Fatoumata Kéïta

Women and Regional Integration in West Africa: Which Way forward to attain Gender Equality?
The West Africa Institute (WAI) is a research institute focused on regional integration and social transformations in the Member States of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). WAI offers capacity building activities and serves as a platform for social dialogue on regional integration in the sub-region. WAI is promoted by ECOWAS, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), the Group ECOBANK, and the Government of the Republic of Cabo Verde.
Fatoumata Kéïta

Dr. Fatoumata Kéïta is an Assistant professor at the English Department, University of Letters and Human Sciences of Bamako, Mali (ULSHB). She teaches Comparative Literature (African and American literature). Mrs. Kéïta holds a Doctorate Degree (2014) in American Studies and a MA degree (2008) in Comparative African Literature from the University Gaston Berger of Saint-Louis, Senegal. Her research areas encompass gender studies, postcolonial studies and theories, psychoanalytic theories, and Afrocentricity. She is also interested in peace and security building in Africa, education, curriculum development theories and sustainable development. In this regard, Dr. Kéïta took part in several seminars, conferences and workshops among others the 5th South-South Summer Institute titled “Rethinking Development: Global and Regional Alternatives for the Development in the South” organized by CODESRIA (West Africa), APISA (Asia) and CLASCO (South America) held on 21 May -1 June 2012 at Recife, Brazil; the Africa Institute of South Africa Young Graduates and Scholars 7th (AYGS) conference titled: “2050 – Africa’s Future on the Horizon: Prospects and Challenges for Development” held at the Vaal Triangle Campus, Gauteng, South Africa on 19-21 February 2013, the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) 4th Annual African Unity for Renaissance conference titled: “OAU/AU@ 50 and Beyond: The Quest for ‘African Solutions for African Problems’ (ASAP)” held in Pretoria on 22 -25 May, 2014, and the CODESRIA Gender Symposium 2016 titled : “Women’s Struggles today” 9-11 May 2016, Cairo, Egypt.

Table of contents

Acronyms ................................................................. 8
Abstract ................................................................. 10
I. Introduction ............................................................ 11
II. Definition of Key Terms .......................................... 13
  2.1 What is Regional Integration? Whose Integration? .......... 14
  2.2. What is Gender? ................................................. 18
  2.3. What is Gender Equality? ...................................... 24
III. ECOWAS’ Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure: Assets and Liabilities .... 25
IV. Pathway toward Gender Equality: Challenges and Prospects ................. 35
V. Recommendations and the Way Forward ........................ 41
VI. Conclusion ......................................................... 46
VII. References .......................................................... 48
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAC</td>
<td>East African Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of East African States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOWAP</td>
<td>Regional Agricultural Policy for West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGDC</td>
<td>ECOWAS Gender Development Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGP</td>
<td>ECOWAS Gender Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGM/C</td>
<td>Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEWE</td>
<td>Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMI</td>
<td>Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMS</td>
<td>Gender Management System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI</td>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAC</td>
<td>Inter-African Committee (Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I4P</td>
<td>Infrastructure for Peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDCs</td>
<td>Least Developed Countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDGs</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEPAD</td>
<td>New Partnership for Africa’s Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCCGE</td>
<td>Coordination and Co-operation Organization for the Fight against Great Endemics (Organisation de Coordination pour la Lutte contre des Grandes Endémies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHADO</td>
<td>Organization for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa (Organisation pour l'Harmonisation en Afrique du Droit des Affaires)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern African Development Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children Fund (Fonds des Nations unies pour l'enfance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USRDA</td>
<td>Union soudanaise-Rassemblement democratique africain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAEMU</td>
<td>West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA: Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAHO</td>
<td>West African Health Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAHC</td>
<td>(the Anglophone) West African Health Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Women and Regional Integration in West Africa: Which Way forward to attain Gender Equality?

Fatoumata Kéïta

Abstract

Twenty years after the adoption of the platform of Beijing and the revision of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Treaty, the participation of women in regional integration and decision-making processes constitute an overarching goal for the implementation of development objectives and prosperity in West Africa. If ECOWAS has put forward significant mechanisms and legal instruments in order to reduce gender disparity in the past fifteen years, huge challenges remain and momentous strides need to be achieved in order to attain gender equality in economic participation and regional integration. Cognizant of those liabilities, policy makers and key regional actors have joined force in order to implement a more inclusive and holistic development and integration policies so as to reduce the gender gap. This paper strives to take stock of the progress realized by ECOWAS over the past twenty years in terms of gender mainstreaming in regional policies and development programs. It then seeks to highlight the huge roadblocks that still impede women’s full and equitable participation in regional integration and decision-making processes and how to overcome them. Finally, the paper outlines some recommendations by laying emphasis on the way forward for the coming decades regarding the realization of Agenda 2063 and the 12 core areas of concerns of the Platform of Beijing which are germane to the mandate of ECOWAS as far as women’s empowerment is concerned.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Gender Equality, Gender Mainstreaming, Regional Integration, Women’s Empowerment.

I. Introduction

“No society can develop successfully without providing equitable opportunities, resources, and life prospects for males and females so that they can shape their own lives and contribute to their families and communities.” US-AID

The idea that regional integration and cooperation cannot be achieved without an active involvement of women has become fully accepted by key regional stakeholders and policy makers. Since the adoption of the Declaration and Platform of Beijing (1995), African women’s participation in the development of the continent has been stressed with urgency and poignancy by the States. In this regard, the Millennium Development Goals3 (MDGs3) emphasizes gender equality and women’s empowerment as prerequisite for sustainable development and human security across Africa.

5 For more details, visit the African Women Decade website at: http://www.africanwomendecade.org (02.5.2016).
7 For more details, visit the African Women Decade website at: http://www.africanwomendecade.org (02.5.2016).

The African Union (AU), in its Constitutive Act (2000), reaffirms its commitment to promote gender equality4 in its Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004)5 which was followed by the AU Gender Policy in 2009.6 The latter establishes a nexus between African integration, prosperity and security and the realization of women’s empowerment and gender equality. It is emphasized that women must enjoy equal access to employment, resources, economic opportunities, education, decent livelihood and their economic independence and security must be ensured as well.7 The African Women’s decade (2010-2020)7 was launched under the banner of the AU with a groundbreaking theme: Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE). The AU follows up the United Nations (UN) Decade of Women (1976-1986) and it comes within the framework of sustaining gender
mainstreaming in sub-regional organizations so as to encourage member States to implement policies aimed at reducing the gender disparity in the continent. Interestingly enough, these actions are consistent with a global agenda dedicated to empower women economically so that they can take part in the development process of the millennium. In this regard, The G8 Summit Declaration (2007) on “Growth and responsibility in Africa” puts forward that “the political and economic empowerment of women is a contribution to sustainable growth and responsible government.”

Consequently, African States have put women socio-economic empowerment at the center of their policies. A large gamut of political and legal instruments has been implemented across the continent in order to make gender equality a reality and not a mere political catchword. The Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003) in its Article 13 titled: “Economic and Social Welfare Rights” stipulates that “States Parties shall adopt and enforce legislative and other measures to guarantee women equal opportunities in work and career advancement and other economic opportunities.” The preceding article focuses on women’s rights to education and training. It invites State parties to “eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and guarantee equal opportunity and access in the sphere of education and training.”

In this perspective, the West African region is making a steady progress towards gender equality through the actions of ECOWAS whose revised Treaty of 1993 includes a provision on women’s empowerment. Over the past fifteen years, the sub-regional organization has become the spearhead of gender equality and equity through its Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure (GMI). However, despite this steady inroad, women are still lagging behind men in terms of economic participation and opportunities but also of regional integration and cooperation because of certain liabilities barring their ways to decision-making processes and development policies. It becomes crucial to transform these liabilities in to assets so as to make the West African women the linchpins of regional integration and cooperation as well as real engines for human development in their region. What role ECOWAS can play in order to foster and boost women’s participation in regional integration and cooperation? What are the pitfalls impeding gender equality in West Africa and how can ECOWAS contribute to overcome them? What is the way forward?

II. Definition of Key Terms

This paper is premised on the use of certain technical terms whose unraveling contributes to a better understanding of the issues at stake. The concepts of regional integration, gender, gender equality, gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment will be clarified in line with the theoretical debates that surround the concept of gender and its use in the lexicon of international and African literature and political discourse. Such a semantic approach will rely on a review of literature whose sole purpose is to critically analyze each concept so as to account for and spotlight the pros and cons of the conceptual debate, shift and possible linkage that may exist between some of them. Such a conceptual review is likely to mitigate the effect of any arbitrary use of these terms and dispel any hegemonic connotation they may embody. Given that “definitions belong to the definers” harms, hence they are neither innocent nor objective, we will strive to display the different meanings and connotations associated to the key terms so as to avoid committing any “definitional fallacy”. In doing so, it will be easy to grapple with the multifaceted


10 Ibid., p. 12.

natures of the different concepts and unleash a critical appraisal of and interest about them.

2.1 What is Regional Integration? Whose Integration?

According to the online Business Dictionary, Regional Integration is delineated as:

An arrangement for enhancing cooperation through regional rules and institutions entered into by states of the same region. Regional integration could have as its objective political or economic goals or in some cases, a business initiative aimed at broader security and commercial purposes. Regional integration could have an intergovernmental or supranational organization.\(^12\)

This definition reveals that regional integration is based on institutions established by member States and common rules that sustain their cooperation and determine the scope of their actions. Trade cooperation seems to be the first prime motive of such an organization. But security is also aimed as part of the overall goals of regional organization.

ECOWAS was created with the same ambit. In this perspective, Dr. Alhaji M.S. Bah, former senior researcher with the Peace Missions Programme at the Institute for Security Studies at Queen’s University Canada and specialist in regional security arrangements in West and Southern Africa, argues that ECOWAS is moving from a “security complex to a security community”\(^13\) with the creation of ECOWAS’ peace and security framework. Dr. Bah is currently a research coordinator at the University of New York. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is said to follow the same path according to peace specialists.\(^14\)

As a symbol of Pan-Africanist ideals, ECOWAS was founded as a solution to the split of a whole continent into tiny States, which considered individually, becomes invisible in the international market scale. This fragmentation or what the late Senegalese President, Leopold Sedar Senghor terms “balkanisation” which is the result of the 19th century European scramble for Africa, constit-

tutes, according to Lolette Kritzinger-van Niekerk, Senior Economist of the World Bank Country Office in South Africa, the most compelling arguments put forward for regional integration in Sub-Saharan Africa.\(^15\)

In fact, West Africa is a rather complex region inhabited by sundry ethnic groups with a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Each State has strong cultural and historical ties with its neighbors; each State depends on and complements its neighbor in terms of agricultural or farming productions; and each State welcomes and harbors refugees and immigrants from its neighbors. When conflicts break up in one member States it is likely to spill over into neighboring ones with the same violence. Owing to the existence of those strong ties, integration becomes a natural process for regional stability and prosperity. Like in the other corners of the continent, the majority of the West African population is young and unemployed. Statistics show that 56% of the population is under 20 years of age and about 66% is under 25 years of age as compared to 12% and 15% respectively in Europe.\(^16\) The linguistic divide, a legacy of colonialism, has deeply marked the integration policies of the region.

West Africa is also faced with a myriad problems ranging from armed conflicts, rebellion, drug-trafficking, terrorism and political upheavals, a situation, which impacts negatively the economic growth and human security in the region. The majority of the African States that are “coup prone”\(^17\) are located in West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Gambia, etc.). In order to enable regional integration and economic cooperation, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was created on May 28, 1975 by fifteen countries in Lagos with a mandate of establishing an economic and monetary union. In 1997, Cabo Verde became the sixteenth member, but this number dropped to fifteen again with the withdrawal of Mauritania in 1999. ECOWAS subscribes into the framework of the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) adopted on April 1980 although it predates the latter. The LPA stands as a testimony of the commitment of African States to make economic integration a


\(^{17}\) Cf. Ali A. Mazrui: The House must not Fall: Constitutional Reforms and the People’s Will.” Written as a Lecture sponsored by AELEX (Legal Practitioners & Arbitrators), Lagos, Nigeria, for delivery in Lagos in July 2012.”
Gender and Regional Integration in West Africa

realization and the overall economic exchange in the region, two other organs came into being: the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) (UEMOA)\(^{20}\) and the Organization for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa (OHADA). ECOWAS also contributes in the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). Hence, until the adoption of the revised treaty in 1993, gender was not at the agenda of the sub-regional organization although women constitute more than 50 percent of the regional population. In this case, women’s empowerment and gender equality were not considered to be a stepping-stone towards sustainable development and prosperity in the region.

However, recently, some evidences have rivet attention on the “hidden monsters” of gender inequality and inequity in Africa in general, and in the ECOWAS region in particular which reflects today the disgraceful image of a war-torn, poverty-stricken area where thousands of women toil and moil in order to make ends meet. With the engendering of poverty, displacement and certain diseases, the issue of gender equality and mainstreaming is poised to become the fulcrum of ECOWAS’ head of States concerns and policymaking. Such a commitment is pertinent to the objectives and mandate of ECOWAS. Gender mainstreaming is part of the MDGs goals and the reduction of poverty in the Sub-Sahara Africa. The reduction of poverty has always been an overarching principle of development programs in Africa and one of the main objectives of ECOWAS. This is highlighted in Article 3 titled “Aims and Objectives” where it is stipulated:

The aims of the Community are to promote cooperation and integration, leading to the establishment of an economic union in West Africa in order to raise the living standards of its peoples, and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations among Member States and contribute to the progress and development of the African Continent. (emphasis added).\(^{21}\)

If West Africa shows the image of poverty, conflict ridden region, women constitute the bulk of the impoverished, displaced and sexually abused as most of them are trapped by family roles as mothers, spouses and caretakers of the elders and the disabled. Empowering women economically has never been as urgent and timely as in the dawn of this new Millennium where instabilities and political upheavals have pushed into the roads of migration thousands of women in the search of safe harbor and better living conditions. Addressing the issue of poverty reduction go hand in hand with a rethinking of gender roles and gender-based discrimination otherwise peace, stability and human development will become a deferred dream in the region. Therefore, regional integration must be an all-inclusive process, a blueprint for social justice and gender equity, a balm to soothe long-standing gender biases. In doing so, Regional Integration and Cooperation in West Africa can yield significant outcome as it will boost the economic growth and human development in the region which accounts for one of the lowest Human Development Indexes (HDI) in Africa. Besides, of the 50 least developed countries (LDCs), 34 are located in Africa and almost the half in West Africa.\(^{22}\)


2.2. What is Gender?

Gender is undoubtedly one of the most used and controversial concepts in contemporary literary and political lexicon. It is also one of the least delineated and understood moniker although it appears in almost every day political speech and literary discourse. This extensive use of the word gender and related concepts almost clouds the very meaning of the term, which is poised to become an empty cliché. Ideas about gender are so widespread that they are taken for granted without any questioning of the underlying epistemological, social, cultural or ideological premises. Today, gender is like a stamp that enables the validation and funding of a project, a program or a legal text. To show that one is gender-aware/conscious even though one flouts the basic principles of gender equality suffices to make one a smart and charismatic leader, politician or teacher. There is a flourishing of gender departments in universities and governments. Feminist theorists and women writers have always been in the forefront of the battle for the recognition of gender as a category that sustains and perpetuates women’s inferiority and oppression. If gender awareness is a token of progress and the politically correct, gender-blindness for its part, is equated with underdevelopment and backwardness in international discourse.

In this framework, gender consciousness and gender integration – which takes into consideration gender inequalities during the design, implementation and evaluation of projects and programs23 – are used by donors and economic partners as yardsticks to measure a country’s development (both human and economic) and democratic advancement. Gender has become a buffer term between the sensitive and hackneyed concepts of race and ethnicity, which traditionally, constitute the roots of discrimination. But what is amazing and deserves attention is that never before has gender inequality been so glaring and widespread than in the past twenty years where gender-based violence has taken a heavy toll on women’s lives worldwide. Amnesty International annual reports reveal gross gender violence against girls and women in domestic spheres, workplaces and schools. Lots of young girls (an estimate of 3 million every year according to World Health Organization)24 are still at risk as far the nefarious practice of Female Genital Mutilation is concerned. Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting (FGM/C) is a relatively newly coined term referring to “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-therapeutic reason.”25 As an age-old practice, FGM encompasses clitoridectomy (partial or total removal of the clitoris); excision (partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without cutting the labia majora); infibulation (narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and apposition of the labia minora and/or the labia majora with or without excision of the clitoris); and other harmful practices including pricking, piercing, incising, scraping etc.26

More, rape and manifold types of sexual abuse are endured by women and little girls in conflict-ridden areas. The kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls from the Government Secondary School of the town of Chibok, in Borno State by Boko Haram is a case in point. On the night of 14-15 April 2014, 276 school girls aged between 16-18 years old were abducted by Boko Haram, a radical Islamic group opposed to Western education and only 50 have managed so far to escape. The remaining 226 schoolgirls are still captives of Boko Haram almost two years after event.27 The capture has mobilized the International community and even Michelle Obama has called for the immediate release of the schoolgirls but to no avail. Specialists have conjectured that the girls have probably undergone brainwashing and turned to sexual slaves in the hands of Boko Haram. The families of the school girls are still waiting for the return of their beloved daughters and they pray that the girls’ capture will not fall in limbo as the event no longer make the headlines of Newspaper except on the anniversary days. So, women’s and girls’ security must become the topmost priorities of ECOWAS in order to fulfill its agenda of human development and regional integration. Without peace and security, integration becomes a utopian. Never before have

23 USAID (ed.): Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy. Washington, DC 2012, p. 3.


26 Ibid., p.4.

women been so scared and vulnerable as far as their basic human rights and security are concerned. Engendering security will boost women’s participation in the regional economic integration and cooperation.

In the Global race for gender mainstreaming and equality, some strive to make us believe that Africa is the only continent that is lagging behind and where gross gender disparity is still prevalent. Nevertheless, twenty years after the Beijing declaration, The UN Women report reveals a stunning and sad reality. If Beijing platform has unleashed unprecedented attention and concern about gender issues and discrimination, and if significant strides have been achieved in many corners of the world, gender-based discrimination and violence are gaining momentum in many regions of the world. Their remark appears as a heartfelt cry for action. In that report, it is said:

“Twenty years on, it is a hard truth that many of the same barriers and constraints that were recognized by the Beijing signatories are still in force globally. There are bright highlights where progress has been made. But no country has achieved gender equality” 29 (emphasis added).

Hence, it becomes crucial to define and redefine the concept of gender and its role in the marginalization of women. Gender is defined as the “social and cultural differences between men and women that assign value and create unequal opportunities in life” 28. Gender is a social and cultural construct that refers to attributes of femininity and masculinity in a given society. Yet, it is worth mentioning that gender is not limited to social differentiation between men and women, but the scope of this paper will not allow us to cover other dimensions of gender issues. Unlike sex, which is biological and accounts for maleness and femaleness, gender is neither inborn nor stable. Rather, it is acquired, constructed and handed down through socialization of girls and boys in their families and communities. According to Judith Butler, gender is something that is performed. 29 Social conventions and cultural differences between men and women. That is the reason why gender roles are fickle and volatile as they change from one society to another, from one generation to another. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced in the English language around the 1950s and 1960s through the works of British and American psychiatrists. 30 The introduction of gender and its recognition as an important category in development policies takes place in the fourth International Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 under the banner of the United Nations. Ever since, the concept of gender and the need for engendering policies emerged in international discourses and guidelines. 31

The 1990s also witnessed in Africa an upsurge of interest in gender issues thanks to the works of women writers, feminist theorists and activists who had rivet attention on the gender bias and exclusionary practices embedded in African literary criticism and publishing industries. 32 The pre-colonial and post-colonial African literary landscape was predominantly masculine. Men writers were the sole vocal heirs of African experience and women’s voices were either silenced or muzzled in this tradition. In order to decry the negative and stereotypical images of women disparaged in men’s fiction, women enter the literary arena and their pen become mightier than the swords that used to discredit them.

The apparition of a distinctive feminine voice and literary tradition bearing witness to the experiences of women and mores mould gender identities across times and cultures. In patriarchal African societies, traditional gender roles attributed to women are related to their reproductive roles as mothers, spouses and caregivers. In this respect, the deorum traditional woman was assigned the role of taking in charge of domestic chores and the children as well as being the custodians of moral and communal values. Those women who seek to soar above the narrow enclosure of tradition or break the mould of established gender norms are castigated. Those who seek to enjoy the same rights as their counterpart men become castaways or scapegoat.

Every society sets attitudes and behaviors which are deemed to be proper to men and women. That is the reason why gender roles are fickle and volatile as they change from one society to another, from one generation to another. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced in the English language around the 1950s and 1960s through the works of British and American psychiatrists. 30 The introduction of gender and its recognition as an important category in development policies takes place in the fourth International Conference on

their oppression in patriarchal traditional societies dated back to the late sixties. Flora Nwapa’s Efuru was published in 1966 and her ideological combat for gender equality and integration was followed up by a flowering of emerging feminine novelist, poets and short story tellers such as Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall (Senegal), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Calixthe Beyala (Cameroon), Aoua Kéita (Mali), the list is not exhaustive. These African women writers have thrown light on the multiple forms of oppression that women are subjected to in their societies. Aoua Keita’s Autobiography34 (1975) marks a watershed in the rise of African women’s literature as it retraces the author’s budding activism as a midwife and her radicalization as a militant inside the US-RDA (l’Union soudanaise-Rassemblement démocratique africain) the then party of Modibo Keita where she becomes the only woman elected in the parliament. Aoua Kéita stands as a literary foremother to both patriarchal laws and the colonial system prevailing in the French Soudan. As a figurehead of women’s trade union organization, Aoua Keita also becomes a trailblazer of feminist consciousness as she challenges with fierceness the ingrained gender bias that often thwarts women’s activism in Africa. As far as Ama Ata Aidoo is concerned, she has called for change in an eponymous novel35 published in 1991 where women are encouraged to interlope the public sphere by combining marriage with a career so as to empower themselves. It is undeniable that West African women have a long-standing tradition of gender militancy prior to the inception of current gender-conscious discourses endorsed by International Organization.

Nevertheless, twenty years after Beijing, African women are still waiting for change regarding gender relations and participation in decision-making processes. Although regional gender mechanism and instruments have been created by AU and endorsed by sub-regional organs, their domestication and implementation still poses a serious problem in many of the member States because of deep rooted traditions and indigenous patriarchal customs. It seems that neither AU nor ECOWAS has the mandate to coerce the States to implement gender equality policies. This difficulty of implementing policies and reinforcing national laws resides in the multifaceted nature of the ECOWAS region itself where gender is still a very complex and sensitive issue because of the weight of age-old traditions and religion that deeply impact gender relationship in the communities. Women are trapped by those discourses and they unwittingly contribute in reinforcing men's supremacy over them. Consequently, they become “patriarchal women” who pay lip service to patriarchal customs by perpetuating its laws through the socialization of their children.

In addition, what might be regarded from a Western development perspective as areas of gender discrimination or inequality may not be considered as such by the stakeholders themselves. Deep-rooted belief in man’s superiority in many West African societies and his representation as the main breadwinner and provider for family’s needs, negatively impact the issue of gender equality in the ECOWAS region as women’s contribution is downplayed or even unrecognized in many instances. Hence, the legitimacy of their fight for equal opportunities and chances in terms of access to employment, education, well-paid jobs, career development and the fact of being ambitious are either denied or mocked at. Even through, today, the portrayal of the man as the head of the family and the sole breadwinner hides a painful and sad reality because women provide in certain families, as much as men, and in single mother families, their contribution is significant. Hence, women activists and gender specialists must debunk the fiction of the man as the main purveyor of family needs. Arguments in favor of gender hierarchy predicated on this belief must be dismantled and replaced by a sound and sustainable gender mainstreaming and equality policy otherwise; gender inequality and unequal distribution of resources and opportunities will have their own glass ceiling in ECOWAS region.

2.3. What is Gender Equality?

According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), gender equality is a concept that fosters a more inclusive approach to development and economic prosperity as it fosters the participation of men and women in decision-making processes on equal footing. It involves providing equal chance and opportunity to both women and men in terms of access to job, education, decent livelihood, health care services, etc. It includes also involving boys and girls, women and men in bringing about changes in mindsets and attitudes, roles and behaviors at home in workplace and schools and in communities regarding gender related issues and biases. USAID sustains that “genuine equality means more than parity in numbers or laws on the books; it means expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males or females.”

Consequently, gender equality carries the hope and expectation that prosperity and long-term development in Africa can be realized if both men and women, girls and boys are given the same chances, opportunities, choices, they can fulfill their destinies and take part in the building and development of their own families, communities and nations. Marshalling gender mainstreaming in school curricula, development programs, health care systems carry the seed of a bright and prosperous Africa for the Africans. Finding a solution to Africa’s endemic poverty and underdevelopment is tantamount to open the fetid sore of Africa’s gender-based discrimination. Opening this Pandora box can alleviate the pains of patriarchal domination and discriminatory practices endured by women since immemorial times.

In addition, gender equality is predicated on the idea of female empowerment that is “achieved when women and girls acquire the power to act freely, exercise their rights, and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society.” Empowerment can be effective if institutions and governments provide the necessary mechanisms for women to empower themselves. However, if these preconditions are not put forward, empowerment will never be totally attained. The empowerment of women can bring tremendous change in ECOWAS region as it will put an end to the injustice and disempowerment felt by women in their communities. When they are empowered economically, socially, legally and politically, women and girls become strong enough to face any challenge and speed up regional integration and development. Both men and women, institutions and individuals, will benefit from the gains of such achievement. A more equitable, serene and peaceful atmosphere is conducive to economic growth and prosperity. To realize this goal with success, ECOWAS must strengthen its capacity building through its Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure (GMI).

III. ECOWAS’ Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure: Assets and Liabilities

Gender Mainstreaming (GM) is defined as “a strategy for pushing through actual equal treatment of the genders.” Its main goal is to achieve gender equality. The UN Women define it as follow:

Hence, GM is the first step toward equality between men and women. It sets the milestone for social transformation involving the empowerment of women.
Gender and Regional Integration in West Africa

both men and women in order to fully contribute to their communities as well as exercising their rights. The inception and use of the moniker of GM dates back to the UN World Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1987. The strategy enters in force in 1995 during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing. Its principles were adopted by the Platform for Action (PFA). Ever since, the concept of gender mainstreaming has been endorsed by institutions, governments, gender agencies and specialists worldwide. GM has become the keystone of the gender policies of the African Union and sub-regional organizations. It is premised on the integration of gender in decisions, legal texts, policy making, project design and evaluation at all levels.

In this paper, the concept of gender mainstreaming infrastructure has been used to refer to the overall legal, political, institutional mechanisms and strategies put forward by ECOWAS in order to empower women and address gender related issues by providing pro-active responses to any act prone to reduce gender disparity or discrimination in the region. It encompasses strategies used by ECOWAS and stakeholders to instil gender awareness and integration in programs, policies at local, national, and regional levels. As far as the concept of infrastructure is concerned, it comes from the UN lexicon. The concept of Infrastructure for Peace (I4P) has been coined in this respect. Our use of the term infrastructure subscribes to the same framework.

Since the adoption of the Revised Treaty, it is emphasized that the mandate of ECOWAS goes beyond economic exchange. The revised Treaty clearly demonstrates that regional integration is not limited to economic cooperation, free movements of people and goods, trade agreements or shared monetary space. Regional Integration, as recent studies and research suggest, encompasses also a social dimension including good governance, human rights, and fair participation in decision-making processes, democracy, social justice, peace and security building, reduction of poverty, gender empowerment. This second aspect of regional integration is somehow misunderstood or glossed over by many specialists. According to René Robert, this is the institutional dimension of regional integration. It accounts for the responsibilities and capabilities of regional structures to solve certain acute problems like promoting social dialogue, fostering and regulating labor standards and laws, securing social justice, conflict resolution and promoting gender equality. In this regard, the revised ECOWAS Treaty includes a provision on gender policies related to the empowerment of women within the ECOWAS region in line with the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. In the Article 63 of the ECOWAS revised Treaty titled: “Women and Development”, member States are encouraged to “formulate, harmonize, co-ordinate and establish appropriate policies and mechanisms for the enhancement of the economic, social and cultural conditions of women.”

In the past fifteen years, ECOWAS has mapped out its strategic plans for gender mainstreaming and equality so as to be in tune with AU political will toward reducing gender imbalance in Africa. This political will is spotlighted by AU Gender policy Architecture whose latest tier is the High Level Panel on Gender Equity and Empowerment in Africa (HLP on GEWE). AU paves the way for regional organizations like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC) and ECOWAS to follow the same path. The ECOWAS’ GMI is ambitious and path breaking. Its blueprint and agenda tally perfectly with the AU Action plans for the elimination of gender disparity and discrimination for the sake of economic growth and sustainable development in Africa.

Over the years, ECOWAS has strengthened its capacity building in terms of gender mainstreaming toward regional integration and economic empowerment of women. It has put forward laudatory actions which boost its gender empowerment framework in order to render visible its Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure which is made of the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre.


43 Cf. ibid.

Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure is as an unattainable dream, ECOWAS equality appears in some countries. This statement implies that the economic dependence of women, the lack of financial resources, and the unfair cultural norms constitute loci of vulnerability that must be addressed by stakeholders in order to make the ECOWAS region free from AIDS. Such vulnerability can be combated by empowering women economically and politically and by changing social discourses and attitudes regarding women's and men's roles in society. Most of the Family Codes in force in West Africa are grounded on a gender hierarchy where men have all the rights and privileges and women have only duties. Attributing subservient and inferior roles to women by asking them to obey their husbands can be disempowering and dangerous as they may force women to remain in risky relationships. And socio-economic problems may limit women's access to counselling and treatment. In this kind of set-up, women do not own property or have access to financial resources and are dependent on their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons for support. Without resources, women are susceptible to sexual violence, and the threat of this violence also limits women's ability to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS.\(^{46}\)

This interplay between disease and gender seems to be pertinent regarding HIV/AIDS, malaria and Sexual Transmitted Disease (STDs) where women bear the brunt of the infections. According to Elizabeth N. Mataka, United Nations Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Africa, women make up half of the adults living with HIV/AIDS in the world. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), of the 23 million of adults living with HIV, 13.1 million, about 57 percent, are women.\(^{45}\) In addition, Elizabeth Mataka has disclosed the root causes of women's and girls' vulnerability compared to young men and adults. She surmises the main factors of female vulnerability are follow:

The socio-economic status disparity between men and women has a great impact in fuelling the spread of HIV, among women and girls in particular. Cultural norms and early marriages further increase the vulnerability of young girls to infection. Poor communication around sex issues limits their ability to negotiate safer practices and

Women’s affairs testify to the upsurge of interest in gender issues in the region. It is obvious that ECOWAS has gained a significant momentum in its agenda of women’s empowerment as gender mainstreaming is being enshrined in regional academic and research institutions. The CODESRIA Gender Institute annually brings together researchers, gender specialists and academics of social sciences to reflect on the situation of gender for the sake of yielding solutions that will reduce the gender gap in the region. These academic meetings are incremental efforts to instigate a public debate and lobbying directed toward women’s empowerment so that they can play fully their roles in regional integration and development processes. For instance, the theme of the CODESRIA Gender Institute (Session 2016) is the following: “Gender, Diseases and Public Health Governance in Africa.” The 2016 session will take place in Dakar on the 14th -15th July. The gender institute aims at analyzing the nexus between the apparatus and frequency of certain infections among women and their traditional gender roles and how this condition makes them more vulnerable compared to men. It seeks to show if engendering public health governance is not a solution to eradicate certain diseases that seem to be endemic among women.

Over the past decade, ECOWAS’GMI has been organizing fora, workshops, seminars, meetings and joint actions with stakeholders to reduce the gender gap despite the existence of domestic laws that still reinforce men’s domination over women. Even though gender equality appears in some countries as an unattainable dream, ECOWAS Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure is striving to bring about changes in behaviors, mindset and attitudes regarding women’s conditions in the region. The increase of ministries, agencies, and directorates devoted to gender and women’s affairs testify to the upsurge of interest in gender issues in the region.
become less free to make good decision and protect themselves against unsafe relationships and their attendant health hazards. Discourses and practices that perpetuate the idea of girls’ inferiority and women’s infantilism and immaturity are used as arguments to control their lives and hinder their emancipation and autonomy.

As a matter of fact, sensitization must start at family level where mothers must be empowered enough so as to empower their daughters. Women and girls can be protected from the AIDS pandemic if they are given more choices and alternatives, when they are empowered and supported by their male partners and the society at large. ECOWAS’ Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure must contribute to create what Morell refers to as “more peaceful and harmonious masculinities” or “liberating masculinities”, the beautiful finding of Ezra Chitando and Sophie Chirongoma in their ground-breaking edited work, Redemptive Masculinity: Men, HIV, and Religion (2012). For them, “liberating masculinity” carries the idea of men who are not trapped in a negative sense of masculinity, rather, it is about men who are free and help set other free. The idea is also extended to men who seek to foster the health and well-being for all.48 The concept of “progressive” or “redemptive masculinities” are also used by the editors in order to show the responsibility of men and religious leaders in order to roll back the AIDS pandemic as far as women are concerned. These strategies have been beneficial in slowing down the infection rate in Zimbabwe and South Africa as well as diminishing women’s vulnerability.

West Africa can take inspiration from this example in order to train men through workshops and seminars so that they can become more progressive and help reach the zero infection, zero transmission and zero death rates propounded by AIDS/HIV programs. “Redemptive” and responsible masculinity behaviors can be a solution to the spread of the disease and the safeguarding of adolescent girls and boys’ health. School teachers, religious leaders, local chiefs and advocacy groups must be the agents in raising awareness regarding “dangerous” and “oppressive” masculinities and their roles in perpetuating gender bias, inequality, unsafe gender relation and the spread of AIDS/HIV and STDs. There is an urgent need to make men allies and actors in transforming the mindsets and attitudes regarding women so as to create gender equity and harmonious relationship. Only a holistic and gendered approach can yield efficient solution to this problem. In this regards, Ufo Okeke Uzodike and Christopher Isike raise the question of reinventing African patriarchies for the sake of women’s empowerment and the demise of AIDS pandemic and gender equality in Africa.49 According to them, colonialism has brought a capitalist form of patriarchy in Africa that endorses women’s inferiority and fosters dangerous masculinity that resists to and resents any discourse or program prone to bring about gender equity. According to them, African patriarchy, which used to be agrarian, bestows some positive roles to women. Hence, patriarchy must be reinvented and freed from the colonial distorted gender bias and relics.50 In this case, it is axiomatic for ECOWAS to address the legacies of colonialism in Africa which has wrought havoc in the gender relations as well as reinforcing women’s subordination and marginalization in decision-making processes. In grappling with this heavy heritage, it is likely to attain gender balance as well as safeguard women’s rights and health. This is more than a political responsibility; it is a moral one, according to the Africa Union. In fact, the AU regards women’s empowerment as a “moral obligation” a “development imperative” as well as a “smart investment” that is prone to preserve not only the health of African girls and women, but also to ensure a more incremental growth and fast-track the AIDS epidemic.51 Elizabeth Mataka recommends that States must go beyond gender mainstreaming in order to put forward concrete programs. Her position is the following:

African governments must commit to strengthening initiatives that increase capacities of individuals, especially women and children, to protect themselves. Empowerment of women should no longer be dealt with under the general heading of ‘Mainstreaming Gender in all Aspects of Development’. Empowerment of women, as well as

50 Cf. ibid., pp.34-36.
support for orphans and vulnerable children must move to the next level of well targeted, time-bound and well-funded programmes with measurable results.\(^{52}\)

As far as malaria is concerned, it continues to claim lots of children’s lives as well as endangering maternal and child health during pregnancy. ECOWAS is waging war against both AIDS and malaria through its healthcare programs and initiatives embedded in the West African Health Organization (WAHO) which is a proactive instrument for regional health integration aimed at enhancing programs dedicated to Child Survival, Control Epidemics, Drugs and Vaccine availability, HIV, AIDS, SDTs and Malaria prevention and treatment, etc.\(^{53}\) WAHO has been created in 1987 in order to harmonize regional health policies and synchronize member States’ efforts so as to be cost-effective and more efficient in their fight against diseases. It is in this spirit that the two health instruments in West Africa, the francophone Organisation de Coordination pour la Lutte contre les Grandes Endemies (OCCGE) and the Anglophone West African Health Community (WAHC) decide to join their forces and transcend their linguistic divide by creating WAHO whose Headquarter is based in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.\(^{54}\) Thanks to this fruitful collaboration and a sound partnership with the World Health Organization, UNICEF, West Africa has attained 99% of children’s vaccine against Polio disease. Similar joint efforts are being directed toward the eradication of HIV/AIDS and malaria in the region so as to realize the MDGs 5 in the region. With the joint effort of international and local agencies, the roll back malaria program and the zero infection and zero death catchword is being enshrined in regional and national policies. Gratuity of medication against malaria for children under and up to 5 years old; subsidised antiretroviral treatment against AIDS, HIV and free caesarian cutting have been implemented in Mali in order to improve maternal health, reduce child mortality and kick out AIDS/HIV and malaria of the country. These constitute some laudable efforts of national public health services to alleviate the dire condition of children and women who bear the brunt of all the new infected.

However, WAHO and its international partners have not succeeded in totally eradicating Malaria and AIDS/HIV which continue to claim the lives of Africa’s women children despite the existence of national healthcare systems and subsidies regarding medication for children from infancy to the age of five. ECOWAS member States celebrate every year the International Day of Malaria on April 25\(^{th}\) and they have pledged to eradicate this scourge in the coming decades. Malaria and HIV/AIDS constitute today the major impediments of sustainable development in Africa. Unsurprisingly, MDGs 3, 4 and 5 lay emphasis on the reduction of child mortality, the improvement of maternal health and the fight against HIV/AIDS and malaria and other infections. Yet, women and girls are still very vulnerable. Addressing those areas of vulnerability is a precondition to the eradication of HIV/AIDS and malaria. Empowering girls and women so that they can become agents for change and their own protection is primordial. As the Beijing Platform for Action recommends, “Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental to the achievement of equality, development and peace.”\(^{55}\)

In addition, at both institutional and family levels, it is important to create positive models of masculinity and femininity in order to fight against this scourge. A redemptive femininity and masculinity based on mutual help can stop the progression of these infections as men and women become empowered to address the issues of discriminatory gender norms and social practices that increase women’s vulnerability. Such empowerment, combined with a gendered and effective Public Health Management and policies, can be a solution to African women’s health conundrum and a pathway to a sound and fruitful regional integration, cooperation and sustainable growth.

The academic interest in gender mainstreaming is reflected also in the CODESRIA Gender Symposium which will take place in Cairo, Egypt on 9\(^{th}\)-11\(^{th}\) 2016 focuses on the following theme:

---

54 Cf. Ibid., p. 50.
55 UN (Women Watch, ed.): Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Fourth World Conference on Women. Adopted at the 16th plenary meeting, on 15 September 1995, p. 3.
“Women’s Struggles today.” Forty years after the creation of ECOWAS and twenty years after the endorsement of the Declaration of Beijing, women continue to wage war against manifold forms of discrimination and unfair customary laws that block their progress toward sustainable development and peace. No matter their difference in terms of locations, ethnicity and class, West African women are quibbling with the offshoots of globalization and attendant social injustice and impoverishment. Their struggles today bear many shades and are informed by multiple contingencies deriving from the socio-economic and historical realities that shape their existences and often determine their status and living conditions.

The actions of CODESRIA constitute laudable endeavors to promote gender equality and equity as well as instigate public awareness of and debate about gender issues. Such an endeavor must be followed up by universities and schools, which must include gender mainstreaming in the curricula and the overall management. In fact, gender must be integrated in curricula and pedagogy because every year thousands of young women abandon schools because they do not receive enough help in order to combine school and a family life. Relief centers and subsidized kindergarten must be created in order to allow those young mothers to continue and upgrade their studies. Such help can reduce the number of drops out of school and may constitute a strategy for female empowerment in the region. Acknowledging gender disparities and working towards its eradication are part of the realization of fundamental human rights in the sense that women’s rights are also human rights according to the Beijing Platform for Action.

It is undeniable that ECOWAS’ Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure has lots of assets which are consistent with the AU and global agenda toward achieving gender equality. In this regard, ECOWAS is fighting against great odds in order to create a serene and harmonious atmosphere of peace and stability in homes, schools working places through awareness campaigns, lobbying and monitoring of projects dedicated to optimize the capacities and capabilities of both men and women in realizing their dreams and attaining their objectives. Yet, certain liabilities constitute an impediment to the realization of gender equality. The challenge of ECOWAS’ Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure is to eradicate the scourge of gender inequality by transforming the liabilities that act as roadblocks into sustaining and tremendous assets for change. The pathway toward gender equality is beset with many obstacles although signs of bright prospects are expected to usher in a new dawn.

IV. Pathway toward Gender Equality: Challenges and Prospects

It is sad and disheartening to acknowledge that despite encouraging actions, women still face discrimination and marginalization and their activities are not visible. Although women make the bulk of traders, agricultural labor force and employees in many sectors, their contribution is seldom recognized and rewarded. This lack of visibility reflects the gender bias embedded in inquiries and research on women’s participation in the economic development of the region. Yet, it must be noted that this neglect is not peculiar to Africa, rather, it accounts for a global marginalization of women’s roles as drivers of economic growth and development. In this respect, it is worth mentioning Esther Boserup’s groundbreaking work on Woman’s Role on Economic Development (1970)\textsuperscript{56} which blazes the trail for many studies on the contribution of women in the economic sector worldwide. Her work emphasizes women’s active participation in agricultural and industrial sectors. Boserup shows how development policies have been discriminatory against women.

According to Lourdes Beneria and Gita Sen, her book constitutes “a comprehensive and pioneering effort to provide an overview of women’s role in the development process. In the literature on development, the specific role of women had been largely ignored, particularly the question of how development affects women’s subordinate position in most societies.”

Therefore, Boserup calls for the implementation of gender-conscious policies and processes aimed at empowering women so as to increase their agricultural outputs. Her pioneering study provides food for thought and actions towards more inclusive and fairer development policies in the world.

Similarly, recent research reveals that women make up almost 50 percent of the agricultural labor force in sub-Saharan Africa. In West Africa, they constitute more than 60% of the agricultural labor force and their share in the food production is estimated to about 60-70% in certain parts of the sub-region. The same accounts for small scale trade and fishing as well as food processing. In this respect, they dedicate 85 to 90 percent of the time to household food processing and preparation in addition of taking care of the children and the remaining household chores.

This output can be improved if women were given more facilities in terms of access to land, credits, funds, fertilizers and transportation. In order to keep pace with the population growth in West Africa, it is urgent to give women more land and facilities to women so as to optimize their output and help fight against famine and food shortage. In addition, agriculture constitutes the backbone of the ECOWAS region as it provides up to 35 percent of the region’s Gross Domestic Product and the export of agricultural products generates around six billion.

It is important to note that the patriarchal nature of many West African societies impede women’s access to landownership. As the man is considered to be the sole head of the family, hence, the breadwinner, the land tenure tends to favor him whereas the woman is relegated in the back seat. This bias against women is strengthened by customary laws in force in many West African countries. In likewise, public investments and international policies are also male-centered. The same is true for elective and power-decision positions. Recently, in Mali, a political party, Sabati 2012, affiliated to Muslim leaders, blocks the examination of a bill about gender parity in elective and nominal positions. They contend that Mali doesn’t need gender parity because “democracy is not something you impose on people, but rather, something that must be built bit by bit.” The members of this movement assert that gender parity and the quota system embedded in the bill is nothing but an affirmative action which is prone to promote “incompetent” women and leave aside “competent” men who are the breadwinners. Because of their overt opposition to the text, the parliament reneges on its decision to review the bill and decides to delay it sine die.

It is no surprise that Mali ranks 50 out of 52 African countries on the 2015 African Development Bank Gender Equality Index which measures gender equality in terms of three parameters: economic empowerment, human development and access to legal institutions. Hopefully, after hard negotiations and heated debates, Malian parliament has finally voted the law on the promotion of gender in nominative and elective posts, giving women 30 percent on January 11 2016. This is a steady inroad, but we are still far from the parity 50/50.

The failure to mainstream progressive laws in terms of women’s empowerment constitutes a major roadblock to gender equality and equity and real obstacle to the effective participation of women in regional integration and cooperation. These “monsters” from within are prone to mire all the mechanisms and strategic plans implemented by ECOWAS in the past years in order to empower women and make them the genuine agents of development.

Passing and implementing effective laws and policies aimed at strengthening women’s access to decision-making posts, investment, land and justice can
accelerate regional economic integration, boost African economy and quicken the realization of Agenda 2063 which is Africa’s roadmap and new catchword that make gender equality and equity the fulcrum of the continent’s socio-economic development. Cognizant that without gender equality the continent long term development project will be a mere dream, the Session of the African Union Heads of States’ Summit held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on January 30-31, launches 2015 the “Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development towards Africa’s Agenda 2063”. The summit also calls for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action towards a transformational change for women and girls in Africa. Obviously, 2015 is a landmark year in the fight for women’s empowerment. Two historic events set the milestone for the abolition of genital mutilation ban.

The second laudatory act comes from the Gambian President, His Excellency Yahya Jammeh who declared on November 23 that FGM is banned in Gambia with immediate effect. It is crucial to take stock of these achievements and ponder over what need to be done so that other African presidents and policy makers tread on the footsteps of these two African Heads of States. Recently, there is a rise of radical Islamism in certain ECOWAS region which is manifested by an upsurge of gender violence in the form of wife beating, femicide and kidnapping. Recent events in Mali augur a relapse of gender-based violence with the brutal murder of a young woman by her own husband.

Women’s empowerment is linked to the fight against insecurity. In conflicts ridden areas, women are vulnerable and are prone to rape, famine and other forms of violations of their rights. These acts constitute serious barriers to the effective implementation of regional integration and sustainable growth. Mainstreaming gender in regional organizations and institutions must go hand in hand in protecting women against gender based-violence. Women can boost regional integration only if they are empowered and secured enough. Domestic violence often prevents women to play fully their roles in integration and development processes as their movements and actions are hampered by their husbands. Female empowerment involves protecting women against gender-based violence and fostering more friendly gender relations.

However, challenges still persist in regards to concrete actions about gender equality and women’s empowerment in Africa. The revised treaty will not be effective if member States fail to enforce it and adapt it to their own national laws and regulations. States must go beyond political rhetoric and declaration of intent and put forward concrete actions in the ground. More, ECOWAS must impose sanctions on all those States that fail to adjust their national laws to the revised Treaty or refuse to abide by its policies and mechanisms regarding gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment. Sanctions must go hand in hand with lobbying of decision makers at the governmental levels. Importantly, ECOWAS must establish a gender equality index whose annual report will not only highlight the overall gender related issues in the region, but it will also spotlight countries that are doing well in reducing gender gap and those that lag behind and deserve sanctions. A gender Award for the ECOWAS region can be created in this respect in order to reward presidents, head of states, NGOs or individuals whose actions contribute to change attitudes and beliefs that sustain gender violence and inequity. ECOWAS must provide financial and logistical support to the activities of NGOs and grassroot initiatives in order to eradicate ingrained gender discrimination and attain equality at all levels. Annual workshops and seminars can be organized by ECOWAS through its Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure to disseminate information and training materials about gender empowerment. Finally, ECOWAS must advocate for legal measures and implement legislation that will make gender inequality a criminal offence. If all these actions are followed by an effective law enforcement against gender discrimination, this will stop if not, slow down, practices and attitudes that foster gender inequality in the region.

In order to be effective and efficient in its commitment to reduce poverty and empower women, ECOWAS must engender regional integrations policies so as to better address the specific needs of women who not only carry the double yoke of gender and class oppressions, but are also forgotten by public investment or their needs are not well addressed by international agencies and national NGOs. Women constitute the bulk of small-scale traders in the sub-region and they largely contribute to better the living conditions of their families and communities at large. Not only do they constitute the backbone of the family, but they play a major role in the West African economy. They are the linchpins of the agriculture, farming, fishing, industry and trade in the region. Women’s empowerment can be a solution to the brain drain and the illegal immigration. Every year, hundreds of West African youth perish in the Atlantic Ocean in their blind obsession to flee from misery and poverty of their countries. Such death harks back with irony the Middle Passage during which millions of African slaves perish in the slave ships during the agonizing journey to the New World. It is sad to realize that unlike the forced crossing during which the slaves were chained up and died because of horrific living conditions, today, there is a voluntary crossing which is tantamount to suicide. The sole ambition of those desperate young women and men is to get a better economic situation in Europe in order to help their mothers, sisters and wives.

In addition, ECOWAS ought to address the discrepancy that exists between rural women who suffer from illiteracy, food shortage, lack of clean drinkable water, dearth of modern facilities and want. They must be empowered socio-economically in order to be able to rise at the challenges of the MDGs. Even if they share some of the problems with their counterparts’ urban women, the latter are more equipped and have more access to health care services, bank credit, and investment. Moreover, girl’s education has been spearheaded by many ECOWAS States in the past twenty years as they have mainstreamed gender parity in the enrollment policies in public schools. Awareness campaigns have been launched everywhere in order to sensitize parents about the importance of girl’s education. These were landmark and very laudatory responses to gender inequity in the region. Yet, it must be noted that there is no need sending girls to school if they have very little chance to attain university levels and upgrade their studies because of indigenous customs (early or forced marriage, early pregnancy, the dictatorship of families in-laws, customary laws regarding women’s rights in marriage etc.) that entrap them. In West Africa, many women and girls are still under the shackles of harmful traditional practices that hinder their participation in the development of their countries. Besides, lot of girls drop out of schools prematurely because of poverty and sundry family problems. Sending girls to school is not enough. It is axiomatic to keep them at school by all costs. This is another pitfall of women’s empowerment and a real impediment to their participation in regional integration and cooperation policies.

V. Recommendations and the Way Forward

ECOWAS must strengthen its vigilance and capacity building in order to effectively deal with the hurdles of women’s empowerments, otherwise, its efforts will be trampled underfoot. It is necessary to put forward vigilance committees in order to ensure the full implementation of the Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure and a thorough revision of discriminatory laws against women. Those vigilance committees must act as magnets in order to impel immediate application of gender equality laws by reporting any violation and by punishing the trespassers. Most member States have not succeeded yet in protecting girls against nefarious traditional customs such as FGM even though they have signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Although Amnesty International and its partners, and the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women (IAC), actively fight against Female Genital mutilation, the practice still continues underground. Formed in Dakar in 1984 and now based in Addis Ababa, IAC is a non-governmental orga-
nization that combats and condemns all forms of nefarious traditional practices that endanger women’s security, sanity and body integrity. It has branches in 28 countries among which lot of ECOWAS member States. Its mission is to “promote gender equality and contribute to the improvement of the health status, social, economic, political, human rights and quality of life of African women and children through elimination of harmful traditional practices and the promotion of beneficial ones.” ECOWAS can rely on IAC and support their fight in order to achieve gender equality.

Furthermore, young girls still fall prey to early marriages and pregnancies, domestic violence, rape, clandestine abortions and infanticide. The rural exodus provides a fertile ground for all these ills to strive. The majority of little girls who go to big cities in order to find a better economic opportunity, end up either pregnant, or catch some STDs. They either abandon the unwanted babies or commit infanticide. Most of the domestic servants or maids employed in many West African countries are not educated. Owing to their young age and their economic precariousness, some of them are easily turned to sexual slaves.

Eliminating FGM and all forms of gender-based violence must be the objectives of ECOWAS if it wants to make women agents of regional integration. It is urgent for ECOWAS to be more vigilant and more coercive regarding these points if it wants its gender policy to be efficient and sustainable. As the sub-regional organization, ECOWAS must act as a magnet in order to keep pace with the needs and expectations of the girl child and women so as to successfully take up the millennium challenges of development and women’s empowerment.

Good governance, democratic transitions, free movement of peoples and strong trade cooperation constitute the pillars of all integration policies. However, without the socio-economic empowerment of more than the half of its population, regional integration will remain an unfinished scheme, a utopian. ECOWAS must reinforce it GMI so that West African women can get their fair share in this context of globalization and rapid social change. Engendering integration and development policies and processes can provide a solution to ingrained gender inequity in the region. This must be the lodestar of the sub-regional organization and the only way forward for the coming fifty years. Moreover, global agendas about the reduction of gender gap also zero in on the empowerment of women as a giant step in achieving gender equity and bringing prosperity in the world. Hilary Clinton, the democrat party’s candidate reaffirms this global commitment when she says that “Achieving our objectives for global development will demand accelerated efforts to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. Otherwise, peace and prosperity will have their own glass ceiling.” By 2020, the regional population is expected to reach 430 million and half a billion in 2040. With such accelerated population growth, the regional organization must take action in order to eradicate all forms of gender-based discrimination and inequality so that women can become fully-fledged agents in the development of their region. The Media can play a paramount role in shifting attitudes and behaviors regarding girls and women for a positive change. This potential of the Media to impact on policies at national and international levels regardless of boundaries has increased significantly thanks to the progress realized in information technology and communication.

The ECOWAS’ Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructures address most of these twelve critical areas of concern. The spirit of the GMI is germane to the latter.

ECOWAS must work in order to set up policies about providing unemployment relief to women who constitute the bulk of the unemployed in the region. Instead of living in the shadows of men, they must be given financial assistance. The danger of women’s economic dependence on men is that they are limited in their potential of the Media to impact on policies at national and international levels regardless of boundaries has increased significantly thanks to the progress realized in information technology and communication. One of the twelve critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action calls for the involvement of the Media to contribute to the advancement of women. The other critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action address the issues of women and armed conflict, women and poverty, women and training and education, women and health, human rights of women, violence against women, women in power and decision making, women and the economy, women and the environment, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, etc. The ECOWAS’ Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructures address most of these twelve critical areas of concern. The spirit of the GMI is germane to the latter.

ECOWAS must work in order to set up policies about providing unemployment relief to women who constitute the bulk of the unemployed in the region. Instead of living in the shadows of men, they must be given financial assistance. The danger of women’s economic dependence on men is that they are limited in


68 Ibid.
their choices in terms of sexual partners, marriage, and protection against infectious diseases. More, they are less free to take decisions and actions regarding birth control, children’s education and their own participation in activities that can boost their health and increases their gains. By providing mothers with unemployment benefit coupled with child benefits can relieve the suffering and untold want of thousands of ECOWAS women who strive to make ends meet. As far as older women are concerned, equal pensions at retirement can help them improve their health and living conditions in general as studies reveal there is a great disparity in pensions’ treatment between men and women. An equal pension treatment can increase significantly elder women’s life expectancy.

Last, but not least, ECOWAS must foster the creation and preservation of what Patricia Collins, an African American feminist theorizing on Black Feminism, calls “safe spaces.” Those safe spaces have been the sites of Black women’s struggle for voice, recognition, equality and empowerment in the United States of America since the times of slavery. They encompass women’s relationships with one another (female friendship, sisterhood, family interactions, mother-daughter relationship or dyad); the black churches and black women’s organizations. These locations have been traditionally the safe spaces that enable women’s empowerment as well as nurture women’s communities so that they can construct viable individual and collective identities. She adds that “By advancing Black women’s empowerment through self-definition, these safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside the Black civil society but within African American institutions.” ECOWAS can take inspiration from the struggle of black women in America so as to create and safeguard safe spaces for African girls and women by guaranteeing their rights, supporting their actions through NGOs, grassroots organizations, movements and associations, as well as ensuring their socio-economic and political empowerment. West African patriarchies have transformed women into enemies, rivals who are always fighting with one another or competing in an endless quest for domination or love for a man. It is high time to change this behavior by promoting sisterhood and friendship, serene and harmonious family atmosphere so that women can contribute to empower one another and their daughters. Eliminating animosity, social barriers and fostering the creation of safe spaces, networks and communities, in transforming the loci of oppression and discrimination like schools, work places, markets, families, etc, into safer spaces, ECOWAS will contribute to empower women and make them agents of regional integration. In this way, the ECOWAS region will become a better and safer place for women.

It is worth mentioning that ECOWAS, through its GMI, has made great strides in reducing gender inequality in many areas. But, overarching questions need to be addressed with bold engagement. The issue of pension regarding elder women and that of the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and HIV/AIDS infections by young women and girls still constitute a great concern in many ECOWAS States. Given that recent studies establish a nexus between integration and human development, the latter can contribute to achieve this goal. Implementing an all-inclusive approach to regional integration and development policies must be the cornerstone of ECOWAS’ GMI in the coming decades so as to be in tune with the Beijing Platform for Action. The implementation of gender equality requires a paradigm shift, a strong political will, a holistic approach, and the promotion of “transformative masculinities” because of ingrained and age-old gender stereotypes heaped on women. Such an initiative has a strong paradigm shift implication that requires thought and practice, theories and actions. The implementation of gender equality requires above all an ethic of praxis, a gender praxis.

---


72 Ibid., p. 111.
VI. Conclusion

This paper has taken stock of the achievements of ECOWAS for the implementation of gender equality as it is recommended by the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals. The paper has examined the Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure set up by ECOWAS in order to attain gender equality for the sake of regional integration and prosperity. It has been demonstrated that momentous strides have been realized over the past fifteen years even though gender discrimination is rebounding in certain areas. Despite huge challenges, prospects for the future are bright and trustworthy as ECOWAS is going to be the watchdog for the realization of Agenda 2063 and the 12 core areas of the Beijing Platform. In making gender equality its battle horse, ECOWAS symbolizes than ever the pan-African ideals of African renaissance and integration embedded in the African Union. It emphasizes that the economic and cultural regeneration of the continent reside in the active involvement of men and women, boys and girls. The long-standing and long awaited dream of African unity for African development is entrenched in the unity of the States and the peoples. Such a unity must start in the family. Men and women must be partners and complement one another instead of being constantly at daggers drawn with one another like foes. This idea is deeply rooted in the African womanism, which unlike certain Western Feminism does not consider men to be enemies, but rather partners, solid props whose unfailing support can bring about positive change and prosperity in Africa.

In this regard, ECOWAS must lay emphasis on women’s agency and great contribution in the realization of their rights and the attainment of gender equality. Women must be depicted as key stakeholders and reliable agents in this battle rather than mere victims. ECOWAS must provide room for them to spotlight their achievements and account for the way forward. Women must be put in the limelight in order to be the mouthpiece for their silenced sisters and daughters who chafe under the weight of untold prejudice and discrimination. The ethic of gender equality, women’s empowerment and women’s agency must be staunchly enshrined in the agenda of ECOWAS Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure. Women and men, policy makers and institutions are morally responsible for carrying out this noble and rewarding task. Since gender mainstreaming is not an end itself but a strategy, it requires an ongoing and sustaining effort to oversee its implementation and maintenance.

Hopefully, a mammoth step has been attained with the adoption of the 1993 revised Treaty and its attendant Gender Mainstreaming Infrastructure. Nevertheless, ECOWAS must not rest on its laurels; rather, it must be unstinting in its effort of following up, supervising, evaluating and monitoring of gender integration and equality and its domestication in member States. In doing so, the sub-regional eagle will fly high above the narrow constraints of patriarchal norms and its trail of ingrained gender hierarchy.
VII. References


Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices (IAC), in: http://www.iac-ciaf.net/


UN (Women Watch, ed.): Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Fourth World Conference on Women. Adopted at the 16th plenary meeting, on 15 September 1995.


