Symposium V: The Economic Community of West African States in its Fifties – Looking Back, Look Forward - Unfinished Business of Gender Equality in ECOWAS

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Introduction

In an ever-growing quest for gender equality, it is quite common for scholars and researchers to overlook regional and sub-regional systems while prioritizing global institutions, particularly the United Nations, its specialized agencies, and other international human rights mechanisms. The limited attention given to regional bodies stems from their perceived lack of influence in implementing meaningful reforms compared to global institutions. Unbeknownst to many, regional systems, despite their marginalization, have developed contextually relevant, progressive policy documents and delivered consequential legal

judgments on women's rights. However, as is the case with many international, regional or sub-regional organizations, the perennial challenges remain the translation of the policies and enforcing the far-reaching judgements on women's rights. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) embodies this paradox. On one hand, it has established gender-focused institutions such as the Gender Technical Commission and the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre and policies. It has also facilitated landmark legal victories for women within its jurisdiction. Conversely, it has failed to translate these gains into broader systemic changes, thereby mirroring the shortcomings of many of its member states in fully institutionalizing gender equality.

This piece explores this duality: ECOWAS as both a site for advancing gender equality and a spectre of the unfinished business of gender equality. It explores three key dimensions: the extent of gender representation within ECOWAS's formation and leadership structures, the organization's influence on gender-related policies in member states, and the broader implications of ECOWAS's gender policies on women's socio-political and economic empowerment in West Africa.

Absent *Herstory* in ECOWAS formation

ECOWAS was established on May 28, 1975, following the signing of the Treaty of Lagos by 15 West African nations. The organization was founded with the primary objective of fostering economic cooperation and regional integration to promote stability, development, and collective self-reliance among its member states. Inspired by the success of regional blocs such as the European Economic Community (EEC) and in response to the colonial legacies of weak and fragmented economies of the region, ECOWAS aimed to eliminate trade barriers, enhance economic productivity, and ensure free movement of people and goods across West Africa (Akperan, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, there are no records on the formation of ECOWAS or its founding framework (1975 Treaty of Lagos) that points to women's involvement or consideration for women's issues (Gowon, 1984) despite the irrefutable evidence of women's contributions to West Africa economic and political discourses within the same time period when ECOWAS was formed (OECD, 2024; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Mba, 1982[1]). If indeed the formation of

ECOWAS was a response to repressive colonial legacies, one of which was the invisibilization of women from formal structures (Gowon, 1984; Tamale, 2020), it is surprising that the same ECOWAS participates in the silencing of women's contribution to the anti-colonial movements (Makana, 2019 ; Jacob, 2023). Or perhaps another argument about the absent *herstory of women's input in the establishment of ECOWAS is a* reflection of the broader socio-political climate that was underway in West Africa. When ECOWAS was founded in 1975 by sitting heads of state, political leadership in individual state were all male with about half being military rulers. It appears proponents of ECOWAS missed an opportunity to reflect it as an institution that embodies a pre-colonial Africa where women were not relegated and where roles were complementary. During the period, women's contribution to individual nation building was incontestable with records of protests led by notable feminist movements and women-led organizations who were advocating for legal reforms, political inclusion, and economic empowerment. The absence of women in dominant historical accounts of ECOWAS's formation is particularly troubling given the well-documented presence of women's regional trade networks and cross-border associations, which functioned as foundational infrastructures for informal economic integration across West Africa.

Despite this lack of *herstory*, these movements laid the groundwork for later gender-responsive policies, even though ECOWAS itself remained slow in integrating gender concerns into its early institutional agenda. Over time, critical moments like conflicts, wars and sustained feminist advocacy has pushed the organization to recognize gender as a critical factor in regional development (Zhizhi, 2023). By the first revision of the ECOWAS Treaty in 1993, the widely acknowledged role that women played during the Sierra Leone and Liberia war and in bringing an end to the war had arguably significantly influenced some of the revisions that eventually featured in the revised Lagos Treaty 1993. Additionally, the eventual establishment of gender-focused institutions within ECOWAS, such as the Commission on Gender Affairs and the ECOWAS Female Parliamentarians Association (ECOFEPA), can be traced back to the persistent efforts of West African women's rights activists (Zhizhi, 2023).

ECOWAS Advanced the Business of Representational Politics

Despite acknowledging the imperative nature of representation in the ECOWAS Revised Treaty (1993), women's representation in ECOWAS leadership roles has historically been limited, but there has been gradual progress (Ugbe, 2025). For instance, ECOWAS blazed a trail with the first female chair of a regional bloc's Authority of Heads of State in 2016–2017, a feat that the African Union has not achieved. However, within the ECOWAS Commission, which is the executive arm, women have traditionally occupied only a few of the top posts. The first woman to attain a leadership position was Madam Finda Koroma of Sierra Leone who served as the Vice President from 2012 until 2016. For many years, the Commission's sole female presence at the highest level was the Commissioner in charge of Social Affairs and Gender, and this reflects a tendency to confine women to feminine portfolios. Again in 2022, ECOWAS appointed Damtien Tchintchibidja as Vice-President of the Commission. The current Commission (reformed in 2022) has 5 Commissioners plus the President and Vice-President and two of them are women. When compared with other sub-regional bodies like SADC, IGAD or ECCAS, ECOWAS appears as a leader on women's representation in the governance structures. For SADC, only once has a woman led the union while for IGAD and ECCAS, no woman has ever served as executive secretary of either body.

Unfortunately, the ECOWAS Parliament mirrors the underrepresentation of women in the legislature of members states since the membership of the ECOWAS Parliament is drawn from elected representatives at the national level. As of 2022, only 21 out of 115 Members of the ECOWAS Parliament are women (18.3%) (ECOWAS Parliament, 2024).

Women in the Business for Gender Equality: Case Study of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Tenure

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's year-long tenure as Chairperson of ECOWAS (June 2016 to June 2017) marked a watershed for women's leadership in West Africa. As President of Liberia, Sirleaf was the first elected female Head of State in Africa, and her elevation to Chair of the ECOWAS made her the first woman to lead ECOWAS's heads of state. This was a moment of immense symbolic importance: it demonstrated that a woman could occupy West Africa's highest political coordination role, breaking an all-male precedent. Beyond symbolism, Sirleaf's leadership had tangible implications for ECOWAS's gender agenda.

During her tenure, ECOWAS achieved several milestones on gender-related initiatives, suggesting that her influence, both direct and indirect, helped to advance the regional gender-inclusive policy framework.

One notable development under Sirleaf's ECOWAS chair was the acceleration of gender policy implementation. In February 2017, ECOWAS Ministers of Gender and Women's Affairs, with the ECOWAS Commission, convened to operationalize the 2015 Supplementary Act on gender equality by adopting a roadmap and three key documents to bolster women's rights and gender equality: an ECOWAS Regional Action Plan on Obstetric Fistula, a Strategic Framework on Gender and Elections (with Action Plan), and the 2017–2020 Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security under the ECOWAS conflict prevention framework.

Furthermore, in speeches and meetings, Sirleaf consistently underscored that West African countries needed to "do more" to bring women into governance, urging leaders to aim for at least 30% female representation in politics. Her role in peacefully resolving the 2017 Gambian political crisis further cemented her reputation and strengthened the case for women's conflict resolution roles in the region. In recognition of her contributions to gender equality, ECOWAS leaders honored Sirleaf on International Women's Day 2017 by signing a Declaration in her honour (ECOWAS Gender and Development Centre, 2017).

Sirleaf's leadership and tenure at ECOWAS offered optical value and challenged stereotypes around performance. Optically, a female face at the helm of ECOWAS coincided with concrete policy actions (the gender frameworks mentioned above). Thus, in addition to inspiring female leadership aspirations within the region, it also proved to skeptics that women can navigate and lead high-stakes diplomatic initiatives, from economic integration efforts to crisis mediation. While it is not definitive that Sirleaf's one-year leadership of ECOWAS produced enduring change in its structures, in the short term, the policies adopted in 2017 have continued to guide ECOWAS's work on gender equality. Institutionally, though, ECOWAS did not immediately see a surge of women in top positions after 2017. Unfortunately, ECOWAS was unable to sustain this momentum, as the Heads of Government remained exclusively male, despite the organization's efforts to improve its gender record. Sirleaf was succeeded by a male Chair. This trajectory suggests that although Sirleaf's

tenure was symbolically and institutionally significant, entrenched gender inequalities within West African political structures constrained the pace of transformation, rendering progress incremental rather than structural.

ECOWAS Efforts at Advancing Gender Equality through its Policies and Mechanisms

In its first two decades, ECOWAS functioned primarily as an economic development and trade-focused institution with little to no engagement with gender equality (Oseghale, 2024). The organization did not establish specific gender-focused mechanisms at its inception, nor did it prioritize the inclusion of women in leadership or policy development (Zhizhi, 2023). This mirrored the broader West African political context, where gender equality had not featured in the governance lexicon and policies were often reactive rather than proactive. Following increasing advocacy from civil society, international organizations, and women's rights groups, ECOWAS established gender-focused mechanisms aimed at addressing disparities in political participation, economic inclusion, and legal protections for women. More importantly, ECOWAS blazed the trail in developing gender policies and influencing its member states to replicate same.

The first mechanism ECOWAS created to advance the business of gender equality, was the Social Affairs and Gender Department in 2003. More recently known as the Human Development and Gender Department, the department is responsible for gender policy development and coordination at the Commission level. The department has developed several regional policies and action plans to advance gender equality. In 2020, ECOWAS launched the ECOWAS Disaster Risk Reduction Gender Strategy and Action Plan 2020-2030.

As part of playing catch up, the second mechanism for gender equality established was the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre (EGDC) with the mandate to work with ECOWAS institutions and member states to incorporate gender perspectives in all policies and programs, focusing on economic policy, agriculture, education, and peace and security. Several policies and regional plans have emanated from EGDC such as the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008), the ECOWAS Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2010–2015), which localized UNSCR 1325 and 1820. It has also

addressed obstetric fistula and child protection, and implemented programs to combat gender-based violence (UNDP& SOAWR; Saungweme, Ngang & Towl, 2024). It recently set up the Gender Observatory and the Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions, encouraging government bodies to meet gender equality standards(ECOWAS Gender Development Centre, 2024), contributed to high-level political outcomes such as the ECOWAS "Zero Tolerance to GBV" Declaration (2021) and incorporated gender priorities in ECOWAS Vision 2020 and Vision 2050 strategies (FAO, 2017; Leadership News, 2023).

One of the areas ECOWAS has effectively handled the business of gender equality is in peace and security (OWIE, 2019). From 2010, ECOWAS took deliberate steps to mainstream gender into peace and security by launching a Regional Action Plan on the UNSCR 1325 (Dakar Declaration, 2010). The implementation of the plan resulted in the collection of gender-specific data within the early warning system established as ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) which tracked incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, women's representation and social outcomes as part of conflict monitoring (Streitfeld-Hall, 2015; WANEP Report, 2019; Boamah, 2025). The system has been instrumental in monitoring complex crises such as protracted conflicts, COVID-19 pandemic socio-political impacts and recent wave of military coups in West Africa (Boamah, 2025). It is reasonable to infer that ECOWARN provided some early indicators that influenced ECOWAS to convene an extraordinary summit and despatch mediators to Mali. Though the subsequent overthrow of Mali's government revealed the difficulties of prevention, it contributed to mitigating greater violence.

The Unfinished Business of Gender Equality in ECOWAS

Despite a slow start, ECOWAS has prospered in the business of generating gender equality policies and programmes over the past 30 years. Even more striking is the business of judicial activism that the ECOWAS Court of Justice has engaged in and delivered Afrocentric gender justice in cases like the Hadijatou Mani Koroua and Mary Sunday cases.

Nevertheless, the business of gender equality in West Africa remains unfinished. To begin with, despite engaging in a comprehensive interpretation of the rights in the Maputo Protocol in some cases, the ECOWAS Court of Justice

has failed to analyse the impact of discriminatory laws and actions on women in all four cases. Additionally, there are variations in political commitment among member states with many exhibiting reluctances in translating sub-regional agreements to national legislation. This challenge is occasioned by underfunded gender machineries, lack of political will for gender-budgeting practices, lack of interest in collecting sex-disaggregated data, weak technical know-how among other things. Except for undemocratic activities like military coup, the business of gender equality is not considered important enough to warrant sanctions from ECOWAS as a body. For instance, ECOWAS requires each state to ensure at least 30% female representation in the ECOWAS Parliament delegation. However, no member state has been sanctioned for this despite occasional demands. Unlike the trade or financial obligations within ECOWAS (which are backed by stronger compliance tools), social policy directives often lack teeth.

A situational analysis of several development indicators such as practice of harmful traditional practices, implementation of laws, level of women's representation in leadership in West Africa, health outcomes, literacy levels reveal how the business of gender equality remains unfinished. West Africa has the highest rate of child marriage, high incidences of female genital mutilation, widowhood practices and an estimated 40% of women in West Africa have been victims of physical or sexual violence. Patriarchal attitudes and socio-political norms continue to masculinize leadership and number of elected and appointed women in West Africa is significantly lower compared to Sub Saharan Africa. Women in West Africa suffer from some of the worst health indicators in the world and consistently record the highest maternal death rates globally. Educational outcomes for girls lag behind those of boys in much of West Africa, with many girls dropping out of school due to conflict, poverty, early marriage, and teenage pregnancy.

Compared to other sub-regions in Africa, ECOWAS has made giant strides in peace and security policies and mechanisms. However, not only does peace elude the sahel and in particular west African states, women continue to be largely excluded from formal peace negotiations and mediation teams in the sub-continent. Globally, women made up only 4% of signatories and 2.4% of chief mediators in major peace processes (ECOWAS Commission, 2020). West Africa is no exception. For example, women were underrepresented in

mediation efforts during recent conflicts in Mali and the Lake Chad Basin. Such low inclusion means women's needs and may be overlooked in peace agreements (ECOWAS Commission, 2020).

It is said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a step. The business of advancing gender equality has commenced and if we go with the estimation of the World Economic Forum that it would take about 134 years to achieve gender equality, ECOWAS at 50years is already showing great potentials but the business of gender equality remains unfinished.

Footnotes

[1] Mba NE (1982) Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900–1965. Berkeley: University of California/Institute of International Studies.

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