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Towards Feminist Peace: How ECOWAS Can Reshape Peace and Security in West Africa

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This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

INTRODUCTION

Traditional frameworks for peace and security in West Africa have typically overlooked the transformative potential of feminist and gender-justice approaches. This has created a blind spot that has hindered the ability of policymakers to effectively resolve security challenges in the region. This paper calls for ECOWAS to integrate feminist principles into its norms, practices, and partnerships to enable the organisation to shape peace and security outcomes better in the region.

DEVELOPING A REGIONAL ECOSYSTEM FOR GENDER JUSTICE

When ECOWAS was established in 1975, it did not give much priority to gender issues. A shift began, however, with the bloc's Revised Treaty in 1993, which included [Article 63 on Women and Development](#), which sought to provide a framework for improving the socio-economic conditions of women in West Africa.

When the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 [UNSCR 1325], a landmark text that obliged all actors in peace and conflict settings to include women in formal peacemaking processes globally. It allowed for the deepening of gender considerations within the gender frameworks of regional organisations, including ECOWAS'. UNSCR 1325, and the nine subsequent resolutions that were adopted after it, make up what is known as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Meanwhile, ECOWAS established a [Gender Development Centre](#) in 2003 and adopted its first Gender Policy the following year. Together, the international obligations as well as regional imperatives enabled the basis for a regional gender equality agenda.

In 2010, ECOWAS adopted the [Dakar Declaration](#), which commits Member States to the inclusion of women in conflict prevention, peace negotiations, and post-conflict recovery. Today, ECOWAS Member States have all adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) to underscore a notional commitment to women's inclusion in peace and security and the success of feminist advocacy of women's rights in West Africa. In addition to the 2015 [Supplementary Act on Equal Rights of Women and Men](#), ECOWAS introduced a set of [internal WPS guidelines](#) in 2021 to ensure that its regional peace and security efforts include women. The guidelines focused on ECOWAS' ways of working

internally, whereas previous gender focused guides mainly applied conduct in external programmes. While these instruments collectively commit every ECOWAS Member State to promoting gender equality across all sectors and call for harmonising domestic laws with regional protocols, a gap exists between the prescription of gender-justice frameworks and their practical application, largely due to the superficial application of feminist principles. The adoption of language indicating support for gender inclusivity and equality has not been matched by a serious attempt to challenge the underlying patriarchal power structures that drive conflict and exclusion.

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WHY FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER MATTER FOR ECOWAS

Going forward, the WPS agenda must mean more than the inclusion or representation of women in decision-making processes. It should also require decision makers to incorporate peace-making processes that pay due attention to intersectional inequalities, emphasise demilitarisation and promote social justice.

Given the prevalence of conflicts linked to governance deficits, climate insecurity, violent extremism, and economic inequalities in West Africa, a feminist approach to peace-building is sorely needed. A feminist approach to peacebuilding is a practical, justice-driven framework that prioritises the inclusive participation of women and marginalised groups in all stages of peace processes. It addresses the root causes of conflict like inequality, gender-based violence and exclusion, while promoting nonviolent, sustainable solutions. By focusing on both formal and informal strategies, it ensures that peace efforts lead to lasting social transformation, and not just a cessation of armed conflict.

ECOWAS is well-positioned to leverage its existing frameworks on gender towards substantive change. A good place to start is the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), which sets out the regional bloc’s prevention and peace-building agenda. The framework acknowledges the impacts of structural violence and underscores the importance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Yet, for the ECPF to truly transform peace and security processes in West Africa, ECOWAS must confront the way in which different forms of marginalisation — like sexism, racism and poverty — combine to create the deep injustices that drive insecurity. This would require the incorporation of analytical concepts like intersectionality, which seeks to understand how different structures of oppression can negatively impact individuals and communities based on their identities.

FEMINIST PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

A feminist-informed framework for peace and security requires moving beyond elite-centred diplomacy towards inclusive, participatory processes that actively involve women-led civil society organisations and grassroots movements. A useful example is the Gender is my Agenda Campaign (GIMAC), which seeks to influence policy within the African Union by advocating for the adoption of frameworks like the Maputo Protocol, the AU Gender Policy and the African Union Convention on Ending Violence against Women and Girls (AU-CEVAWG).

In the West Africa region, the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) was instrumental in establishing peace negotiations during the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Similarly, the Women in Peacebuilding Network programme of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) has played an important role in promoting gender perspectives in the region. Since 2002, WANEP has had a strategic partnership with ECOWAS that was formalised with a memorandum of understanding signed in 2004 and renewed in 2024. However, engagement with MARWOPNET is mainly ad-hoc, even though the Network played a significant role in peace dialogues in the Mano River subregion and was awarded a U.N. Peace Prize in 2003 (Gaanderse, 2010). MARWOPNET was instrumental in brokering dialogue between the presidents of Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone during intense regional conflict in the early 2000s and facilitated the inclusion of women in peace and security decision-making. Other similar bodies are Network on Peace and Security for Women in the ECOWAS Region, which, for instance, authors shadow reports on the state of regional compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

ECOWAS should collaborate better with grassroots organisations like MARWOPNET in order to enhance women-led leadership in peace negotiations, conflict mediation and peacebuilding more generally. It can look towards GIMAC's effort on the AU level – supporting the development of a more coherent network of feminist and women's rights civil society groups to strategically partner with the regional organisation. Replicating this in the West African context would support further institutionalisation of feminist principles into the framework of ECOWAS' operations.

INCLUSIVE SECURITY SECTOR REFORM (SSR)

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is one of ECOWAS' key areas of activity, and a central component of peacebuilding in West Africa. The WPS agenda identifies SSR as crucial to its effective implementation. As Holvikivi (2015) demonstrates, for SSR to successfully meet its aims of transforming the security sector, it must be accountable to the entire population, which would necessarily mean paying attention to gender and other power hierarchies.

Like most organisations, ECOWAS is shaped by beliefs about gender that influence who holds power, whose voices are heard and whose needs are prioritised (Haastrup,

2021). Practically, SSR processes can bring ECOWAS closer to the communities it ostensibly represents. Given that many West African citizens believe that ECOWAS and other international institutions are disconnected from their lived realities, improved engagement between ECOWAS and local communities can shift perceptions in ways that would build trust and contribute towards meeting the obligations of the WPS agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ECOWAS should embrace a feminist response to climate insecurity.**

ECOWAS should join forces with feminist and women's rights organisations which have an extensive leadership footprint in the sector. Climate-induced conflicts and environmental degradation disproportionately impact women and marginalised communities, who are likelier to lose access to their land and other resources, and face increased risks of violence during displacement. Successful efforts in Niger and Burkina Faso, where women in rural communities contributed to community-based climate resilience projects, offer practical examples for ECOWAS to replicate and expand on, with the aim of enhancing regional stability and resilience to climate-induced conflicts.

In addition, a key dimension of liberatory African feminism is the importance of inter-generational engagements. With the majority of Africa's population being under 30 years old, young people constitute a significant demographic bloc on the African continent. The inclusion of young people in decision-making structures is another feminist move that will enable ECOWAS to find resonance among the younger generation. By making better use of digital technology, ECOWAS can democratise access to political discussions for young people, leading to newer, more inclusive ways to build peace and security.

- **Incorporate grassroots women's groups into security sector**

reform efforts local women's groups are often at the forefront of gathering information that feeds into early warning on the potential for crises to spiral into armed conflict. They can help to prevent and mitigate crises, make security responses more inclusive and fairer, and reduce militarism. By working closely with local women's groups and paying attention to their priorities, ECOWAS would prioritise injustices including gender-based violence in all dimensions, and beyond sexual violence in war.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toni Haastrup is Professor and Chair in Global Politics at the University of Manchester, UK. She is also co-founder of the African Feminist Collective on Feminist Informed Policies (AFiP), which seeks to shape feminist-informed domestic and foreign policy from African feminist, anti-imperialist, and decolonial perspectives, and to create space for African feminist expertise to engage “feminist foreign policy” debates. A researcher and teacher, Toni’s work critiques enduring global power hierarchies, while opening up the space to reimagine feminist otherworlds with allies.

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