Navigating the Grey Zone: Illicit Sex and Cross-Border Trade in Nigeria-Benin Border Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of sexuality, informality, and border governance in the Nigeria–Benin border communities of Idiroko and Seme, focusing on how women traders negotiate access and authority within a system of everyday corruption. Grounded in feminist political economy, borderland theory, and the sociology of transactional sex, the study employed a qualitative design integrating historical, ethnographic, and feminist methodologies. Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with women traders, customs and immigration officials, and community members to explore how gendered power relations shape informal trade practices. Findings reveal that informal payments – monetary or sexual – have become normalised mechanisms for navigating bureaucratic barriers. Sexual negotiation, often strategic or survivalist, reflects both women's constrained agency and the pervasive impunity of male officials. These dynamics expose the border as a site of gendered governance, where legality and illegality are continuously negotiated through power, desire, and necessity. The study recommends gender-sensitive reforms in border management, the establishment of confidential reporting systems, and collective empowerment initiatives for women traders. It concludes that addressing sex-for-access practices requires structural, not moral, reform – one grounded in justice, accountability, and recognition of women's lived realities at Africa's borders.

Keywords: Transactional Sex; Cross-Border Trade; Idiroko; Seme; Nigeria; Benin Republic