



**Assessing Women and Youth Inclusion in ECOWAS Peace and Security
Architecture: Breaking Barriers for Regional Stability**

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Abstract

Women and youth are integral stakeholders in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. While ECOWAS has adopted critical frameworks on women peace and security and youth policy in the sub region, there still exist gaps in their inclusion in vital decision-making positions on security governance. The paper therefore aimed to ascertain the level of women and youth involvement in ECOWAS peace and security architecture. It also seeks to identify the challenges affecting their inclusion and proffer recommendations to strengthen their participation in ECOWAS peace and security architecture for regional stability. Anchored on the human security theory which suggest that security should be people-cantered, and as such women and youth who are often the most affected by conflict, should be involved in ECOWAS peace and security architecture, data was sourced from secondary sources and the method utilised in collection was the documentary review and digital archives of ECOWAS and other relevant organizations. Analysis was conducted by grouping the data into relevant themes and examined using content analysis. Findings reveal that women and youth are included in ECOWAS peace and security architecture, often occupying advisory and supportive roles but not very visible in critical strategic decision-making roles. The challenges are more structural and political than institutional. It was also revealed that the ECOWAS has put in place strategies to enhance the capacity of women and youth in the subregion. Particularly, the gender development center of the commission has provided critical support to the integration of gender inclusive polices and political and social stability within the ECOWAS space. The study affirms that structural barriers are deeply rooted in patriarchal and cultural biases and such, recommends further strengthening of existing policies to with clearer enforcement and accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Conflict Prevention, ECOWAS Peace and Security framework, Regional Stability, Security Architecture.



1. INTRODUCTION

The growing wave of insecurity across West Africa marked by terrorism, insurgency, military coups, and communal violence, has made it increasingly clear that lasting peace depends on inclusive and participatory peacebuilding. These security threats are complex, interconnected, and spread across the region, each demanding specific, context-sensitive strategies to build and maintain lasting peace and stability.

The continent of Africa has witnessed a number of long-term, severe and, often, inter-related crises and violent conflict. From the proliferation of arms in the Sahel-Sahara belt in Africa, to the Boko Haram wave of attacks in Nigeria, these challenges underscore the urgent need for collective, homegrown solutions to restore stability and foster lasting peace. The security challenges in North African countries have been continuously getting worse, especially since 2011 popular upheavals. The conflict in Libya stands out as a major obstacle for North Africa. Which has evolved into a complicated interaction of political and military factions (Quainoo, 2023).

The West African sub-region has long been plagued by political instability, armed conflicts, and recurring humanitarian crises. In recent years, the resurgence of human trafficking across sub-Saharan Africa has further reflected the deeply rooted insecurity and widespread poverty confronting the continent. Extremism and transnational organized crime have increasingly transcended national borders, reinforcing the urgent need for a coordinated regional security strategy. Border areas, in particular, remain highly vulnerable to these spillover effects.

Empirical evidence points to a steady escalation of violence since 2017, with jihadist attacks spreading beyond the Sahel into coastal West African states. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2023) and reports from the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo have all recorded rising incidences of extremist attacks linked to groups operating from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The situation in Niger, in particular, has deteriorated sharply, with the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2024) documenting increased militant activity along its borders.



These trends highlight the expanding geography of insecurity in West Africa and the urgent need for comprehensive, cross-border responses (Quainoo, 2023).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) emerges as a crucial regional actor in addressing these multifaceted challenges. Established on May 28, 1975, through the Treaty of Lagos, ECOWAS comprises fifteen West African countries with a shared vision of peace, security, and economic integration. Although originally founded to promote economic cooperation across sectors such as industry, agriculture, energy, and finance, the organization's mandate has since evolved to include peacebuilding and conflict prevention. The 1993 Revised Treaty further emphasized democratic governance, the rule of law, and collective security. Through mechanisms like the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), ECOWAS has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to restoring peace and fostering stability in the region, particularly in countries affected by civil unrest and armed insurgency (Boutellis, 2011).

Over the past two decades, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has made notable progress in institutionalizing gender and youth perspectives within its peace and security agenda. The 2004 ECOWAS Gender Policy marked a historic milestone as the first regional framework dedicated to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across member states (ECOWAS Commission, 2004). Building on this foundation, the 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) incorporated human security and gender-sensitive approaches to conflict prevention, emphasizing the inclusion of women and youth as critical stakeholders in early-warning systems and peacebuilding processes (ECOWAS, 2008; Aning & Bah, 2009).

In alignment with global norms, ECOWAS developed a Regional Action Plan (RAP) in 2010 to implement United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, focusing on women's participation in peace negotiations, leadership roles, and protection from conflict-related sexual violence (UNOWAS, 2010). This was followed by the 2015 Supplementary Act on Gender Equality, which provided a legally binding framework for equal rights and non-discrimination across all member states, an advancement from policy to enforceable regional law (ECOWAS, 2015). Furthermore, the 2016 Supplementary Act



on Security Sector Reform and Governance (SSRG) reinforced inclusive and accountable security institutions, stressing women's and youth's representation in defense, policing, and justice sectors (ECOWAS, 2016; Ekiyor, 2017). In response to global normative frameworks such as United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 1325 and 2250, ECOWAS developed the *Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Regional Action Plan* and corresponding Youth Policy to mainstream inclusion across its peace and security institutions (ECOWAS Commission, n.d.).

Despite these frameworks, implementation remains inconsistent. Only 7 out of 15 ECOWAS member states have developed National Action Plans for UNSCR 1325, and fewer have allocated budgets for execution (ECOWAS Gender Development Centre, n.d.). This is in spite of ECOWAS strategically positioned as a critical body in regional conflict prevention and management. While women and young people constitute a substantial proportion of the population and are often the most affected by violent conflict, they remain marginalized in decision-making circles (Afolabi, 2022). This study therefore seeks to ascertain the level of inclusion of women and youth in ECOWAS's peace and security framework, explore the barriers to their full participation, and propose practicable recommendations to strengthen inclusivity as a pathway to sustainable regional stability.

2. Conceptual Clarification

It is critical to conceptually clarify the key concepts in this paper. Hence, the clarification is provided in the following themes.

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding refers to a comprehensive process aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict and creating the structural conditions necessary for sustainable peace. It encompasses activities that promote reconciliation, strengthen governance institutions, advance social justice, and foster inclusive economic development (Boutellis, 2011; Ojo & Olayinka, 2022). Essentially, peacebuilding moves beyond the cessation of hostilities to focus on long-term stability and resilience within societies emerging from conflict. As such, it is the foundation upon which regional peace and a robust security architecture is built. As submitted by Aning & Bah (2009), peacebuilding requires inclusive



participation, particularly of women and youth, in local decision-making and security processes. Hence, it is a more wholistic approach that seeks to address the underlying factors that lead to a conflict. It evaluates the key drivers of conflict by examining the political, social, or economic problems of the society (Abdussalam & Labaran, 2022)

Conflict Prevention

Conflict prevention encompasses a broad spectrum of political, diplomatic, developmental, and socio-economic measures aimed at addressing the underlying causes of instability before they escalate into violent conflict. It emphasizes proactive engagement through dialogue, mediation, institutional reform, and equitable development. It is grounded in the notion that the human, economic, and institutional cost of violent conflict far outweigh those of proactive prevention (United Nations, 2020). The approaches to conflict prevention are more multidimensional in nature combining political, socioeconomic and developmental, and socio-economic approaches. These measures aim not only to defuse immediate triggers of conflict but also to address the root causes which are inequality, poverty, poor governance, and marginalization

Regional Stability

Regional stability refers to a situation in which a group of bounded geographically experience relative peace, security, and similarities in political, economic, and social relations. It also implies coming together to ensure cooperative mechanisms for conflict resolution and absence of violent conflict. There is also the presence of an institutions and peaceful mandated to ensure cooperation and peaceful coexistence. The legitimacy of governance systems, and the ability of states within the region to collectively respond to internal and external threats is of priority in regional stability. This is because stability depends on the strength of political institutions, the degree of economic interdependence, and the quality of regional diplomacy.

Women and Youth inclusion in Peace and Security Architecture: Global and Regional Policy Context

Globally, the integration of women and youth into peace and security frameworks has



gained significant momentum over the past two decades, reflecting a paradigm shift from state-centric security models to human-centered approaches. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) provided the foundational normative framework for the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, recognizing women not only as victims of conflict but as essential agents of conflict prevention and peacebuilding process. It emphasizes four critical pillars, participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery, urging member states to ensure women's full involvement in all stages of peace processes (United Nations, 2000). Building on this foundation, UNSCR 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace, and Security expanded the global discourse by formally recognizing the role of young people in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. It set the pace for inclusive representation, meaningful participation, and empowerment of youth in peacebuilding, governance, and community resilience efforts (United Nations, 2015). As a result of this, the groundwork for a complementary global agenda that views women and youth as central stakeholders in sustaining peace was laid.

Beyond UNSCR 1325 and 2250, the international community has developed a comprehensive normative ecosystem for inclusive peace and security. UNSCR 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), and 2242 (2015) have collectively strengthened the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda by addressing sexual violence in conflict, monitoring and accountability, and operational implementation (Coomaraswamy, 2015). Similarly, UNSCR 2419 (2018) complemented Resolution 2250 by emphasizing the role of youth in peacebuilding across conflict and post-conflict settings (Simpson, 2018). The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also provide foundational legal and policy instruments that obligate states to ensure gender equality in all spheres, including peace and security (UN Women, 2015). The African Union has domesticated these global norms through instruments such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol, 2003) and the African Youth Charter (2006), both of which emphasize the rights and responsibilities of women and youth in governance and peacebuilding (African Union, 2006).



ECOWAS, aligning with these international frameworks, has developed the Women, Peace and Security Regional Action Plan and complementary Youth, Peace and Security initiatives. These policies demonstrate regional commitment to inclusive peacebuilding, though implementation remains inconsistent across member states (Afolabi, 2022; ECOWAS Commission, n.d.). The ECOWAS WPS Regional Action Plan (2020-2024) specifically outlines five pillars: prevention, protection, participation, relief and recovery, and normative frameworks (ECOWAS Commission, 2020). Furthermore, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), adopted in 2008, explicitly recognizes gender and youth as cross-cutting themes in conflict prevention and peacebuilding (Iwilade & Agbo, 2012). However, studies reveal that only seven of the fifteen ECOWAS member states have developed National Action Plans (NAPs) on UNSCR 1325, and fewer have allocated sufficient budgets or monitoring mechanisms for implementation (Hendricks & Hutton, 2017). This implementation gap reflects broader challenges of translating regional commitments into national practice, often due to competing political priorities, inadequate financing, and weak institutional capacities (Olonisakin et al., 2011).

Recent scholarship and policy frameworks recognize that women and youth are more than just victims of violent conflict but also, critical stakeholders in the peace and security architecture. The adoption of UNSCR 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security and UNSCR 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security catalyzed inclusive preventive initiatives across West Africa. ECOWAS's Gender and Youth Division has since mainstreamed these principles, emphasizing women's and youth's participation in mediation, community dialogue, and peace education (UNOWAS, 2019; Sefa-Nyarko, 2022). Empirical studies show that prevention efforts that incorporate women and youth leadership yield more durable peace outcomes (Aghedo & Eke, 2021).

ECOWAS Institutional Mechanisms for Women and Youth Inclusion

ECOWAS has institutionalized several mechanisms to advance gender equality and youth inclusion in regional peace and security governance. These initiatives reflect the organization's recognition that inclusive participation is essential to sustainable peace, development, and democratic stability in the region. Among the key institutional instruments are the ECOWAS Centre for Gender Development (CCGD) and the



ECOWAS Youth Policy Framework, which serve as the main regional platforms for mainstreaming gender and youth perspectives in policy formulation and implementation (CCGD, 2024–2025).

Created in 2003, the ECOWAS Centre for Gender Development (CCGD), based in Dakar, Senegal, is the main body responsible for promoting gender mainstreaming across ECOWAS policies and programs (ECOWAS, 2010). Its role centers around drafting gender policies, offering technical guidance to member states, carrying out gender audits, and tracking the implementation of gender-related commitments (Ndiaye, 2018). Over the years, the Centre has developed important regional tools such as the ECOWAS Gender Policy (2004), the Supplementary Act on Equality of Rights Between Women and Men (2015), and the Regional Action Plan for implementing UNSCR 1325 and 1820 (2020-2024) (ECOWAS Commission, 2020).

In addition to the CCGD, ECOWAS has put in place other structures to promote inclusion. The Directorate of Political Affairs, Peace and Security hosts a Gender and Women Empowerment Unit tasked with ensuring that gender perspectives are included in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and post-war recovery efforts (Bakare, 2015). The West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), although an independent civil society actor, functions as an official partner to ECOWAS and runs the ECOWARN early warning system, which tracks gender-based violence and youth radicalization as part of its monitoring indicators (Wuye & Aneji, 2020).

On youth inclusion, ECOWAS adopted the Strategic Framework for Youth and Youth Employment in West Africa (2020-2024) to ensure that youth voices are reflected in regional programs (ECOWAS Commission, 2020). However, unlike the CCGD, there is no equivalent ECOWAS Centre for Youth Development with strong institutional backing, highlighting a gap in commitment between gender and youth mainstreaming (Oosterom, 2019). Most youth engagement takes place through collaborations with networks like the West African Youth Network (WAYN) and the Réseau des Organisations de la Jeunesse de l'Afrique Francophone (ROJAF), which often lack stable funding and political recognition (Chacha, 2020).



Despite these frameworks, the actual presence of women and youth in high-level decision-making platforms such as the Mediation and Security Council or ECOWAS strategic committees remains low. As noted by Afolabi (2022) and Owie (2019), current efforts tend to be procedural rather than transformative. ECOWAS Commission data (2021) shows that women make up only 18% of professional staff and less than 10% of senior leadership within the Directorate of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (Gbowee, 2020). Youth inclusion is even more limited, with individuals under 35 holding fewer than 5% of decision-making roles, and youth consultation processes remaining informal and irregular (Onapajo & Isike, 2016).

Empirical Perspectives from West Africa

Studies across the subregion reveal a gap between policy articulation and practice. Owie (2019) argues that gender mainstreaming within ECOWAS's peace structures remains largely symbolic, while Durueke (2025) observes that national action plans in Nigeria, though well-framed, suffer from inadequate funding and political support. Similarly, Gbadeyan (2024) contends that women's roles in post-conflict mediation are often limited to community initiatives rather than formal institutional leadership.

Factual research across West African countries reveals persistent patterns of exclusion despite normative progress. In Liberia, despite having Africa's first elected female president and a robust NAP on UNSCR 1325, women's participation in high-level security decision-making remains minimal, with women occupying less than 15% of senior positions in security institutions (Fuest, 2008; Bouta et al., 2005). In Sierra Leone, while women played critical roles during the civil war and in post-conflict recovery, their involvement in formal peace negotiations was marginal, and subsequent security sector reforms have largely maintained male-dominated hierarchies (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). Research in Ghana, often cited as a model of democratic stability, shows that women constitute fewer than 10% of security personnel and are systematically excluded from strategic decision-making roles within the police and military (Adomako Ampofo, 2008). In Senegal, despite progressive legislation and active women's civil society organizations, cultural norms and institutional resistance continue to limit women's access to leadership positions in peace and security institutions (Diop, 2016).



When it comes to youth inclusion, the exclusion is even more visible. In Nigeria, for example, young people make up more than 60% of the population, yet they occupy less than 5% of leadership positions in formal security institutions (Onapajo, 2017). Studies from Mali and Burkina Faso show that youth are often seen more as security risks (potential recruits for extremist groups) than as partners in peacebuilding. This perception leads to approaches that focus on control and surveillance rather than genuine participation (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2011; Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020). In Côte d'Ivoire, although youth militias played major roles during the civil war, post-war Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs did not properly include young people in decision-making on security matters, viewing them mainly as recipients of aid instead of active stakeholders (Boutellis, 2013).

FES Nigeria (2023) notes that long-standing bureaucratic barriers and patriarchal attitudes continue to shut out both women and youth from key security roles. This reflects a common trend across West Africa: many countries have policies that support inclusion, but the actual implementation and political commitment are weak. Other studies confirm this trend. Adebajo and Landsberg's (2000) work on ECOWAS peacekeeping revealed that women were mostly assigned to supportive roles such as logistics and nursing instead of being involved in command or strategic planning. Likewise, Ekiyor (2008) found that although women actively contributed to grassroots peace efforts, they were still left out of formal peace talks and post-conflict governance structures.

Theoretical Framework: The Human Security Paradigm

This study adopts the human security theory as its analytical lens. Unlike the traditional state-centric notion of security, the human security paradigm shifts the focus toward the protection of individuals, their safety, dignity, and well-being (United Nations, 2015). The human security concept became widely recognized after the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced it in their 1994 Human Development Report. This report challenged the traditional view that security should focus primarily on protecting states and their borders. Instead, it posits that real security means ensuring people have "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" (UNDP, 1994).



Several influential thinkers have shaped this concept over the years. Amartya Sen, an economist and philosopher, argued that security must include expanding people's abilities and freedoms (Sen, 2000). Sadako Ogata, who served as UN High Commissioner for Refugees, applied these ideas through her practical work protecting displaced people and coordinating humanitarian responses (Ogata & Cels, 2003). Together, Ogata and Sen led the Commission on Human Security, which produced an important 2003 report. This report defined human security as safeguarding "the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment" (Commission on Human Security, 2003). Other scholars like Kanti Bajpai (2000) and Caroline Thomas (2001) also helped develop the concept, showing how it applies to different parts of the world, especially developing regions facing multiple security challenges.

The human security approach is built on several key ideas. First, it argues that security should focus on protecting people, not just states. Rather than concentrating on borders and sovereignty, this approach sees individuals and communities as what truly needs protection (Paris, 2001). Second, human security recognizes that threats to people's safety come from many sources and are often connected. The UNDP (1994) identified seven main types of insecurity: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political threats. These are sometimes called the "seven pillars" of human security (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). For example, environmental problems can lead to food shortages, which then create economic hardship and political instability.

Third, human security emphasizes both protection and empowerment. Vulnerable people need protection from immediate dangers, but they also need to be given the tools and opportunities to build their own security (Commission on Human Security, 2003). Simply protecting people without involving them in decisions that affect their lives is not enough. Fourth, this approach maintains that lasting peace cannot be achieved without including everyone in the process. Women, young people, and other marginalized groups must have meaningful roles in security decisions, not just token representation (Hampson et al., 2002). Finally, human security recognizes that every region is different. Security problems look different in West Africa than they do in East Asia or Latin America, so solutions must fit local realities rather than applying one-size-fits-all policies from the top down



(MacFarlane & Khong, 2006).

This theoretical framework is useful for understanding and addressing West Africa's security challenges, where conflicts hit women and youth the hardest. Research shows that when women and young people have real input into peace and security policies, the results are more sustainable and better accepted by local communities (UNIDIR, 2025).

Also, the human security lens helps expose problems within ECOWAS's peace and security structures, which have historically been controlled by male elites (Acharya, 2001). Since women and youth make up most of the people affected by conflicts in West Africa, focusing on their experiences reveals how current systems exclude the very people they claim to protect (Newman, 2010).

Furthermore, this approach connects directly to international commitments like UNSCR 1325 and 2250. These resolutions do not simply call for protecting women and youth, they demand their active involvement as peace agents (Hudson, 2005). In West Africa, where traditional patriarchal systems and age-based hierarchies still limit opportunities, human security theory provides a way to both diagnose what is wrong and prescribe how to fix it (Martin & Owen, 2010). It helps identify the gap between what ECOWAS says in its policies and what actually happens in practice, while offering concrete guidance for building more inclusive and effective security institutions. Hence, ECOWAS's commitment to the human security approach offers a conceptual foundation for advancing gender and generational inclusion in its peace and security governance.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing secondary data from ECOWAS publications, regional policy documents, academic articles, and institutional reports. Data were collected through documentary reviews and analyzed using thematic content analysis, categorized into four core themes: inclusion levels, barriers, institutional mechanisms, and opportunities for reform.

This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived realities reflected in policy frameworks, offering insights into both structural and practical dimensions of inclusion (Durueke, 2025; WANEP, n.d.).



4. Women and Youth Inclusion in ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture: Breaking Barriers for Regional Stability

4.1 Current Level of Inclusion

ECOWAS has shown growing awareness of the need to promote inclusion through policy frameworks such as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Guidelines and the Continental Results Framework (CRF) for gender monitoring (ECOWAS Commission, n.d.). Women and youth are present in various ECOWAS initiatives, including community mediation, early warning systems, and peace education programmes (CCDG, 2024–2025). Despite this, meaningful participation remains limited. Youth under 30 make up more than 60% of West Africa’s population, yet their influence in formal peace and security structures is minimal. The adoption of UNSCR 2250 and 2419 encouraged a shift in perspective, calling for the recognition of young people as active contributors to peace rather than passive subjects of security policy.

Available data highlights the scale of exclusion. Between 2015 and 2024, women made up only 8% of military personnel, 12% of police personnel, and 22% of civilian staff deployed in ECOWAS peace operations (ECOWAS Commission, 2023). Leadership roles remain even more restricted, with women holding just 4% of top positions such as Force Commander, Police Commissioner, or Special Representative (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Youth representation shows a similar pattern, individuals under 35 accounted for less than 3% of mission leadership and only 15% of overall personnel (Myrntinen et al., 2016).

At the policy level, women and youth have increasingly been included in regional consultations. ECOWAS has organized WPS and Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) forums, launched capacity-building programmes for women mediators, and provided support to youth-led civil society organizations involved in peace monitoring (Odugu, 2020). The CCDG alone trained over 500 women in mediation, early warning, and peacebuilding between 2019 and 2024 (CCDG, 2024). Despite these efforts, participation often remains at the consultative level. Women and youth are invited to discussions but seldom occupy decision-making positions that determine mission mandates, budget



allocations, or strategic priorities (Olonisakin & Muteru, 2014).

ECOWAS has also partnered with youth-led networks such as ROAJELF (West African Network of Young Women Leaders) to encourage civic engagement and leadership. Youth have contributed to election observation, digital peace campaigns, and community dialogue platforms. However, several barriers persist:

- Limited access to formal decision-making spaces
- Inadequate mentorship and institutional support
- Continued securitization of youth, who are often viewed as potential threats rather than partners

Youth involvement in formal peace processes still appears symbolic. During the Mali peace talks (2014-2015) and ECOWAS mediation efforts in Guinea and Burkina Faso, youth representatives were either excluded entirely or relegated to observer roles without decision-making power (Nsaibia, 2021). This is particularly concerning given that young people are often both the main actors in conflict and key drivers of peacebuilding (Mercy Corps, 2015).

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Nigeria forum noted that *“the inclusion of young people and their participation in peace and security are key to building more inclusive, sustainable, and effective peace.”* Yet, as Owie (2019) points out, youth involvement rarely moves beyond consultation. Strategic roles, such as chief mediators, heads of missions, or commissioners, remain dominated by older male elites. This persistent exclusion is not accidental but reflects entrenched patriarchal and gerontocratic systems that continue to define leadership through age and gender hierarchies (Oyewumi, 2003).

4.2 Barriers to Inclusion

The challenges constraining women and youth inclusion are multidimensional. The structural Barriers are deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and age-based hierarchies leading to significant limitations in women and youth’s access to decision-making positions (Afolabi, 2022; FES Nigeria, 2023). In many West African societies, traditional



gender roles confine women to domestic responsibilities while men dominate public leadership and security matters (Mama, 2011). Similarly, older men are viewed as natural leaders while young people are seen as inexperienced and needing guidance (Honwana, 2012). This cultural framing encourages patterns of male dominance in political, peace and security structures, which leads to the sidelining women's perspectives in formal peace processes. The age hierarchies further reinforces exclusion of youth in leadership in security institutions, traditional councils, and political parties. The leadership of this bodies is often determined by seniority and patriarchal patronage networks. To corroborate this assertion, FES Nigeria (2023) submits that youth are frequently portrayed as passive dependents or potential security risks, rather than as legitimate contributors to peacebuilding.

The political barriers are entrenched in the politicisation of regional cooperation and power dynamics. The weakness of the democratic institutions poses significant barrier to the inclusion of women and youth in the ECOWAS Peace and security architecture. This is often attributed to the highly centralised nature of security governance in the member countries. The political will to ensure inclusion is also low despite established frameworks on gender and youth inclusion by the ECOWAS. In most cases, the commitments are adopted in the bid to embrace international legitimacy rather than actual change. Even though the member states ratify these frameworks, the implementation is usually met with resistance in terms of political and financial incentives. Security governance within ECOWAS is heavily influenced by state elites who actively resist meaningful inclusion. Governments see security as their exclusive territory and oppose regional policies that threaten their control (Adebajo, 2002). Electoral systems also work against women and youth (high campaign costs, political violence, and patronage networks favor older, wealthy men), while ECOWAS's consensus-based decision-making allows resistant countries to block reforms indefinitely (Arriola & Johnson, 2014; Aning & Atuobi, 2011).

Another barrier to inclusion is at the level of institutions. The ECOWAS is not free from institutional weaknesses which is attributed to the consensus model of decision making where member states can veto or delay policies aimed at enhancing inclusivity in security governance. There is also the issue of insufficient funding, lack of data, and weak



monitoring systems often undermining inclusion efforts (Durueke, 2025). Consequently, implementation remains uneven despite ECOWAS frameworks. Without proper data showing how many women and youth actually participate in peace activities, it is difficult to measure progress or hold anyone accountable (True & Wiener, 2019).

4.3 Summary of Findings

The study finds that the rhetoric of inclusion within ECOWAS has yet to translate into genuine representation and decision-making power. This gap undermines the legitimacy of ECOWAS's peace interventions and weakens the sustainability of regional stability efforts (Gbadeyan, 2024). When peace processes exclude the people most affected by conflict (women and youth), they lack legitimacy in the eyes of local communities and are therefore less likely to garner popular support and ownership, which are critical for sustainable peace (Olonisakin et al., 2011). Furthermore, the non-inclusion of women and youth in peace and security architecture deprives it of the integral ingredient which is the perspectives of the most affected.

The elements of the human security theory further reaffirm the importance of women and youth in security governance by arguing that sustainable peace requires addressing the root causes of exclusion. The theory also stresses that protecting women and youth is not enough. They need to be economically empowered to boost their chances of getting involved and also shaping the policy outcomes on peace and security. When these groups are sidelined, ECOWAS unintentionally reinforces power imbalances that contribute to tensions and instability in the region (Newman, 2010). This kind of exclusion also clashes with ECOWAS' own commitments under frameworks like UNSCR 1325 and 2250, creating a gap between policy promises and actual practice. Such inconsistency weakens the organization's credibility and limits its influence at both the regional and international levels (Shepherd, 2017).

Therefore, the need for ECOWAS to evolve beyond normative compliance to operational inclusion where representation translates into influence, and frameworks are matched with funding, accountability, and enforcement mechanisms cannot be overemphasized (Owie, 2019; Durueke, 2025). The inclusion goes beyond symbolic actions like appointing a few



women or inviting youth without giving them real influence (Tripp, 2015), it requires structural reforms such as enforceable quotas, dedicated funding, transparent data tracking, and permanent spaces for women and youth to contribute to security decisions (True & Wiener, 2019). This shift however largely depends on a strong political will and leadership willing to challenge patriarchal and age-based power structures and hold institutions accountable (Afolabi, 2022). With this, the ECOWAS's peace and security framework advance further in the realization of its mandate and properly tackle the recurring instability in the region.

5. Conclusion

ECOWAS has made commendable progress in institutionalizing frameworks for women and youth inclusion, practical implementation however remains weak. Inclusion is often rhetorical rather than transformational. The persistence of patriarchal structures, political inertia, and inadequate institutional mechanisms continues to undermine the full participation of women and youth in the ECOWAS peace and security architecture. For ECOWAS to achieve genuine regional stability, inclusion must evolve from policy aspiration to institutional practice. Building a people-centered peace architecture, rooted in human security and grounded in inclusivity, is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for sustainable peace in West Africa. It is therefore recommended that;

1. ECOWAS adopt an enforceable gender and youth quotas (at least 35%) within its peace and security organs. These quotas must be legally binding through amendments to the ECOWAS Treaty and relevant protocols, with clear timelines for implementation and penalties for member states and institutions that fail to comply.
2. Strengthen the ECOWAS Centre for Gender Development by enhancing CCDG's operational mandate and resources to coordinate regional inclusion programmes (CCDG, 2024-2025). This requires significant budget increases to enable the CCGD to conduct sustained capacity-building, research, advocacy, and monitoring activities across member states.



3. ECOWAS must develop comprehensive monitoring frameworks with Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) indicators for tracking women's and youth's participation across all peace and security activities. Regular reports by member states should be mandatory, with independent evaluations conducted at least twice in a year and results published transparently.
4. ECOWAS leaders should publicly champion inclusion and lead by example. This would require Heads of State and Government to make public commitments to gender and youth inclusion, allocate national budgets to implement NAPs on UNSCR 1325 and 2250, and appoint women and youth to senior positions within their own governments and delegations to ECOWAS bodies.
5. ECOWAS should also partner with traditional and religious leaders, who wield significant influence in shaping social norms, to advocate for inclusive leadership and challenge harmful stereotypes in their respective domain.

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