

Policy Briefing

Women, Power & Policymaking

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Beyond the Rhetoric: Mainstreaming Gender in the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture

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Executive summary

With a long history of a troubled backyard, ECOWAS needs to modify its strategies to ensure effectiveness. This requires a bespoke and innovative approach to peace and security that, necessarily, has to be gendered and inclusive. This policy briefing analyses the women, peace and security component of ECOWAS's peace and security regulatory framework, particularly its policy on mainstreaming gender and its implementation by ECOWAS member states. In so doing, it hopes to inform praxis and improve policy outcomes. The briefing argues that ECOWAS should pursue a vigorous strategic plan for the effective implementation of its comprehensive policy framework on

mainstreaming gender in peace and security. The path to this requires innovative thinking and broader engagement with relevant stakeholders.¹

Introduction

Peace and security did not feature in the regulatory landscape of ECOWAS at its inception in 1975. Despite this the region's approach to peace and security – which has come to define ECOWAS as a regional economic community (REC) – has grown in the past four decades into a complex framework of norms and policies facilitating regional peacekeeping and peace support operations, as well as conflict prevention, conflict management and peacebuilding. ECOWAS has had to review its objective of regional integration against the reality of political instability and insecurity within the region, and adapt its response accordingly. There has been a marked shift from its hitherto reactionary to a precautionary approach to conflict and insecurity, as well as an expanded notion of security beyond the state to include human security. This is in line with its new vision of an 'ECOWAS of the Peoples'. In this regard, it has pursued a women, peace and security agenda and sought to bring the integration of gender perspectives to the fore of policymaking, reform and governance of the peace and security architecture. In the past 15 years, it has adopted the 2004 ECOWAS Gender Policy, the 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), the ECOWAS Regional Plan of Action for the Implementation of Resolutions 1325 and 1820, the 2015 Supplementary Act Relating to Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in the ECOWAS Region, and the 2016 Supplementary Act on Security Sector Reform and Governance (SSRG).

A gender imperative to peace and security

Conflict, by its nature, cuts across many issues, of which gender and injustice are but two – with gender inequality implicated as one of the root causes of conflict as well as an aggravator in the instrumentalisation of violence. The effects of conflict are gender varied and compound existing gender inequalities, with women and children being most vulnerable to, and affected, by armed conflict. As such, women need to be represented in and participate at all levels of decision-making in peace and security to address their unique concerns and issues, as well as to have a singular impact on the peace and security landscape in West Africa.

There is a tendency to oversimplify the role of women. They are usually portrayed as the victims of violence, negating their agency in the varied and complex dimensions of armed conflict, including as strategic actors in conflict prevention and agents of change for

¹ The author recognises, while using the term 'gender' in the briefing, that there are differences, challenges and vulnerabilities peculiar to gender and gender identity; as well as the importance of ensuring inclusive benefits from any interventions.

sustainable peace. For instance, research shows that over 50% of peace agreements fail within five years of conclusion and that the success rate of post-conflict transitions is low.² However, the inclusion of women in peace processes accounted for a 20% increase in the probability that a peace agreement would last at least two years; over time this probability increased to 35% for that agreement's lasting 15 years.³ The centrality of women's roles in families and communities has been shown to improve their effectiveness in conflict prevention and early warning strategies, such that the inclusion of women in countering violent extremism has been a mitigating factor in radicalisation.⁴ This makes gender a critical entry point in any strategic engagement on violent extremism and its prevention. The mainstreaming of gender in peace and security is thus not only a moral imperative but also a strategic one, especially in view of the goal of 'silencing all guns by 2020' through dialogue-centred conflict prevention and resolution under the AU's Agenda 2063.⁵

The ECOWAS peace and security architecture

Prior to UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 (2000), the normative frameworks for peace and security were gender-blind. With Resolution 1325, the UNSC sought the increased representation and equal participation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict. ECOWAS adopted a Regional Plan of Action for the implementation of Resolution 1325 and the 2008 ECPF to define its gendered approach to peace and security. The ECPF is ECOWAS's conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategy, which includes women, peace and security as one of its 15 components. It strives to bring to the fore, as well as advance, the role and contribution of women in the design, elaboration, implementation and evaluation of conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives. It also seeks to strengthen regional and national mechanisms for the protection and advancement of women.⁶

As part of a broader reform agenda on promoting peace and mainstreaming gender in security sector reform and governance, the 2016 SSRG was adopted. It provides for the establishment of laws and policies promoting non-discriminatory, equitable, gender-responsive national security sectors; increased participation of women at all levels in democratic control, security sector and oversight institutions; and the establishment of

2 Rees M & C Chinkin, 'Exposing the gendered myth of post-conflict transition: The transformative power of economic and social rights', *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, 48, 2016, p. 1211.

3 UNWomen, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Security Council Resolution 1325*, October 2015, p. 49, [https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20(1).pdf), accessed 10 May 2019.

4 Millar A, 'Women on the front lines', in *Charting a New Course: Women Preventing Violent Extremism*. Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2015, pp. 9-10.

5 AU, 'Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want', September 2015, Aspirations 4 & 6, https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063_popular_version_en.pdf, accessed 10 May 2019.

6 ECOWAS, 'ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, Regulation MSC/REG. 1/01/08'. Abuja: ECOWAS Commission, January 2008, par. 81.

laws, policies, structures and mechanisms on gender-based violence, seeking to address the specific needs of women and girls.⁷

In this architectural landscape, implementation of the policies envisages different roles for ECOWAS, member states and civil society organisations as stakeholders in regional peace and security. The ownership of, and primary responsibility for, peace and security belongs to member states. Member states are expected to implement measures and initiatives that go beyond the management of violence to include prevention and peacebuilding as well, as elaborated by ECOWAS under practical guidelines and reference instruments such as the ECPF and SSRG.

Progress and problems

ECOWAS has been a trailblazer in Africa regarding its praxis on conflict management and resolution. It has played a key role in resolving conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Mali. This has garnered the REC international praise, including a series of commendations by the UNSC,⁸ as well as some criticism for operational shortcomings.⁹ It remains at the leading edge of normative developments on women, peace and security – not only in terms of the profusion of regional and national (13 of its 15 member states) action plans on the implementation of Resolution 1325¹⁰ but also in the elaboration of initiatives and strategies on mainstreaming gender into peace and security on the African continent.¹¹ The ECOWAS Gender Development Centre is tasked with mainstreaming gender in ECOWAS and its member states and coordinating the implementation of the Regional Plan of Action. It has been instrumental in the creation of three platforms for supporting community gender programmes and coordinating civil society activities under the Regional Plan of Action: the West African Network of Young Women Leaders, the Association of ECOWAS Female Parliamentarians and the Network on Peace and Security for Women in the ECOWAS Region.

However, as much as ECOWAS has achieved in terms of policy formulations and strategies, so little has been done in implementation and monitoring. Without implementation, the policies remain mere rhetoric – rendering futile the ideational objective of advancing the role and participation of women in the design, elaboration and implementation of decisions in the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.

7 ECOWAS, 'ECOWAS Policy Framework for Security Sector Reform and Governance', Article 61, <https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ecowas-policy-framework-on-ssrg-english-adopted.pdf>, accessed 10 May 2019.

8 UNSCR, 'Resolution 788 (19 November 1992)', <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/788>, accessed 10 May 2019; UNSCR, 'Resolution 866 (22 September 1993)', <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/866>, accessed 10 May 2019; UNSCR, Resolution 1166 (27 June 1997)', <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1166>, accessed 10 May 2019.

9 Pitts M, 'Sub-regional solutions for African conflicts', *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19, 1999, p. 49.

10 Cape Verde and Benin are yet to adopt one.

11 AU Commission, 'Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Africa'. Addis Ababa: AU Commission, July 2016, p. 14.

The persistent problem of non-implementation of ECOWAS policies cannot be explained away as the usual enforcement dilemma faced by international organisations. This does not explain why, despite a comprehensive policy and strategic framework, gender mainstreaming in peace and security remains a pie in the West African sky.

Firstly, member states lack the political will to operationalise the ECPF, or at least its women, peace and security component. The involvement of women in national governance in West Africa (a vital aspect of gender mainstreaming in peace and security) is sub-par. With the exception of Senegal (ranking seventh in the world with women making up 42.7% of its parliament), the representation of women in ECOWAS countries' parliaments is well below the world average of 23.3%, with Nigeria ranking lowest of all ECOWAS states at 5.6%.¹² West African states lag behind their Southern African and East African counterparts in this regard. In addition, West African women occupy less than 20% of ministerial positions and are found mostly in secretarial, accounting and other administrative positions in the public sector, rather than technical and managerial ones.¹³ Their participation in traditional and religious processes is even less certain than in these formal processes, owing to the patriarchal nature of West African socio-political systems.

The regional hegemon's lack of political will to implement these policies is worth specific mention, especially in view of Nigeria's pivotal role in ECOWAS, the insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria and the gender-based violence committed by Boko Haram for which there have been no prosecutions thus far. Despite having adopted a national gender policy in 2006 and a strategic implementation framework in 2008, Nigeria takes a back seat in terms of actualising gender mainstreaming in its policy and decision-making spaces, especially in those of its political institutions capable of contributing to peace and security. Statistics even show a decline since 2015.¹⁴

Secondly, the paucity of resources for capacity building plays a role in the non-implementation of policies on women, peace and security in ECOWAS, including gender mainstreaming. ECOWAS struggles with financial constraints and contends with member states' recalcitrance to pay levies. It remains dependent on Nigeria and external funding from foreign governments and donor organisations. Longer-term structural aspects of conflict prevention such as the women, peace and security component of the ECPF have not been a priority for foreign donors, unlike operational aspects such as early warning, preventive diplomacy, the ECOWAS Standby Force and practical disarmament.¹⁵ In fact, women, peace and security was ranked 14th out of 15 in terms of priority based on

12 Senegal 42.7%; Cabo Verde 23.6%; Guinea 21.9%; Togo 17.6%; Niger 17.0%; Guinea-Bissau 13.7%; Chad 12.8%; Ghana 12.7%; Sierra Leone 12.4%; Liberia 12.3%; Côte d'Ivoire 11.5%; Burkina Faso 11.0%; The Gambia 9.4%; Mali 8.8%; Benin 7.2%. See OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), *Maps and Facts: Sahel and West Africa*, 50, March 2017, <http://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/50-Women-deputies.pdf>, accessed 10 May 2019.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Nigeria, National Bureau of Statistics, *2017 Statistical Report on Women and Men in Nigeria*, February 2018, pp. 28-34, <https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/download/784>, accessed 10 May 2019.

15 ECOWAS Commission, 'ECPF Internal Steering Committee Meeting', 16 February 2017, <http://ecpf.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ECPF-Secretariat-Presentation-ISC.pdf>, accessed 10 May 2019.

consistency with the strategic framework of ECOWAS.¹⁶ This is unsurprising considering that, in general, very little aid (0.4%) goes to women's organisations participating in conflict prevention and resolution.¹⁷

Thirdly, there is the question of the extent of buy-in for mainstreaming gender in peace and security beyond the normative and rhetorical, as well as the strategic need. Gender mainstreaming in peace and security has provided a convenient talking point for both member states and ECOWAS, but in practice there has not been increased participation by women in high-profile mediation in conflict resolution.¹⁸

Conclusion

Despite an extensive policy framework for mainstreaming gender in peace and security, there is a conspicuous disparity between norm setting by ECOWAS at the regional level and the implementation of these norms at the national and local levels. Moreover, the existing strategies for implementation have not sufficed to facilitate the translation of norms into tangible outcomes. The way forward requires innovative thinking, broader engagement with relevant stakeholders, and vigorous strategic planning if ECOWAS is to effectively implement its comprehensive policy framework on mainstreaming gender in peace and security.

Policy recommendations

- Improved and broader engagement by ECOWAS with member states and civil society organisations will ensure the involvement of oversight institutions, including national parliaments, judiciaries, traditional and religious authorities, women's organisations, relevant professional bodies, the academe, security organisations, and trade and market associations. This will strengthen local governance, build participatory structures and mobilise the necessary critical mass for the implementation of policies.
- Introspection and self-audit by ECOWAS is needed on the extent to which gender has been mainstreamed in its own decision-making levels and to which women are participating in the design of its policy framework, as well as in conflict prevention, management and resolution strategies. Gender mainstreaming pertains to both national and regional institutions and processes, which necessarily includes ECOWAS.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Bigio J & R Vogelstein, 'How Women's Participation in Conflict Prevention and Resolution Advances US Interests', Discussion Paper. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, October 2016, p. 1.

¹⁸ Elowson C & J MacDermott, *ECOWAS Capabilities in Peace and Security: A Scoping Study of Progress and Challenges*. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2010, p. 38.

The practices of ECOWAS should reflect its lofty policy ideals. As a standard-setter, its own actions cannot be sub-par.

- Effective means for assessing stakeholders' performance should be identified. This would include a reporting requirement under the ECPF and programmes of action whereby member states commit to annual reports on gender mainstreaming and ECOWAS undertakes progress reports on implementation at national and regional levels.
- Innovative and sustainable alternative funding, including the involvement of the private sector, should be sought to address deficits. There is a need for increased transparency, accountability and judicious management of funds. Streamlining responsibilities and improved coordination between various ECOWAS structures on peace and security are encouraged to avoid multiplicity of efforts and resources.

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Cover image

A woman cheers as ECOWAS troops from Senegal gather outside the Gambian statehouse on 23 January 2017 in Banjul, The Gambia. ECOWAS is in Gambia to ensure a safe transition of power after authoritarian ruler Yahya Jammeh left the country two days prior, admitting defeated to the current president, Adama Barrow (Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images)

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