

**GENDERED CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY AND HUMAN SECURITY IN WEST
AFRICAN BORDERLANDS**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines gendered cross-border mobility in West African borderlands through a human security framework. Although the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement has expanded regional mobility, women's everyday experiences at borders reveal persistent gaps between legal commitments and lived realities. Existing scholarship often treats informal trade, trafficking, border corruption, and feminist mobility concerns separately. This study integrates these dimensions by conceptualizing women's cross-border movement as a multidimensional human security issue encompassing economic, personal, community, and political security. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative interpretive approach based on structured literature review and regional policy analysis (2014–2025). It incorporates comparative case analysis of the Nigeria–Benin (Seme–Cotonou) and Ghana–Togo (Aflao) corridors to illustrate how informality, governance practices, socio-cultural norms, and regional insecurity intersect in shaping women's mobility experiences. The findings show that while the feminization of migration reflects expanding agency and economic participation, women remain embedded in systems characterized by informality, corruption, infrastructural deficits, and gendered power asymmetries. The article argues that regional integration must move beyond formal free movement provisions toward gender-responsive governance and institutional accountability to ensure meaningful human security for women across West African borderlands.

KEYWORDS: - Gendered Mobility; Human Security; Cross-Border Trade; ECOWAS Free Movement; Informal Economy; West African Borderlands.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research and policy discussions have paid growing attention to the link between gender, security, and mobility. This shift reflects wider social and economic changes across African societies. Economic restructuring, urban growth, and gradual changes in traditional gender roles have created new opportunities for women to participate more actively in public and economic life. Today, women are increasingly present in labour markets, small businesses, political institutions, and cross-border commercial networks. Yet this expansion has not come without cost. Alongside new opportunities, women also face new forms of risk, insecurity, and inequality that require careful examination (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019; Lehmann, 2020; UN Women, 2022). Feminist scholars have played an important role in drawing attention to these realities by challenging gender-blind development approaches and by emphasizing women's everyday experiences of movement, vulnerability, and agency (True, 2020; Blumberg et al., 2016).

At the institutional level, global and regional commitments to gender equality have also strengthened interest in women's mobility. Frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063 encourage governments and research bodies to understand how economic reforms, trade policies, and regional integration affect women differently from men (African Union, 2020; UNCTAD, 2021). In West Africa, this issue is particularly important because many households depend on movement across borders for survival. Women's increasing involvement in cross-border trade, circular migration, and regional labour markets reflects both the feminization of migration and the continued pressure of unemployment, declining rural livelihoods, and household poverty (Awumbila, 2018; IOM, 2023; Hall, 2023). Over time, women's participation in informal cross-border trade has grown significantly. Many women travel regularly between neighbouring countries to sell agricultural products, textiles, processed foods, and other small goods. These movements have been made easier by the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement, which aims to reduce restrictions within the region. However, the benefits of regional integration have not been shared equally. Most female traders remain in the informal sector because they lack access to credit, official documents, legal information, and institutional protection (Hasham & Logan, 2023; Cline-Cole & Robson, 2016). Although detailed gender-based migration data are still limited, existing studies show that women make up a large share of informal cross-border traders and short-distance migrants in West Africa (IOM, 2023; World Bank, 2020).

While mobility has helped many women earn income and support their families, it has also exposed them to serious security challenges. Border areas and trade routes often operate under weak regulation and poor oversight. Female traders frequently experience harassment, demands for unofficial payments, seizure of goods, and various forms of gender-based violence. In some locations, these problems are made worse by the presence of armed groups, traffickers, and criminal networks operating across porous borders (Grip, 2017; Ranjan, 2025). These risks are not accidental. They are linked to deeper gender inequalities, limited legal protection, and women's concentration in informal and undocumented forms of movement. Human trafficking represents one of the most serious outcomes of these vulnerabilities. Economic hardship and social expectations that women contribute to household income often push women and girls into risky migration arrangements. Trafficking networks take advantage of existing trade routes and weak border control systems to recruit and exploit female migrants. Many victims are forced into domestic work, low-paid labour, or sexual exploitation within the region and along routes leading to North Africa and Europe (Awumbila, 2018; UNODC, 2022). The persistence of trafficking shows how economic pressure, migration aspirations, and insecurity are closely connected.

These challenges are occurring within a broader context of regional instability. Parts of West Africa, especially the Sahel, are affected by violent extremism, the spread of small arms, and organised crime. Women who travel for trade or livelihood purposes often pass through areas marked by heavy security presence, informal checkpoints, and unpredictable enforcement practices (Grip, 2017). In such environments, mobility becomes more than an economic activity. It becomes a human security issue shaped by weak governance, inequality, and institutional failure. Although policymakers increasingly recognise the need for gender-sensitive migration policies, important gaps remain. Regional frameworks often focus on trade and labour mobility without giving enough attention to the protection needs of informal female traders and migrants. Poor data, weak enforcement of anti-trafficking laws, and the continued neglect of informal economic actors limit the effectiveness of existing measures (Kofman et al., 2023; UN Women, 2022). There is therefore a need for research that brings together questions of economic survival, informal trade, regional integration, and human security. Essentially, the study of gendered cross-border mobility in West Africa is both necessary and timely. Women's growing participation in regional economic activities reflects important gains in independence and resilience. At the same time, these gains exist alongside persistent risks and structural disadvantages. A clearer understanding of these realities is essential for developing policies that make mobility safer, protect women's rights, and ensure that regional integration contributes meaningfully to inclusive development.

Although research on gender and mobility in West Africa has grown considerably, significant conceptual and analytical gaps persist. A substantial body of scholarship has documented women's engagement in informal cross-border trade, their exposure to harassment and coercive border practices, and their structural marginalization within transport and migration systems (Awumbila, 2018; UN Women, 2022; IOM, 2023). Yet, these studies often approach economic mobility, trafficking, border insecurity, and governance deficiencies as separate thematic concerns. As a result, the interconnected nature of these dynamic and the way they converge in women's everyday border experiences remains insufficiently theorized. In particular, limited attention has been given to how economic precarity, institutional corruption, entrenched socio-cultural norms, and regional instability operate simultaneously to shape women's lived mobility realities in borderland spaces. Women's cross-border movement does not occur within isolated policy domains; rather, it unfolds at the intersection of livelihood strategies, administrative power structures, community expectations, and shifting security environments. Without an integrative analytical framework, these overlapping influences risk being examined in fragmented ways that obscure the cumulative and layered character of insecurity.

Furthermore, while feminist mobility scholarship has been instrumental in highlighting women's agency, spatial inequality, and transport injustice, it often emphasizes questions of access, infrastructure, and spatial exclusion without fully situating these concerns within broader debates on human security. Core human security principles, freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the right to live with dignity (UNDP, 1994) are highly relevant to women's border experiences, yet they are not consistently mobilized as an overarching analytical lens. Similarly, feminist security scholarship has critiqued state-centric models of protection (Hudson, 2005), but the integration of gendered mobility analysis with multidimensional human security frameworks remains underdeveloped. Adopting a human security perspective offers a means of bridging this divide. By shifting the focus from territorial control and state sovereignty to individual wellbeing, the human security approach integrates economic, personal, community, and political dimensions of insecurity within a single framework. This multidimensional orientation is particularly well suited to borderland contexts, where mobility generates both opportunity and risk. It enables a more holistic understanding of how women's cross-border movement can simultaneously enhance economic agency and expose them to structured vulnerabilities embedded in governance systems, informal economies, and socio-cultural hierarchies. This article contributes to the existing literature by reconceptualizing gendered mobility in West African borderlands as a comprehensive human security issue. Rather than treating informal trade, corruption, trafficking, and social norms as isolated variables, it situates them within an integrated analytical model that captures their interdependence. In doing so, it advances feminist mobility scholarship by embedding it within a broader human security framework and offers a regionally grounded analysis of how ECOWAS integration processes shape both empowerment

and precarity. Through this synthesis, the study provides a theoretically cohesive and contextually sensitive account of the layered realities that define women's cross-border mobility in West Africa.

2.0 GENDER MOBILITY AND BORDERLANDS SECURITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of gender mobility has evolved from feminist critiques of transport planning and spatial governance that historically overlooked women's lived experiences. It integrates two analytically linked dimensions: gender and mobility. Gender refers to socially produced roles, norms, and power hierarchies that structure everyday life and influence access to resources, authority, and autonomy (Lehmann, 2020; UN Women, 2022). These socially embedded expectations shape who moves, how they move, and under what conditions. Feminist scholars have therefore interrogated how mobility systems reproduce or challenge gendered inequalities, generating an expanding body of research that foregrounds women's spatial experiences (Uteng & Lucas, 2018). Mobility, in its broadest interpretation, encompasses the movement of individuals across geographical space and the physical and institutional infrastructures that enable or regulate such movement. This includes transport networks, border posts, regulatory frameworks, and administrative systems that facilitate or constrain circulation (Sustainable Mobility for All, 2019; World Bank, 2020). When gender is brought into this framework, mobility becomes a lens through which to analyse how infrastructure design, governance practices, and social norms differently shape women's and men's movement patterns. Gender mobility research thus examines travel behaviour, safety perceptions, economic motivations, caregiving responsibilities, and the socio-political environments within which mobility occurs (Lehmann, 2020; Uteng & Lucas, 2018).

Within feminist scholarship, gender mobility has become a significant area of inquiry because mainstream transport systems often fail to reflect women's specific needs and constraints. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that women experience distinctive barriers related to personal security, cost burdens, limited accessibility, and inadequate facilities (International Transport Forum [ITF], 2021; UN Women, 2022). Harassment in public transport, disproportionate transport expenses relative to income, poorly lit terminals, lack of sanitation facilities, and route designs that neglect caregiving travel patterns all contribute to gendered mobility disadvantages. Although these challenges vary by context, they remain a persistent feature of global mobility inequality (World Bank, 2020; ITF, 2021). In African contexts, particularly in developing economies, gender disparities in mobility have attracted increasing policy and scholarly attention. Deep-rooted cultural norms, unequal access to financial capital, and male-dominated institutional structures continue to restrict women's spatial autonomy (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019; African Development Bank [AfDB], 2018). These structural

constraints have prompted calls for gender-responsive transport policies and critical reassessments of infrastructure development paradigms that implicitly assume gender neutrality (Uteng & Lucas, 2018; World Bank, 2020). Beyond questions of infrastructure and planning, mobility also intersects with security concerns. Movement across space inherently involves exposure to varying degrees of risk, depending on distance, route conditions, and political context. In fragile or conflict-affected regions, safe movement becomes central to broader human security debates (UNDP, 2022). Feminist researchers have therefore expanded gender mobility scholarship to incorporate analyses of violence, exploitation, and insecurity during transit, particularly in informal transport systems and borderland spaces (UN Women, 2022; IOM, 2023).

Historically, women's mobility was more restricted than men's due to entrenched gender divisions of labour and social expectations that confined women largely to domestic spheres. However, economic restructuring and livelihood pressures have increased women's engagement in income-generating activities requiring regular movement. Across Africa, women now play prominent roles in agriculture, service sectors, petty trade, and cross-border commerce (World Bank, 2020; ILO, 2019). This shift has intensified demand for reliable transport and border infrastructure, while simultaneously revealing systemic shortcomings in mobility governance. Despite women's expanding participation in economic mobility, transport systems frequently remain poorly aligned with their needs. Women disproportionately rely on overcrowded, informal, and underregulated transport services, environments where harassment and abuse are more prevalent (ITF, 2021). In rural regions, poor road networks and long travel distances particularly affect pregnant women, small-scale traders, and those transporting agricultural produce. Limited rural infrastructure across Sub-Saharan Africa continues to constrain women's access to markets, healthcare, and educational opportunities, thereby reinforcing economic marginalization (World Bank, 2020; AfDB, 2018). These disparities are especially pronounced among rural women and informal traders. Many must traverse long distances on foot before accessing motorized transport, often carrying goods for sale. In urban contexts, mobility concerns shift toward safety, affordability, sanitation, and route mismatches that fail to reflect women's multi-stop travel patterns shaped by caregiving and household responsibilities (ITF, 2021; UN Women, 2022). Research consistently shows that women's travel behaviours differ from men's due to their overlapping domestic and economic roles.

The gendered dimensions of mobility become even more complex within West African borderlands. Borders in the region are frequently described as porous and unevenly governed, creating spaces where formal and informal systems coexist (Iwuoha & Doevenspeck, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023). Such environments often facilitate smuggling, trafficking, and the movement of armed groups (Okunade et al., 2021). For women engaged in informal cross-

border trade, these borderlands function simultaneously as spaces of economic opportunity and heightened vulnerability. Growing collaboration among criminal networks and armed actors across poorly monitored borders has intensified insecurity in several West African corridors (UNODC, 2022). Women operating outside formal regulatory systems particularly petty traders, face elevated risks because they often lack documentation, legal protection, and institutional support (Sarkingobir, 2014; Ubba Koderu, 2020). In addition to general threats such as theft and extortion, women encounter gender-specific risks, including sexual exploitation, coercion, forced labour, and trafficking. Although insecurity affects both men and women, evidence suggests that women are disproportionately exposed to sexual violence and trafficking-related abuses during cross-border movement (UNODC, 2022; UN Women, 2022). These patterns are rooted in broader structural inequalities, including economic dependency, limited access to information, and weak enforcement of protective legislation.

Policy responses aimed at enhancing women's economic participation and mobility have expanded in recent years. Nevertheless, progress remains uneven across geographic contexts. Urban centres have seen more visible gender equality interventions, while rural and peripheral border communities often continue to experience institutional neglect (Bisong, 2019; IOM, 2023). Women involved in small-scale cross-border trade remain among the most vulnerable groups due to poverty, informality, and limited state presence. Collectively, the literature demonstrates that gendered mobility in West Africa is shaped by an intricate interplay of social norms, livelihood imperatives, infrastructure gaps, and regional insecurity. While women's engagement in cross-border movement has grown substantially, the structural conditions governing their mobility continue to reproduce inequality and vulnerability. Addressing these intersecting challenges requires integrated policy approaches that link gender-responsive transport planning, border governance reform, security sector accountability, and protections for informal economic actors.

3.0 GENDER MOBILITY IN WEST AFRICA BORDERLANDS

Gendered mobility across West African border regions continues to be shaped by deeply rooted structural inequalities, socio-cultural hierarchies, and institutional shortcomings. Recent empirical and policy-oriented scholarship confirms that women moving along major regional corridors particularly those connecting Ghana, Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria face disproportionately restrictive conditions compared to their male counterparts (Afolayan & Adepoju, 2024; Yusuff, 2014). Field-based investigations at strategic crossing points such as the Nigeria–Benin Seme-Cotonou border consistently document experiences of harassment, intimidation, extortion, and gender-based mistreatment involving border personnel (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2017; Okeke & Salami, 2025; Yusuff, 2014). These recurring patterns are closely linked to inadequate gender-sensitive infrastructure, weak accountability and

grievance mechanisms, and the absence of inclusive mobility governance systems capable of protecting vulnerable travelers (Odufuwa, 2008; Sustainable Mobility for All, 2019; UN Women, 2024). Women participating in informal cross-border commerce face particularly acute vulnerabilities. Evidence indicates that female traders are frequently exposed to arbitrary levies, prolonged clearance delays, confiscation of merchandise, theft, and opaque administrative procedures that intensify both economic losses and psychological stress (George et al., 2017; Mensah & Traoré, 2024). Their precarious position is further compounded by limited access to formal banking systems, credit facilities, insurance schemes, and legal literacy resources, which collectively heighten susceptibility to exploitation (Uteng & Turner, 2019; World Bank, 2025). More recent assessments highlight the role of digital marginalization and insufficient knowledge of cross-border documentation processes in increasing exposure to trafficking schemes and fraudulent intermediaries, particularly among rural women traders (Ikuteyijo, 2020; ECOWAS Commission, 2024).

Beyond commercial mobility, women's cross-border movements for employment, education, and professional development have expanded considerably in recent years. While earlier literature emphasized women's vulnerability in migration processes, emerging demographic data point toward a sustained feminization of migration within the ECOWAS region (Bisong, 2019; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). Women now constitute nearly half of intra-regional migrants, with countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger recording female migration rates that surpass those of men (Bisong, 2019; African Development Bank [AfDB], 2018). Scholars attribute this shift to improvements in girls' educational attainment, expanding labor market integration, and evolving socio-economic aspirations (AfDB, 2018; Prozesky & Beaudry, 2019; UNDESA, 2024). As a result, motivations for women's mobility have diversified significantly, encompassing career advancement, higher education, entrepreneurship, and personal autonomy, alongside longstanding drivers such as family reunification and subsistence trade (Bisong, 2019; ILO, 2024). Notwithstanding these encouraging trends, persistent structural and institutional barriers continue to constrain women's mobility experiences. Contemporary evaluations report ongoing difficulties in securing travel documentation, discriminatory treatment within host communities, heightened reproductive health risks, and exposure to sexual exploitation (Bisong, 2019; UN Women, 2025). Although normative regional instruments including the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration (2008) and the ECOWAS Gender and Migration Framework and Plan of Action (2015) establish formal protections, significant implementation deficits undermine their effectiveness (Olga, 2013; ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Governance reviews conducted in recent years emphasize shortcomings in cross-national data harmonization, insufficient gender-disaggregated statistics, weak complaint and redress systems, and entrenched corruption within border management institutions (African Union, 2024; World Bank, 2025). In certain contexts, patriarchal norms continue to shape women's

access to passports and official documentation, effectively restricting the practical realization of free movement rights (African Partnership Forum, 2007; Afolayan & Adepoju, 2024).

Simultaneously, the broader security environment of West African borderlands has become increasingly unstable. The intensification of armed insurgencies, the expansion of transnational militant networks, and the proliferation of illicit arms particularly across the Nigeria–Niger–Chad axis have amplified risks associated with cross-border movement (Okunade et al., 2021; United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS], 2025). Although regional security mechanisms and arms control initiatives were designed to bolster collective stability, recent analyses indicate continued circulation of small arms and persistent insecurity along several border corridors (Alusala, 2018; African Union, 2024). These dynamics disproportionately affect women, especially those engaged in informal trade or rural migration who traverse poorly secured routes. Reports of gender-based violence, abduction, coercion, and forced exploitation by extremist actors remain pressing concerns in fragile border zones (Hahonou, 2016; UN Women, 2025). Infrastructural deficiencies further compound these vulnerabilities. Research published between 2024 and 2025 underscores that inadequate transport connectivity, unsafe transit environments, insufficient market facilities, limited childcare support, and poor sanitation infrastructure significantly constrain the productivity, safety, and wellbeing of women participating in informal cross-border economies (Mensah & Traoré, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Persistent cultural norms restricting women’s independent mobility, coupled with income disparities and the high cost of transportation, continue to reinforce systemic inequality across the sub-region (Uteng & Turner, 2019; UNDESA, 2024). Taken together, the evidence indicates that although women’s cross-border mobility in West Africa has grown in scale and diversified in purpose, it remains embedded within enduring socio-cultural constraints, governance weaknesses, infrastructural limitations, and escalating security threats. The continued prevalence of harassment, documentation barriers, corruption, and insecurity demonstrates that policy frameworks alone are insufficient in the absence of effective enforcement, gender-responsive border governance reforms, sustained infrastructure investment, and coordinated regional security strategies (African Union, 2024; UN Women, 2025; World Bank, 2025)

4.0 THE FEMINIZATION OF MIGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

The increasing feminization of migration within West Africa represents a profound demographic and socio-economic transformation in intra-regional mobility. Earlier migration literature frequently depicted women as secondary migrants either accompanying male relatives or occupying marginal, highly vulnerable positions within migration systems. Contemporary data, however, reveal a markedly different reality. Women now account for approximately half of all intra-regional migrants within West Africa, and in countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger, female migration rates surpass those of men (Bisong, 2019; International Labour Organization

[ILO], 2024). This evolution signifies not merely a numerical increase in women's participation in migration flows but also a substantive shift in women's agency, motivations, and socio-economic roles within ECOWAS mobility systems (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2024). Recent scholarship (2024–2025) underscores that this feminization is closely connected to structural transformations in education, labor markets, entrepreneurship ecosystems, and evolving gender norms across the sub-region (African Union, 2024; World Bank, 2025). These interrelated drivers are discussed below.

4.1 Access to Education

One of the most influential factors contributing to increased female mobility is improved access to formal education. Over the past decade, policy initiatives aimed at promoting girls' education have led to notable increases in female enrollment at both secondary and tertiary levels (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2018; UNDESA, 2024). Enhanced educational attainment has broadened women's professional aspirations and increased their participation in regional academic exchange, skilled labor migration, and professional mobility. Recent regional evaluations suggest that women with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in voluntary and opportunity-driven migration, including professional advancement and postgraduate study, rather than purely survival-based or subsistence-oriented movement (ILO, 2024; UN Women, 2025). Education strengthens employability while simultaneously improving knowledge of migration regulations, documentation requirements, and cross-border legal frameworks (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). As a result, female migration among educated populations increasingly reflects proactive career planning and strategic life choices rather than reactive coping mechanisms.

4.2 Increased Labor Market Participation

The feminization of migration is also deeply intertwined with expanding female labor force participation across West Africa. Structural economic shifts including urbanization, service-sector expansion, and the growth of agribusiness and informal economies have generated labor demand in sectors where women are strongly represented, such as hospitality, domestic services, petty trade, agro-processing, and small-scale manufacturing (World Bank, 2025; ILO, 2024). The ECOWAS free movement framework has facilitated women's access to regional labor corridors, enabling migration toward comparatively stable or economically dynamic neighboring countries (African Union, 2024). Wage differentials, market access, and employment diversification have strengthened the economic logic of cross-border migration. Moreover, remittances from female migrants now represent a significant source of household income and contribute to poverty reduction strategies across the sub-region (UNDESA, 2024). However, while women's labor participation has expanded, occupational segmentation persists. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in informal, low-wage, and precarious employment categories

lacking social protection and labor safeguards (UN Women, 2025). Thus, increased participation in labor mobility enhances economic agency while simultaneously exposing women to structural insecurities embedded within informal employment systems

4.3 Entrepreneurial Aspirations and Transnational Commerce

Entrepreneurship has become a defining dimension of female migration in West Africa. While informal cross-border trade remains central to women's economic engagement, recent patterns demonstrate increasing diversification into small and medium enterprises (SMEs), agribusiness value chains, and digital commercial platforms (World Bank, 2025; ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Regional trade liberalization, combined with improved communication technologies, has enabled women to establish and expand transnational trading networks beyond traditional subsistence markets. Access to microfinance programs, cooperative associations, rotating savings schemes, and mobile banking services has further strengthened women's capacity to operate across borders (AfDB, 2018; UN Women, 2024). In this context, entrepreneurial migration increasingly reflects calculated economic positioning, movement undertaken to access supply chains, consumer markets, and regional business opportunities. Nevertheless, persistent structural obstacles such as limited collateral access, elevated transportation costs, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and corruption at border checkpoint continue to constrain the full potential of women's entrepreneurial mobility (African Union, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Despite these impediments, entrepreneurial ambition remains a powerful engine of female migration flows within the ECOWAS region.

4.4 Socio-Economic Autonomy and Changing Gender Norms

Underlying these structural drivers is a broader transformation in socio-cultural attitudes toward women's economic participation and spatial mobility. Urbanization, delayed marriage patterns, rising female educational attainment, and evolving gender norms have increased social acceptance of independent female migration (Afolayan & Adepoju, 2024; UNDESA, 2024). Women increasingly migrate as principal income earners and independent decision-makers rather than solely as dependents within male-dominated household structures. Recent gender-focused studies emphasize that female migrants often exercise significant authority over remittance allocation, investment decisions, and household welfare priorities (UN Women, 2025). These patterns signal a gradual reconfiguration of intra-household power relations and broader inclusion of women in economic and public domains. However, this autonomy remains uneven across geographic and socio-economic contexts. Rural women frequently encounter more restrictive cultural norms, documentation challenges, and limited access to institutional support mechanisms (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Consequently, while socio-economic autonomy is expanding, it remains shaped by class disparities, spatial inequalities, and governance structures.

5.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HUMAN SECURITY AND GENDERED MOBILITY IN WEST AFRICA

The idea of human security gained international prominence with the publication of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report in 1994. This landmark report fundamentally reframed security discourse by shifting attention away from the traditional emphasis on territorial defense and state sovereignty toward the protection of individuals and communities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994). Rather than defining security solely in military or geopolitical terms, the human security approach prioritizes three interconnected freedoms: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity. Human security is multidimensional in scope. It encompasses economic, personal, political, community, food, health, and environmental security, recognizing that threats to wellbeing often arise from structural conditions rather than armed conflict alone. Contemporary scholarship and policy analysis have further refined the framework to address emerging global challenges, including migration governance, climate change, transnational crime, and gender inequality (African Union, 2024; United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security [UNTFHS], 2024; World Bank, 2025). Within migration contexts, human security offers a lens through which mobility can be assessed not merely in terms of legal status or border control but in relation to dignity, safety, and equitable opportunity. In West Africa, the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement seeks to promote regional integration by facilitating mobility across member states. Yet, a human security perspective reveals that the existence of legal mobility rights does not automatically ensure safe or equitable movement. For women in particular, formal recognition of free movement often contrasts sharply with lived experiences characterized by insecurity, discrimination, and institutional neglect (ECOWAS Commission, 2024; UN Women, 2025). Consequently, adopting a human security framework enables a more comprehensive analysis of gendered mobility in borderland environments.

Feminist security studies have long critiqued conventional security paradigms for marginalizing women's experiences and privileging state-centric concerns over everyday vulnerabilities (Hudson, 2005). Integrating gender into human security analysis exposes how structural inequalities rooted in patriarchy, economic marginalization, and institutional bias shape unequal access to protection, livelihoods, and justice (UN Women, 2024; World Bank, 2025). In the context of West African borderlands, women's cross-border mobility cannot be reduced to a technical matter of migration administration. Rather, it represents a complex security issue situated at the intersection of economic precarity, exposure to gender-based violence, corruption in border governance, and entrenched socio-cultural discrimination (African Union, 2024; UNTFHS, 2024). A gender-sensitive human security framework therefore positions women not as passive beneficiaries of migration policies but as rights-bearing individuals whose mobility experiences reflect broader power dynamics and governance structures. Applying the human

security framework to gendered cross-border mobility in West Africa involves examining several interconnected dimensions. Four dimensions economic, personal, community, and political security are particularly relevant to understanding women's lived experiences in borderland regions.

5.1 Economic Security

Economic security, as conceptualized within the human security framework, refers to consistent and dependable access to income, meaningful employment, and sustainable livelihood opportunities that enable individuals to live with dignity and withstand economic shocks (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994; United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security [UNTFHS], 2024). In West African border regions, women's cross-border mobility is closely connected to these economic imperatives. For many women, migration is not simply a matter of movement across territory but a calculated strategy for survival and resilience in contexts marked by limited formal employment, unstable local economies, and recurring socio-economic uncertainty (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2024). Mobility, in this sense, operates both as a livelihood mechanism and as a household risk management strategy, allowing families to diversify income sources and reduce vulnerability to localized economic downturns.

Across rural and peri-urban communities in West Africa, informal cross-border trade remains one of the most significant economic activities undertaken by women. Female traders play a central role in the circulation of agricultural produce, processed foods, textiles, and household goods, often capitalizing on price differentials between neighboring countries within ECOWAS free movement corridors (African Union, 2024). The income generated from these activities is frequently directed toward essential household needs, including food provision, children's education, healthcare expenses, and housing improvements (ILO, 2024). Empirical assessments further indicate that remittances and trading profits earned by female migrants contribute meaningfully to poverty reduction and household stabilization, reinforcing women's economic relevance within family and community structures (UNDESA, 2024). As women increasingly manage income streams derived from cross-border activities, their participation strengthens intra-household bargaining power and enhances their role in financial decision-making processes (UN Women, 2024). Moreover, cross-border entrepreneurship has gradually expanded beyond subsistence trading to include small-scale agro-processing ventures, service provision, and engagement in regional value chains, reflecting a diversification of economic ambition and capability (World Bank, 2025).

Yet, while cross-border mobility opens pathways for economic agency, its outcomes remain uneven and frequently precarious. Women migrants are disproportionately concentrated in

informal, low-skilled, and labor-intensive sectors characterized by unstable earnings, absence of contractual protections, and minimal access to social insurance mechanisms (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Informality exposes women to multiple layers of vulnerability, including market volatility, fluctuating exchange rates, seasonal production cycles, and disruptions in transportation networks. Without formal employment contracts, savings instruments, or reliable access to credit, women often lack the financial buffers necessary to absorb sudden economic shocks. Border governance practices further exacerbate these challenges. Reports of unofficial payments, arbitrary levies, prolonged clearance delays, and occasional confiscation of goods increase operational costs and erode already narrow profit margins (African Union, 2024; ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Given that women traders frequently operate with smaller capital reserves than men, such cumulative financial pressures intensify economic fragility.

From a human security standpoint, these patterns reveal that economic participation alone does not guarantee economic security. The principle of freedom from want implies not only the availability of income but also its reliability, sustainability, and protection from systemic exploitation (UNDP, 1994). Where women's livelihoods remain vulnerable to corruption, regulatory opacity, and structural instability, economic empowerment remains incomplete. Structural barriers further complicate women's pursuit of economic stability. Despite gradual progress in digital financial inclusion and mobile banking platforms, gender disparities in access to formal financial services persist throughout the region (World Bank, 2025). Many women encounter constraints linked to limited property ownership rights, collateral requirements, and lower levels of formal education, all of which restrict access to credit and opportunities for capital expansion (African Union, 2024). These financial exclusion patterns constrain business growth and limit women's capacity to transition from small-scale subsistence activities to more secure and formalized enterprises. Infrastructural shortcomings also play a critical role. Poor road networks, inadequate storage facilities, insufficient market infrastructure, and limited access to electricity and sanitation services directly reduce productivity and increase transaction costs (UN Women, 2024). Such deficits diminish competitiveness within regional markets and undermine income stability.

The broader security climate in fragile border zones adds another layer of economic uncertainty. Armed insurgencies, banditry, and localized instability disrupt trade corridors, inflate transportation costs, and discourage investment (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS], 2025). In such contexts, women's economic mobility becomes deeply intertwined with regional security dynamics. Market access, profitability, and livelihood sustainability are shaped not only by entrepreneurial capacity but also by the stability of transit routes and the predictability of governance systems. Taken together, women's cross-border economic activities in West Africa illustrate both resilience and vulnerability. Migration and

trade enhance agency and household income generation; yet persistent informality, financial exclusion, infrastructural deficits, and insecurity constrain the realization of durable economic security. Within the human security framework, addressing these vulnerabilities requires more than facilitating mobility; it demands structural reforms that strengthen financial inclusion, formal protections, infrastructural development, and governance accountability to ensure that economic participation translates into genuine resilience and dignity (UNDP, 1994; UNTFHS, 2024).

5.2 Personal Security

Within the broader human security paradigm, personal security refers to protection against physical harm, coercion, exploitation, and violations of bodily integrity. In the context of West African borderlands, this dimension of security remains particularly fragile and significantly shapes women's cross-border mobility experiences. Although ECOWAS mobility frameworks formally guarantee the right to free movement across member states, the everyday realities encountered by women at border checkpoints often diverge sharply from these legal commitments. Reports continue to highlight experiences of harassment, intimidation, and gender-based mistreatment within both formal and informal crossing spaces (African Union, 2024; ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Empirical evidence consistently indicates that female traders and migrants are subjected to verbal abuse, intrusive and arbitrary searches, extended questioning or detention, and demands for unofficial payments during border procedures (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2017; Okeke & Salami, 2025). These practices are rarely isolated incidents; rather, they are embedded within broader systems characterized by institutional corruption, weak oversight, and insufficient accountability within border governance structures (World Bank, 2025). Women operating within informal cross-border trade networks are especially vulnerable because their economic activities frequently fall outside formal regulatory protections. As a result, when abuses occur, their access to legal redress or institutional complaint mechanisms is often limited or ineffective (African Union, 2024). From a gender-sensitive human security perspective, these encounters extend beyond bureaucratic inefficiencies or procedural irregularities. They represent infringements upon personal dignity, autonomy, and bodily integrity. Research demonstrates that coercive practices at borders may include threats to confiscate goods, exploitative negotiations linked to women's financial vulnerability, and instances of sexual harassment (UN Women, 2025). The normalization of such interactions reinforces unequal power hierarchies between state authorities and female migrants, effectively transforming border spaces ostensibly designed to regulate mobility into environments of insecurity.

The broader regional security landscape further intensifies risks to women's personal safety. Border areas in West Africa, particularly along the Nigeria–Niger–Chad axis, are marked by

insurgent movements, cross-border militant networks, and the widespread circulation of small arms (Okunade et al., 2021; United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS], 2025). Limited state presence and fragile governance structures have allowed trafficking networks, armed banditry, and extremist groups to operate within these transnational corridors (African Union, 2024). Women traveling through such regions whether for commerce, employment, or family reunification face elevated risks of abduction, trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence (UN Women, 2025). For rural women who depend on informal transport routes and lightly monitored crossing points, geographic isolation compounds vulnerability. In these contexts, personal security risks are not episodic or incidental; they are deeply embedded within systemic governance weaknesses and chronic regional instability. Displacement linked to insurgency and communal violence has further complicated mobility dynamics. Women fleeing conflict or insecurity often transition from forced displacement into precarious migration trajectories, encountering new forms of exploitation during transit. These may include unsafe accommodation arrangements, limited access to healthcare or psychosocial services, and exposure to predatory intermediaries (IOM, 2017; UN Women, 2025). Such layered vulnerability illustrates the interconnected nature of security dimensions personal insecurity cannot be separated from economic precarity, political exclusion, or community-level marginalization.

Viewed through a human security lens, the persistence of violence and exploitation within border regions reflects systemic shortcomings in institutional protection mechanisms. Although ECOWAS frameworks articulate rights-based mobility principles, implementation gaps, weak monitoring systems, and inadequate grievance redress channels undermine the practical realization of these commitments (ECOWAS Commission, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Strengthening personal security therefore requires comprehensive institutional reform rather than solely enhanced surveillance. Effective measures must include anti-corruption enforcement, gender-responsive training for border officials, transparent complaint procedures, and cross-border accountability systems. Essentially, ensuring women's personal security in West African borderlands demands a transition from migration-control-centered governance toward a protection-oriented approach. The human security framework insists that mobility should enhance, rather than threaten, individual dignity and safety. Without substantive reforms addressing both institutional misconduct and the broader climate of regional insecurity, the normative promise of free movement will remain undermined by persistent threats to women's physical integrity and human rights.

5.3 Community security

Community security, within the human security framework, concerns protection from social exclusion, discriminatory norms, and harmful cultural practices that undermine individuals'

dignity, identity, and sense of belonging (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994; United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security [UNTFHS], 2024). In West African border regions, this dimension of security is closely linked to entrenched gender relations and socio-cultural expectations that shape women's access to mobility. While regional and national policies increasingly endorse gender equality, deeply rooted patriarchal structures continue to influence how women's movement particularly independent cross-border travel is perceived and regulated within communities (UN Women, 2024). In many rural and semi-urban contexts, women's social roles remain strongly associated with caregiving, domestic responsibilities, and localized economic activities. When women travel independently for trade, wage employment, or education, such mobility may be viewed as deviating from normative gender expectations. These perceptions can generate social scrutiny, reputational risks, or informal sanctions that discourage independent migration (African Union, 2024). Even where legal frameworks protect mobility rights, community-level attitudes may constrain women's practical ability to exercise those rights. Thus, the gap between formal entitlements and social legitimacy becomes a significant barrier to inclusive mobility.

Indirect constraints further complicate women's community security. In some contexts, customary or bureaucratic practices restrict women's access to identity documentation, land ownership, inheritance rights, or financial resources necessary to support cross-border travel (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Although ECOWAS protocols guarantee freedom of movement across member states, the realization of these rights often depends on household-level approval, access to resources, and community endorsement. Rural women are particularly disadvantaged due to lower literacy rates, limited access to migration information channels, and reduced social networks capable of facilitating safe mobility (UN Women, 2024). These intersecting disadvantages illustrate how community-level norms and structural inequalities operate together to limit women's autonomy.

From a human security perspective, genuine mobility rights require both formal recognition and social acceptance. When women's movement is framed as socially disruptive or morally questionable, it undermines their dignity and perpetuates gender hierarchies. Moreover, exclusionary practices at the community level weaken the broader integrative objectives of ECOWAS by sustaining localized inequalities that contradict regional commitments to inclusion and equal opportunity (African Union, 2024). Community insecurity is therefore not limited to overt discrimination; it also encompasses subtle forms of social marginalization that restrict participation in economic and civic life. Such exclusion extends into economic networks and labor segmentation. Women traders often encounter barriers to entry in male-dominated transport unions, trade associations, and cross-border business networks. Exclusion from these structures reduces access to information, collective bargaining mechanisms, and informal protection

systems that facilitate safer and more profitable trade (World Bank, 2025). As a result, community-level discrimination reinforces economic vulnerability and limits women's capacity for upward mobility within regional markets. Addressing community security in borderland contexts therefore requires more than policy reform; it demands sustained efforts to transform gender norms through education, public awareness campaigns, and inclusive community dialogue (UNTFHS, 2024). Without confronting socio-cultural constraints, progressive legal frameworks risk remaining formally robust but socially ineffective.

5.4 Political Security

Political security, another core dimension of the human security framework, concerns protection from institutional abuse, arbitrary governance, corruption, and violations of fundamental rights (UNDP, 1994). In West African borderlands, political security is closely tied to the ability of national and regional institutions to implement free movement protocols in a transparent, accountable, and equitable manner. While ECOWAS frameworks formally endorse gender equality and guarantee the right to mobility across member states, practical implementation remains uneven (African Union, 2024; ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Weak oversight mechanisms, inconsistent enforcement of regional agreements, and limited monitoring capacity contribute to governance gaps that disproportionately affect women. Corruption within border management systems represents one of the most persistent threats to political security. Reports of unofficial payments, discriminatory inspections, and selective application of regulations reflect systemic governance weaknesses that erode public trust (World Bank, 2025). Women operating within informal economic sectors are particularly disadvantaged in such contexts. Limited financial capital, constrained legal literacy, and fear of retaliation reduce their capacity to challenge misconduct or pursue justice (African Union, 2024). Consequently, political insecurity manifests not only through overt rights violations but also through everyday administrative practices that reproduce inequality.

The absence of reliable gender-disaggregated migration data further undermines effective governance. Without comprehensive statistics on women's cross-border mobility patterns, economic contributions, and exposure to risk, policy interventions remain fragmented and insufficiently targeted (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Weak grievance mechanisms exacerbate this challenge. Where complaint systems are inaccessible, opaque, or non-responsive, victims of border-related abuses face significant obstacles in seeking redress (World Bank, 2025). Such institutional deficiencies limit accountability and perpetuate cycles of impunity. From a human security standpoint, strengthening political security requires governance systems that are transparent, rights-based, and responsive to gender-specific vulnerabilities. This entails robust anti-corruption enforcement, gender-sensitive capacity building for border officials, accessible and confidential complaint channels, harmonized data collection across ECOWAS states, and

independent monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with regional commitments (African Union, 2024; UNTFHS, 2024). The persistent divergence between the normative vision of free movement and the lived experiences of women in borderlands underscores structural fragility within institutional frameworks. Political insecurity in these contexts reflects not isolated administrative failures but systemic governance weaknesses that directly affect women's safety, dignity, and ability to exercise their mobility rights.

Conclusively, the ECOWAS free movement regime embodies an ambitious vision of regional integration and economic cooperation. Yet empirical evidence suggests persistent discrepancies between policy frameworks and the everyday realities of women navigating border spaces (ECOWAS Commission, 2024; UN Women, 2025). Human security theory offers a conceptual bridge between normative commitments and lived experiences by emphasizing prevention, inclusion, and structural transformation. Recent regional policy reviews advocate for comprehensive reforms, including gender-responsive border management systems, strengthened anti-corruption enforcement, expanded social protection programs, improved data harmonization, and enhanced security sector accountability (African Union, 2024; UNTFHS, 2024; World Bank, 2025). These measures are essential for translating formal mobility rights into meaningful human security outcomes for women. Summarily, applying a gendered human security framework to West African borderlands reveals that mobility is simultaneously a source of opportunity and vulnerability. Legal integration alone is insufficient. Ensuring that women experience freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom with dignity requires coordinated institutional reform, socio-cultural transformation, and sustained investment in inclusive governance.

6.0 NIGERIA–BENIN (SEME–COTONOU) CORRIDOR AS A CASE STUDY OF GENDERED MOBILITY AND HUMAN SECURITY

The Nigeria–Benin border at Seme–Cotonou stands as one of the busiest and most economically strategic crossing points in West Africa. Situated along the Lagos–Abidjan highway one of the principal arteries of ECOWAS regional integration, it serves as a vital corridor for intra-regional trade, labor mobility, and informal commercial exchange. Its geographic and economic centrality makes it an important empirical site for examining how gendered mobility intersects with human security in borderland contexts. The Seme–Cotonou axis encapsulates the promises and contradictions of regional free movement, revealing how legal mobility regimes interact with everyday realities shaped by informality, governance practices, and socio-cultural norms.

Economically, the corridor facilitates substantial flows of both formal and informal trade. Agricultural produce, processed foods, textiles, petroleum products, and household commodities circulate daily across this border. Women constitute a significant proportion of the small-scale

traders operating within this transnational marketplace (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2017; World Bank, 2025). For many women residing in southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin, cross-border trade through Seme represents not a supplementary activity but a primary source of livelihood. By leveraging price variations between the Nigerian and Beninese markets, women engage in frequent circular migration, sometimes crossing weekly or multiple times within a single month (African Union, 2024). Income derived from these activities sustains household food consumption, supports children's educational expenses, and strengthens local economic circulation (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). However, the economic vitality of the corridor is deeply embedded in informality. High compliance costs, complex customs procedures, and limited access to formal trade documentation discourage many women from operating within official customs regimes (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Consequently, while the corridor generates economic opportunity, it simultaneously exposes women to precarious working conditions characterized by income instability and vulnerability to exploitative practices. Informality may facilitate entry into cross-border commerce, but it also reduces access to legal protections and formal dispute resolution mechanisms.

Personal security concerns are particularly pronounced along the Seme–Cotonou corridor. Over time, the border has developed a reputation for unofficial levies, harassment, and coercive enforcement practices. Investigations and field reports have documented repeated instances in which female traders experience verbal intimidation, arbitrary inspections, extended clearance delays, and demands for informal payments by customs or immigration officials (IOM, 2017; Okeke & Salami, 2025). These interactions disproportionately affect women involved in small-scale trade because their limited capital reserves and weaker bargaining positions constrain their ability to resist or negotiate. The threat of having goods confiscated or delayed often compels compliance with unofficial demands (African Union, 2024). Viewed through a human security lens, such practices are not merely bureaucratic inconveniences but infringements on dignity and bodily autonomy. They undermine the principle of freedom from fear central to the human security framework (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994). Moreover, the informal status of much cross-border commerce at Seme reduces access to formal grievance channels. Women who experience harassment may hesitate to report misconduct due to fear of retaliation, financial loss, or prolonged bureaucratic entanglement (World Bank, 2025). These dynamics highlight institutional weaknesses within border governance systems and reveal how gaps in accountability translate into everyday insecurity.

Community security considerations further shape women's experiences along the corridor. In many communities near Seme and Badagry, cross-border trade is an established and normalized economic practice. Nonetheless, women's independent mobility continues to intersect with prevailing patriarchal expectations regarding gender roles and caregiving responsibilities (UN

Women, 2024). Female traders often navigate a dual burden, balancing domestic obligations with the demands of frequent cross-border travel. For unmarried or younger women, repeated independent mobility may invite social scrutiny or reputational questioning within conservative community contexts (African Union, 2024). At the same time, women traders have developed adaptive strategies to mitigate risks. Informal solidarity networks—including rotating savings schemes, cooperative associations, and trader groups—serve as mechanisms for sharing information about enforcement patterns, pooling resources, and providing mutual support (World Bank, 2025). These community-based networks contribute to resilience and partial protection; however, they cannot fully substitute for formal institutional safeguards capable of ensuring consistent and equitable treatment at border crossings.

Political security challenges are equally evident along the Seme–Cotonou corridor. While ECOWAS protocols guarantee visa-free mobility for member state citizens, implementation frequently falls short of normative commitments (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). The corridor vividly illustrates the tension between regional integration objectives and national policy decisions. Nigeria’s 2019–2020 land border closure, for example, disrupted daily trade flows and significantly affected the livelihoods of female informal traders who depended on regular cross-border exchange (African Union, 2024). Such policy reversals exposed the fragility of mobility regimes and the vulnerability of women’s economic security to shifts in national political priorities. Corruption within customs and immigration service’s further complicates political security. Reports of inconsistent rule enforcement and discretionary practices erode confidence in governance institutions (World Bank, 2025). Additionally, the absence of harmonized gender-disaggregated trade and migration data limits policymakers’ capacity to design targeted interventions addressing women’s specific vulnerabilities along the corridor (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). From a human security perspective, political security requires governance structures that are transparent, accountable, and responsive to gendered realities. The Seme case demonstrates how institutional weaknesses can render legally guaranteed mobility rights conditional, negotiable, and unevenly applied.

Although Seme is geographically removed from the most conflict-affected Sahelian areas, broader regional insecurity influences its dynamics. Coastal West Africa has experienced growing concerns related to illicit trade, trafficking networks, and organized criminal activities operating along transnational routes (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS], 2025). Women engaged in informal trade may inadvertently encounter smuggling networks or become entangled in enforcement operations aimed at combating illicit flows (African Union, 2024). Furthermore, porous borders between Nigeria and Benin have historically been exploited by trafficking networks facilitating human trafficking and other forms of exploitation (UN Women, 2025). These intersecting risks underscore the interconnected nature

of economic, personal, community, and political security within borderland environments. The Seme–Cotonou corridor thus serves as a microcosm of broader regional dynamics, illustrating how gendered mobility unfolds within layered systems of opportunity and vulnerability. While the corridor enables economic agency and regional integration, persistent informality, governance deficits, and transnational insecurity continue to shape women’s experiences. A comprehensive human security approach therefore demands reforms that address institutional accountability, gender-responsive border management, and socio-cultural inclusion to ensure that mobility enhances rather than undermines women’s dignity and safety.

7.0 GHANA–TOGO (AFLAO) CORRIDOR AS A CASE STUDY OF GENDERED MOBILITY AND HUMAN SECURITY

The Ghana–Togo border at Aflao (Ghana) and Kodjoviakopé in Lomé (Togo) is one of the most vibrant and strategically important crossing points within the ECOWAS sub-region. Located along the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor, it functions as a major conduit for regional trade, labour circulation, and everyday cross-border commerce. Its high traffic volume and relatively integrated socio-cultural landscape make it an important comparative case for examining gendered mobility through a human security framework. While it shares similarities with the Nigeria–Benin (Seme–Cotonou) axis in terms of informal trade intensity and gendered participation, the Aflao corridor presents distinctive socio-political and cultural dynamics that enrich analysis of borderland mobility in West Africa.

Economically, the Aflao–Lomé corridor sustains dense and routine cross-border interactions. Women constitute a significant share of petty traders and small-scale merchants moving between Ghana and Togo on a daily basis (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023; World Bank, 2025). Goods commonly traded include food items, agricultural produce, processed commodities, second-hand clothing, and cosmetics. Traders strategically capitalize on currency differentials, variations in market demand, and price fluctuations between the Ghanaian cedi and the West African CFA franc zones. For many women in Ghana’s Volta Region and southern Togo, this cross-border commerce is not occasional but embedded in cyclical patterns of movement closely tied to household subsistence and income diversification strategies (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). The geographical proximity of Lomé’s major markets to Ghanaian consumers fosters an economically interdependent ecosystem in which mobility is routine and normalized under the ECOWAS free movement regime (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Despite this vibrancy, the majority of women’s economic participation along the corridor remains informal. Many traders lack official registration, standardized customs documentation, or access to structured trade facilitation programs. High administrative costs, bureaucratic complexity, and procedural opacity often incentivize informal transactions or negotiated arrangements at border checkpoints (African Union, 2024). From a human security

perspective, this informality produces a dual reality: mobility enhances income-generating opportunities and economic agency, yet it simultaneously exposes women to regulatory unpredictability, fluctuating earnings, and vulnerability to discretionary enforcement practices.

Personal security concerns at the Aflao border are shaped less by armed insurgency—given Ghana’s relative political stability—and more by everyday administrative interactions and institutional hierarchies. Women traders report recurring experiences of excessive scrutiny, prolonged inspections, verbal intimidation, and requests for informal payments by border personnel (IOM, 2023; UN Women, 2024). Such practices disproportionately affect those transporting perishable goods, as delays may result in financial loss. Although these interactions may not involve overt violence, they generate cumulative psychological stress and reinforce gendered asymmetries of power within mobility systems (World Bank, 2025). In addition to administrative pressures, the corridor has historically intersected with trafficking routes along the Gulf of Guinea coast. Despite strengthened enforcement initiatives, porous informal crossing points remain susceptible to exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022). Women and adolescent girls seeking employment opportunities in Lomé or Accra may encounter deceptive recruitment schemes that expose them to domestic servitude or commercial sexual exploitation (UN Women, 2025). From a human security standpoint, personal security threats in Aflao are embedded not only in overt criminality but also in normalized bureaucratic practices that compromise dignity and bodily autonomy.

Community security dynamics along the Ghana–Togo border are shaped by a distinctive feature: shared ethnic composition, particularly among Ewe communities whose kinship networks extend across the colonial-era boundary. These transnational social ties facilitate integration and render cross-border movement socially familiar rather than exceptional (African Union, 2024). For many women, daily mobility between Aflao and Lomé is embedded within familial, linguistic, and cultural continuity, reducing the perception of crossing as “international” migration. Nevertheless, patriarchal norms within these communities continue to influence gendered expectations regarding mobility and autonomy (UN Women, 2024). Women engaged in trade often negotiate a dual burden of economic activity and domestic caregiving responsibilities. Independent or prolonged travel may be subject to social scrutiny, particularly for younger or unmarried women. Additionally, market competition in densely populated commercial spaces can generate tensions, especially where informal traders lack formal association membership or institutional protection (World Bank, 2025). Exclusion from male-dominated trade unions or transport associations may reduce women’s access to information-sharing networks, collective bargaining mechanisms, and informal protection systems. Thus, even in a culturally integrated borderland, gender hierarchies mediate the degree to which women can exercise mobility rights without social constraint.

Political security considerations further illuminate the governance dimensions of the Aflao corridor. Ghana and Togo are both committed to ECOWAS free movement protocols, and Aflao is often portrayed as a relatively functional example of regional mobility implementation (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). However, operational inconsistencies remain evident. Female traders report variations in customs valuation procedures, inconsistent tariff assessments, and discretionary enforcement practices that create uncertainty and financial risk (African Union, 2024). The absence of harmonized cross-border trade documentation systems and limited gender-disaggregated data on mobility patterns hinder the design of targeted policy responses (World Bank, 2025). Although formal grievance mechanisms exist within both Ghanaian and Togolese administrative structures, informal traders often lack awareness of these channels or the legal literacy necessary to navigate them effectively. As a result, accountability gaps persist.

The vulnerability of women's economic security became particularly visible during public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Temporary border closures and movement restrictions severely disrupted daily cross-border trade flows, disproportionately affecting women whose livelihoods depend on high-frequency mobility (ILO, 2024). These episodes underscored the fragility of informal economic systems and highlighted how state-level decisions can rapidly undermine household-level resilience. Viewed through a human security lens, the Aflao–Lomé corridor demonstrates how governance quality, socio-cultural norms, and informal economic structures converge to shape women's lived mobility experiences. While the corridor benefits from relative political stability and strong cross-border cultural continuity, persistent informality, bureaucratic opacity, and gendered power imbalances continue to influence outcomes. The case illustrates that the realization of free movement rights depends not only on formal policy commitments but also on transparent administration, institutional accountability, and sustained efforts to address socio-cultural constraints. In this way, Aflao provides a nuanced example of how economic opportunity and structural vulnerability coexist within West African borderlands.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed gendered cross-border mobility in West African borderlands through a multidimensional human security framework, contending that women's movement within ECOWAS corridors simultaneously reflects expanding opportunity and entrenched structural vulnerability. Although regional integration policies particularly the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement have facilitated greater circulation of people, goods, and services, the everyday experiences of women at border crossings reveal a persistent divergence between formal policy aspirations and lived realities. By incorporating economic, personal, community, and political dimensions of security, this article demonstrates that gendered mobility cannot be fully understood through narrow sectoral perspectives or state-centered security paradigms. Instead, women's mobility unfolds within intersecting systems of informality, governance weaknesses,

socio-cultural hierarchies, and regional instability that collectively shape access to safety, dignity, and sustainable livelihoods. The ongoing feminization of migration across West Africa signals a profound socio-economic shift. Women have moved from peripheral roles to central positions within informal trade networks, regional labor markets, and transnational entrepreneurial systems. Expanded access to education, increased participation in labor markets, and evolving gender norms have strengthened women's agency within cross-border mobility regimes. Yet this agency remains embedded in unequal structural contexts. Economic insecurity persists due to informality, limited financial inclusion, inadequate infrastructure, and opaque regulatory systems. Simultaneously, exposure to harassment, corruption, trafficking risks, and institutional misconduct undermines personal and political security. At the community level, entrenched patriarchal norms continue to mediate the extent to which women can exercise mobility rights, underscoring that social acceptance is as crucial as legal entitlement.

The comparative examination of the Nigeria–Benin (Seme–Cotonou) and Ghana–Togo (Aflao) corridors illustrates how these layered dynamics manifest in distinct border environments. The Seme corridor highlights the convergence of informality, corruption, and broader regional insecurity, demonstrating how institutional fragility and transnational criminal activity intensify vulnerability. By contrast, the Aflao corridor benefits from relative political stability and shared cross-border ethnic ties, which moderate certain overt security risks. Nevertheless, discretionary administrative practices, informal trade dependence, and gendered power imbalances remain salient. Taken together, these cases reveal that even in comparatively stable settings, structural governance deficiencies and socio-cultural hierarchies reproduce everyday insecurity within mobility systems. Thus, cross-border movement remains both empowering and precarious. At a theoretical level, this study advances feminist mobility scholarship by situating gendered movement within the broader human security framework. While earlier research has foregrounded issues of spatial access, transport injustice, and women's agency, this analysis conceptualizes cross-border mobility as an integrated security concern encompassing freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the right to live with dignity. By redirecting analytical focus from border enforcement to lived experience, the human security lens exposes the interdependence of economic precarity, institutional corruption, social exclusion, and regional instability. This integrated approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how mobility regimes shape women's daily realities within borderland contexts.

The policy implications of this analysis are significant. Formal free movement provisions alone are insufficient without robust implementation, gender-sensitive administrative practices, and accountable governance structures. Enhancing human security in West African border regions requires coordinated and multidimensional reforms, including strengthened anti-corruption measures, gender-responsive training for border officials, accessible and confidential grievance

mechanisms, harmonized gender-disaggregated migration data systems, expanded financial inclusion strategies, improved border infrastructure, and community-based initiatives aimed at challenging restrictive socio-cultural norms. Absent such reforms, regional integration efforts risk perpetuating rather than dismantling structural inequalities. Essentially, gendered cross-border mobility in West Africa represents a critical intersection of regional integration, informal economic systems, and security governance. Women's growing participation in cross-border movement reflects resilience, adaptability, and transformative socio-economic change. However, the persistence of exploitation, harassment, and institutional shortcomings underscores ongoing structural vulnerabilities. A human security perspective makes clear that sustainable regional integration must prioritize individual wellbeing alongside economic cooperation. Ensuring that women can move safely, productively, and with dignity is fundamental not only to gender equality but also to broader goals of development, social cohesion, and long-term regional stability. Only through aligning normative commitments with institutional accountability and socio-cultural transformation can the promise of free movement translate into substantive human security outcomes for women across West Africa.

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