop. Second, it will be an opportunity for both AGOA and AfCFTA to measure their work by the number of success stories they can get. Lastly, the two Centers should consider creating entrepreneurship courses and modules online that are open to women entrepreneurs in Africa so that they can be more aware of the process to follow in order to be successful exporters.