

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS IN WEST AFRICA AND ECOWAS GENDER MAINSTREAMING INITIATIVES

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Abstract

Women in West Africa have long played crucial but under-examined roles in separatist movements, driven by a complex interplay of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. Despite their active participation, policy responses, including ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives, often overlook the specific motivations and challenges faced by these women. This study explores the underlying drivers of women's involvement in separatist movements and evaluates the effectiveness of ECOWAS's interventions in addressing their needs. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study draws on Feminist Conflict Theory to analyze women's narratives within separatist movements, uncovering key factors such as economic marginalization, political exclusion, and personal trauma. Findings reveal that while ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming policies hold promise, they frequently lack the depth and nuance required to address the unique realities of women engaged in separatist struggles. Existing initiatives often fail to consider the intersection of gender, conflict, and identity, limiting their impact on fostering sustainable peace. The study underscores the need for ECOWAS to adopt a more inclusive and trauma-informed approach to conflict resolution. Recommendations include targeted economic empowerment programs, enhanced political inclusion mechanisms, and context-specific interventions that address the lived experiences of women in separatist movements. By refining its strategies to be more attuned to gendered conflict dynamics, ECOWAS can better contribute to long-term stability and peacebuilding efforts in West Africa.

Keywords: *Gender Mainstreaming Initiatives, Feminist Perspectives, Marginalization, Political Exclusion*

Introduction

Women's roles in separatist movements across West Africa represent an intersection of gender, conflict, and socio-political transformation. Despite prevailing narratives of separatist movements as male-dominated arenas, women contribute as mobilizers, supporters, and, at times, combatants¹. This article seeks to understand the socio-economic and political drivers behind women's involvement in separatist movements and evaluate how ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives are positioned to address these issues². By applying Feminist Conflict Theory, the study examines women's participation within a framework that emphasizes the influence of structural inequalities, gender roles, and political marginalization on conflict dynamics.

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender Mainstreaming Initiatives

Gender mainstreaming refers to the systematic integration of gender perspectives into policies, programs, and institutions to achieve gender equality³. In West Africa, ECOWAS has implemented gender mainstreaming initiatives to promote women's participation in governance and conflict resolution⁴. ECOWAS has implemented gender mainstreaming initiatives to enhance women's

participation in governance and conflict resolution in West Africa. These initiatives include the ECOWAS Gender Policy, which promotes gender equality in political and economic spheres, and the ECOWAS Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, which aligns with the UN's Resolution 1325 to ensure women's involvement in peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, ECOWAS supports capacity-building programs, leadership training for women, and legal reforms to increase female representation in decision-making processes. These efforts aim to foster inclusive governance and sustainable peace in the region.

Despite these efforts, challenges such as cultural resistance and weak policy enforcement hinder their effectiveness⁵. Despite ECOWAS' gender mainstreaming efforts, challenges like cultural resistance and weak policy enforcement limit their effectiveness. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms in many West African societies discourage women's participation in governance and conflict resolution. Additionally, weak implementation of gender policies, lack of political will, and inadequate funding hinder progress. Many legal frameworks exist but are not fully enforced, leading to low female representation in leadership roles. Addressing these challenges requires stronger enforcement mechanisms, increased advocacy, and cultural sensitization to promote gender inclusivity.

Feminist Perspectives

Feminism advocates for gender equality in social, political, and economic spheres⁶. Feminist scholars critique separatist movements and governance structures in West Africa for perpetuating male dominance and limiting women's leadership roles⁷. They argue for gender-sensitive policies that recognize and empower women's contributions to political struggles⁸. Advocates for gender-sensitive policies emphasize the need to recognize and empower women's contributions to political struggles in West Africa. They call for inclusive legal frameworks, increased political representation, and equal access to leadership opportunities. These policies aim to address systemic barriers by ensuring women's voices are heard in decision-making, governance, and peacebuilding. By integrating gender perspectives into policies, ECOWAS and member states can create a more equitable political environment that values and amplifies women's roles in shaping the region's future.

Marginalization

Marginalization refers to the systemic exclusion of specific groups from social, economic, and political opportunities⁹. Women in West Africa often face marginalization in political movements, peace negotiations, and governance structures¹⁰. Women in West Africa often experience marginalization in political movements, peace negotiations, and governance due to deep-seated patriarchal norms, limited access to resources, and systemic discrimination. They are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, despite their active roles in grassroots mobilization and peace efforts. Cultural biases, legal barriers, and lack of political will further restrict their participation in leadership positions. Addressing this requires stronger gender-inclusive policies, capacity-building initiatives, and greater advocacy to ensure women's meaningful involvement in governance and conflict resolution.

This exclusion limits their ability to influence decision-making processes and contributes to gender inequality¹¹. The exclusion of women from political movements, peace negotiations, and governance structures limits their influence in decision-making and reinforces gender inequality in West Africa. Without representation, women's perspectives, needs, and contributions are often overlooked in policies and peace agreements. This lack of inclusion perpetuates disparities in leadership, economic opportunities, and social rights. To address this, stronger gender-sensitive policies, legal reforms, and advocacy efforts are needed to ensure women have equal access to decision-making roles and governance structures.

Political Exclusion

Political exclusion occurs when individuals or groups are denied access to governance, policymaking, and leadership roles¹². Women's political exclusion in West Africa is reinforced by legal, cultural, and institutional barriers, making it difficult for them to participate in separatist movements and formal politics¹³. Women's political exclusion in West Africa is reinforced by legal, cultural, and institutional

barriers that limit their participation in separatist movements and formal politics. Discriminatory laws, such as restrictive electoral policies and inheritance rights, reduce their access to political power. Cultural norms favor male leadership, discouraging women from engaging in activism or governance. Institutional barriers, including lack of funding, party support, and security concerns, further hinder their involvement. Overcoming these challenges requires legal reforms, political empowerment programs, and cultural shifts to create a more inclusive political landscape.

Legislative quotas and affirmative action have been introduced in some countries, but implementation remains inconsistent¹⁴. Some West African countries have introduced legislative quotas and affirmative action to increase women's participation in politics, but implementation remains inconsistent. While these measures aim to ensure a minimum representation of women in governance, challenges such as weak enforcement, lack of political will, and resistance from male-dominated institutions limit their effectiveness. In some cases, quotas exist only on paper, with no real mechanisms for enforcement. To improve outcomes, stronger legal frameworks, political commitment, and public awareness are needed to ensure these policies translate into meaningful representation.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Conflict Theory

Feminist Conflict Theory serves as a powerful analytical tool for understanding women's engagement in separatist movements. Rooted in both feminist and conflict perspectives, this theory critically examines how gendered power structures and socio-economic inequalities shape women's roles in political struggles. It challenges traditional narratives that often overlook or minimize women's agency in political and separatist movements, arguing instead that systemic oppression and marginalization compel women to seek alternative pathways for empowerment, including participation in separatist causes.

Feminist Conflict Theory draws heavily from the works of influential feminist scholars such as Heidi Hartmann, Sylvia Walby, and bell hooks, who emphasize the intersection of gender, power, and economic structures. Hartmann's theory of patriarchy and capitalism asserts that women's economic and political subjugation is systematically reinforced by both patriarchal institutions and capitalist framework and similarly, Walby's concept of "gender regimes" highlights the structural barriers that limit women's access to power and resources, thereby influencing their political activism and Bell hooks, on the other hand, provides a critical lens on how race, class, and gender intersect, demonstrating how women from marginalized communities often experience compounded forms of oppression, which can push them toward radical political engagement¹⁵.

The central premise of Feminist Conflict Theory is that women are often excluded from formal political and economic decision-making processes, leading them to seek alternative platforms where they can assert their agency. In the context of separatist movements, women may find these spaces as avenues for challenging not only national or ethnic oppression but also deeply entrenched gender hierarchies within their own communities. Their involvement can take various forms, including direct participation in armed resistance, advocacy for self-determination, or mobilization for social and economic justice within separatist frameworks.

Moreover, Feminist Conflict Theory underscores the necessity of integrating women's perspectives into policy and governance structures. It aligns with global and regional initiatives, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) gender mainstreaming policies, which seek to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and governance. ECOWAS recognizes that sustainable peace and security cannot be achieved without addressing the unique experiences, needs, and contributions of women, thereby reinforcing the relevance of Feminist Conflict Theory in policy formulation and implementation¹⁶.

By applying Feminist Conflict Theory to the study of women's engagement in separatist movements, this framework not only highlights the gendered dimensions of conflict but also calls for a re-evaluation of traditional power structures. It advocates for a more inclusive and equitable approach to

understanding political struggles, ensuring that women's voices are not only acknowledged but also actively incorporated into broader discussions on self-determination and governance.

Drivers of Women's Participation in Separatist Movements:

Women's involvement in separatist movements, particularly in regions marked by socio-political instability, is shaped by a combination of economic, political, cultural, and psychological factors. Within the context of Feminist Conflict Theory, these drivers reveal the multifaceted ways in which women, marginalized by both gendered and socio-economic structures, engage with separatist causes as a means of resistance and empowerment. The theory offers a lens through which these drivers can be better understood, showing how women's participation is not merely a response to ethnic or nationalistic conflicts but is also deeply rooted in the intersectionality of gender, class, and political exclusion. These drivers of Women's Participation in Separatist Movements include:

Economic Marginalization

One of the most significant factors driving women's participation in separatist movements is economic marginalization. In many regions, especially within West Africa, women face profound economic disenfranchisement, compounded by limited access to education, employment, and other resources necessary for upward mobility¹⁷. This economic marginalization is not a result of personal failure but is systemic, embedded in the structures of patriarchy and capitalist economies that inherently limit women's opportunities. Feminist Conflict Theory posits that women, due to their exclusion from economic structures, are often pushed to the fringes of society, where they struggle to secure basic needs for themselves and their families. Separatist movements, with their promises of socio-economic restructuring and inclusivity, present an alternative vision of economic justice, which appeals to women seeking a more equitable redistribution of resources. These movements often champion the interests of marginalized groups, including women, offering them hope for greater economic inclusion and an escape from the entrenched socio-economic order that keeps them in poverty¹⁸.

In the case of separatist movements in West Africa, the economic promises of these movements are frequently framed around the notion of self-determination, where a new political order would allow for the equitable distribution of resources, including land, wealth, and employment opportunities. Women, whose economic realities are shaped by exploitation and inequality, see these movements as opportunities to challenge the existing economic structures that often overlook their needs. Feminist Conflict Theory helps to illuminate how women's economic disenfranchisement becomes both a motivating factor and a source of agency within separatist struggles, as they seek to reclaim power over their economic futures.

Political Exclusion and Marginalization

Another significant driver of women's participation in separatist movements is political exclusion. Women, particularly in patriarchal societies, are often marginalized in formal political processes and excluded from decision-making positions in both state and local governance structures¹⁹. This exclusion is not simply an incidental byproduct of political structures but is inherently tied to patriarchal systems that systematically deny women political agency. Feminist Conflict Theory emphasizes how gendered power relations perpetuate women's political marginalization, leaving them with few avenues through which they can exercise their rights and advocate for their needs.

In many cases, separatist movements present an alternative political platform where women can gain agency. These movements often operate outside of the traditional political frameworks that exclude women and provide a space for them to engage in activism, advocate for gender equality, and address grievances that are largely ignored in mainstream political discourse²⁰. The promise of political participation and representation within separatist causes thus appeals to women who feel silenced in the existing political order. These movements allow women to take on leadership roles, make decisions, and shape the ideological direction of the struggle, which is often a central tenet of their engagement. By asserting their political voice in these contexts, women can challenge both the patriarchy within their own communities and the broader national structures that deny them participation and recognition.

Community Solidarity and Cultural Factors

Women's involvement in separatist movements is also deeply intertwined with cultural solidarity and community loyalty. In many cases, women join these movements due to a sense of cultural or ethnic responsibility and collective identity. Cultural norms and values often dictate the role women play in preserving the integrity of their communities, and these expectations can extend into the political realm. The idea of defending one's ethnic or religious group, particularly in the face of perceived threats from central governments, can be a powerful motivator for women's participation in separatist struggles²¹.

In societies where women are expected to uphold cultural traditions and family responsibilities, the pressure to participate in separatist movements can be immense. These movements, which are often framed as defending the rights and survival of a particular cultural or ethnic group, can tap into women's sense of duty to protect their families, communities, and heritage²². Feminist Conflict Theory helps explain how women's roles in cultural preservation and community solidarity can converge with political activism. By aligning themselves with separatist movements, women not only act out of a desire to protect their cultural identity but also as a response to the larger political dynamics that threaten their communities' existence. Their participation is, therefore, not merely an expression of nationalism but also a complex negotiation of gender, culture, and resistance.

Personal and Community Trauma

The impact of trauma, both personal and collective, is another key driver of women's participation in separatist movements. Experiences of violence, displacement, or the loss of family members can profoundly shape women's political consciousness and activism. Feminist Conflict Theory highlights how such trauma can become a catalyst for engagement in separatist struggles, as women seek not only justice and retribution but also solidarity and collective healing²³. In many conflict zones, women are disproportionately affected by violence, including sexual violence, displacement, and the destruction of their communities. These experiences often result in deep emotional and psychological scars that drive women to join movements that promise change or retribution.

Trauma is both a personal and communal experience, and the collective nature of women's suffering in conflict zones often serves as a unifying force that propels them into action. For many women, joining a separatist movement is a way to channel their grief and anger into a form of resistance, helping to transform their personal suffering into a collective struggle for justice and empowerment. Feminist Conflict Theory underscores the importance of recognizing trauma as a driver of women's involvement in political movements, and calls for trauma-informed approaches in peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives. It also highlights the need for policies that address the emotional and psychological needs of women who have been affected by conflict, ensuring that their voices are heard and their experiences validated in peace processes.

ECOWAS's Gender Mainstreaming Initiatives in Peace and Security: A Feminist Conflict Theory Perspective

In response to the persistent conflicts and instability within West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has developed gender mainstreaming initiatives aimed at integrating women into peace and security frameworks. These efforts are aligned with the broader international agenda set forth by the United Nations' Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) resolution, which advocates for women's active participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding²⁴. However, despite the theoretical commitment to gender inclusivity, the practical implementation of ECOWAS's initiatives faces significant challenges, particularly in regions affected by separatist conflicts. These challenges stem from resource limitations, inconsistent policy execution, and deep-seated socio-cultural resistance to women's political and economic empowerment.

Feminist Conflict Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts within the context of regional security. The theory critiques the patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized women in conflict prevention and resolution processes,

emphasizing how gendered power imbalances shape both the causes and consequences of conflict. By applying this lens, it becomes evident that while ECOWAS's initiatives aim to address gender disparities, they remain constrained by the very systems of exclusion they seek to transform. ECOWAS's key strategies for gender mainstreaming initiatives in peace and security include:

Political Inclusion and Leadership Development

One of ECOWAS's key strategies for gender mainstreaming in peace and security has been the promotion of women's representation in governance and conflict resolution processes. Recognizing that political exclusion is a fundamental driver of gender inequality in conflict dynamics, ECOWAS has introduced leadership training programs and advocated for legal reforms to enhance women's participation in decision-making²⁵. These efforts are crucial, as Feminist Conflict Theory argues that patriarchal political structures systematically marginalize women, denying them access to platforms where key security and governance decisions are made.

However, the effectiveness of these political inclusion initiatives is significantly undermined in regions affected by separatist conflicts. Political instability, coupled with the entrenched exclusion of women from leadership roles, makes it exceedingly difficult for ECOWAS to ensure that its programs reach the women most affected by conflict. In separatist strongholds, where state authority is often weak or contested, women's political participation is further constrained by both armed actors and traditional societal norms that resist female leadership. As a result, while ECOWAS's leadership development initiatives have had some success in stable regions, their impact remains limited in areas where women face the dual barriers of state fragility and patriarchal resistance.

Economic Empowerment Programs

Economic disempowerment is a major factor influencing women's participation in both conflict and peacebuilding efforts. Acknowledging this reality, ECOWAS has implemented vocational training and entrepreneurship programs designed to provide economic opportunities for women, particularly those living in conflict-prone regions²⁶. These programs seek to address the economic inequalities that Feminist Conflict Theory highlights as central to women's marginalization, aiming to equip women with the financial independence necessary to engage meaningfully in peace processes.

Despite the noble intentions behind these economic initiatives, their impact remains constrained by funding shortages and logistical challenges. In many separatist-affected areas, women's access to economic resources is further restricted by insecurity, displacement, and systemic gender discrimination. The limited reach of ECOWAS's programs means that the most vulnerable women—those who have been displaced, widowed, or economically devastated by separatist violence—often remain excluded from economic empowerment initiatives. Additionally, separatist movements themselves sometimes offer competing economic incentives, drawing women into their ranks with promises of financial security that mainstream economic programs fail to provide.

By analyzing ECOWAS's economic empowerment initiatives through the lens of Feminist Conflict Theory, it becomes clear that structural gendered inequalities must be addressed at a deeper level for these programs to be truly effective. Without confronting the patriarchal economic structures that keep women in subordinate roles, economic initiatives risk serving only those women who are already positioned to benefit, rather than reaching the most marginalized populations in conflict zones.

Trauma-Informed Support Services

One of the most glaring gaps in ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts is the lack of trauma-informed support services for women affected by separatist conflicts. Women in conflict zones frequently endure extreme forms of violence, including sexual violence, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. Feminist Conflict Theory emphasizes that these traumas are not incidental but are deeply embedded in the gendered dynamics of war and conflict, where women's bodies and psychological well-being are often weaponized as tools of oppression²⁷.

While ECOWAS has made strides in advocating for women's inclusion in peacebuilding, it has yet to fully integrate psychological support mechanisms into its gender policies. Trauma-informed care—including counseling, mental health services, and reintegration programs—is essential for helping women rebuild their lives after experiencing conflict-related violence. The absence of such services weakens ECOWAS's broader gender mainstreaming agenda, as women who have been traumatized by separatist violence may struggle to participate in leadership or economic programs without adequate psychological support.

The feminist perspective urges policymakers to recognize that addressing trauma is not merely a humanitarian concern but a necessary step toward achieving true gender equality in peace and security initiatives. Women's participation in post-conflict reconstruction cannot be fully realized unless their emotional and psychological needs are acknowledged and addressed. Therefore, ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts must evolve to include comprehensive trauma-informed services that support women's recovery and long-term resilience.

ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives in peace and security represent an important step toward addressing gender inequalities in conflict prevention and resolution. However, when analyzed through the framework of Feminist Conflict Theory, it becomes evident that these initiatives remain constrained by systemic barriers that limit their effectiveness, particularly in separatist-affected regions. Political inclusion programs, while well-intended, struggle to penetrate areas of instability where women's political participation is met with resistance. Economic empowerment initiatives, though promising, often lack the funding and structural support necessary to uplift the most vulnerable women. Furthermore, the absence of trauma-informed support services significantly weakens efforts to integrate women into peacebuilding, as psychological distress remains a major obstacle to meaningful participation.

For ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts to be truly transformative, they must go beyond surface-level interventions and tackle the deep-seated gendered inequalities that fuel women's exclusion from peace and security processes. This requires a commitment to not only increasing women's visibility in governance and economic structures but also addressing the underlying patriarchal norms and power imbalances that perpetuate their marginalization. Feminist Conflict Theory reminds us that gender inclusivity in peacebuilding is not simply about representation; it is about dismantling the structures that have historically excluded women from the very processes meant to shape their futures. Without this fundamental shift, gender mainstreaming in conflict resolution risks being a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive transformation of power dynamics in West Africa.

Effectiveness and Challenges of ECOWAS's Gender Mainstreaming Initiatives

ECOWAS has made notable strides in incorporating gender mainstreaming into its regional peace and security frameworks. However, through the lens of Feminist Conflict Theory, significant limitations emerge, particularly in regions affected by separatist movements. Feminist Conflict Theory highlights the structural inequalities and gendered power dynamics that shape both conflict experiences and resolutions. From this perspective, it becomes evident that mainstream peace and security interventions often fail to adequately address the specific vulnerabilities, needs, and agency of women in separatist-affected areas.

One of the core strategies ECOWAS has employed in gender mainstreaming is the promotion of political inclusion and economic empowerment. These initiatives align with international frameworks such as United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which advocates for greater participation of women in governance, peace processes, and post-conflict reconstruction²⁸. While these efforts have yielded some progress, they often lack the specificity required to address the distinct challenges faced by women in conflict-prone areas, particularly those affected by separatist movements. A key shortcoming of these programs is their generalized approach, which does not adequately differentiate between the experiences of women in relatively stable regions and those who live under the constant threat of separatist violence.

In the realm of political inclusion, ECOWAS has encouraged increased female representation in governance structures. However, women in separatist-affected areas face unique political barriers that these initiatives do not fully address. In such conflict zones, political participation is often constrained by insecurity, threats from armed groups, and the systematic exclusion of women from peace negotiations. Moreover, even when women do gain access to political platforms, their voices are frequently marginalized, as decision-making remains dominated by patriarchal structures that do not fully integrate gender perspectives into conflict resolution efforts.

Similarly, ECOWAS has sought to empower women economically through financial assistance, vocational training, and business grants. While these efforts have helped women in various parts of West Africa, they do not sufficiently account for the complex economic vulnerabilities faced by women in separatist-affected regions. In many of these areas, ongoing conflict disrupts local economies, displaces entire communities, and limits access to financial institutions and markets. Women often find themselves dispossessed of property, without stable sources of income, and facing increased financial burdens as they assume caregiving roles for displaced family members. Without targeted interventions that address these specific economic realities, ECOWAS's economic empowerment programs remain largely ineffective in these contexts.

Beyond economic and political challenges, a critical shortcoming in ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts is the absence of trauma-informed approaches. The role of trauma in shaping women's participation in separatist movements is significant, yet it remains largely overlooked in the design and implementation of gender policies. Women in separatist-affected areas are often subjected to gender-based violence, forced displacement, and the psychological toll of prolonged conflict. These experiences fundamentally shape their ability to engage in governance, economic activities, and peace processes. However, many of ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming programs focus primarily on political representation and economic inclusion, failing to recognize that without addressing the underlying trauma experienced by women, such efforts will have limited success.

The psychological impact of conflict on women in separatist-affected regions cannot be overstated. Exposure to violence, the loss of family members, and the destruction of community structures often result in deep-seated trauma that affects women's agency and ability to participate in public life. Despite this, ECOWAS has not integrated trauma-sensitive policies into its gender mainstreaming initiatives. For instance, there is little emphasis on mental health services, psychosocial support, or specialized reintegration programs for women who have been directly or indirectly involved in separatist movements. As a result, many women who might otherwise contribute to peacebuilding efforts remain excluded due to the psychological and social barriers that ECOWAS has not adequately addressed.

Another major challenge in ECOWAS's approach is the lack of reintegration support for women who have been involved in separatist movements. Women who have been coerced into joining armed groups, or who have participated voluntarily, often face severe stigma, discrimination, and exclusion from their communities upon their return. Many gender mainstreaming policies do not include specific mechanisms to assist these women in rebuilding their lives, which further marginalizes them and, in some cases, increases their vulnerability to re-recruitment into violent groups. Reintegration programs should take into account the unique socio-cultural and psychological barriers that these women face, yet this remains a largely neglected area in ECOWAS's policy framework.

Beyond programmatic limitations, institutional and policy-related constraints further hinder the effectiveness of ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives. A key issue is the weak accountability mechanisms that exist within ECOWAS's gender policy framework. Although the organization has adopted gender policies such as the ECOWAS Gender Policy and the Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325, the enforcement of these policies remains inadequate²⁹. In many cases, gender mainstreaming is treated as a rhetorical commitment rather than a systematically enforced

priority. The absence of strong monitoring mechanisms means that member states are not held accountable for failing to implement gender-sensitive policies, particularly in high-conflict regions.

Another major institutional challenge is the fragmentation between gender policies and broader security frameworks within ECOWAS. In many cases, security interventions in separatist-affected areas are heavily militarized, focusing primarily on counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts. Gender considerations are often treated as secondary concerns, rather than being integrated into core security and peacebuilding strategies. This disconnect between security policies and gender mainstreaming efforts means that many women in separatist-affected areas remain excluded from decision-making processes related to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

The effectiveness of ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives is further constrained by limited funding and resource allocation for gender-sensitive programs in conflict zones. While ECOWAS has established several initiatives aimed at empowering women, these programs often suffer from insufficient financial backing, inadequate staffing, and logistical challenges in reaching the most vulnerable populations. Many initiatives are short-term and project-based, rather than being integrated into long-term policy frameworks that can ensure sustainability. As a result, the impact of these programs remains uneven and inconsistent, particularly in regions where the presence of separatist movements further complicates program implementation.

A critical factor that undermines ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts is the lack of coordination between regional and national institutions³⁰. While ECOWAS has developed regional gender policies, their implementation at the national level remains weak, as member states have varying levels of commitment to gender equality. In some cases, national governments have failed to incorporate ECOWAS's gender policies into their domestic legal and policy frameworks, resulting in fragmented and ineffective implementation. This lack of coordination leads to gaps in service delivery, particularly for women in separatist-affected areas who require specialized interventions that integrate both gender and security considerations.

In sum, while ECOWAS has made significant progress in advancing gender mainstreaming, its initiatives remain structurally flawed when examined through the lens of Feminist Conflict Theory. The generalized nature of its policies, the absence of trauma-sensitive interventions, weak institutional accountability, and the lack of integration between gender and security frameworks all contribute to the limited effectiveness of ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts in separatist-affected regions. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift in how gender mainstreaming is conceptualized and implemented within ECOWAS's peace and security strategies.

Conclusion

Women's participation in separatist movements in West Africa is a complex phenomenon shaped by multiple intersecting socio-economic and political factors. Unlike traditional conflict narratives that primarily focus on male combatants, a Feminist Conflict Theory perspective reveals that women's involvement in separatist struggles is not incidental but deeply rooted in structural inequalities, historical injustices, economic deprivation, and political exclusion. This study has demonstrated that while ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives have laid a foundation for addressing these issues, they remain insufficiently nuanced to fully respond to the unique challenges faced by women in separatist-affected regions.

A key finding of this study is that economic marginalization plays a significant role in driving women into separatist movements. Many women who join these movements come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, where limited access to education, employment, and financial resources restricts their opportunities for socio-economic advancement. The economic hardships faced by women in conflict zones are often exacerbated by land dispossession, destruction of local economies, and restricted access to markets due to prolonged violence. In some cases, women see engagement with separatist groups as a survival strategy, providing them with financial support, protection, or a sense of agency that is otherwise denied to them in mainstream economic structures. The absence of targeted

economic interventions that recognize these realities limits the effectiveness of ECOWAS's empowerment programs.

Another critical driver of women's participation in separatist movements is political exclusion. This study has shown that in many parts of West Africa, women continue to face systematic barriers to political participation, particularly in regions where governance structures are weak or dominated by patriarchal norms. The marginalization of women in decision-making processes, governance, and peace negotiations has created a vacuum where separatist movements sometimes become alternative spaces for political expression. While ECOWAS has made commendable efforts to promote gender inclusion in governance, these initiatives often fail to address the deep-seated socio-political structures that prevent women from actively engaging in political and peacebuilding processes. Without dismantling these exclusionary structures, women will continue to be drawn toward alternative movements that offer them a more active role in shaping their communities.

Beyond economic and political considerations, community solidarity and social networks play an influential role in shaping women's involvement in separatist movements. Many women join these movements due to social ties, familial connections, or communal affiliations. In separatist-affected regions, where state structures are weak, women often rely on informal networks for support, security, and access to resources. Separatist groups, in some cases, exploit these pre-existing networks, offering women roles as logisticians, recruiters, caregivers, or even combatants. The failure of ECOWAS's gender policies to leverage community structures in reintegration and peacebuilding efforts has resulted in missed opportunities to counter the appeal of separatist movements among women. Without community-driven reintegration programs, many women who disengage from these movements face stigmatization, isolation, and economic hardship, further reinforcing the cycle of exclusion.

A particularly underexamined factor influencing women's involvement in separatist movements is personal trauma. Through the lens of Feminist Conflict Theory, this study has revealed how violence, displacement, and psychological distress shape women's decision-making processes in conflict zones. Many women who experience gender-based violence, forced displacement, or the loss of family members turn to separatist movements either as a mechanism for self-protection or as a way to seek retribution. However, ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives largely overlook trauma-informed approaches, failing to provide women with the psychosocial support, mental health services, and community-based healing programs necessary for their reintegration. The absence of these critical interventions means that even when women disengage from separatist movements, they continue to struggle with psychological scars that hinder their ability to participate fully in peacebuilding and governance.

While ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming efforts provide an important framework for addressing these issues, this study has demonstrated that these initiatives must go beyond surface-level inclusion. Current programs that focus primarily on political representation and economic empowerment are insufficient unless they are accompanied by trauma-sensitive, community-based, and structurally transformative policies. The integration of mental health services, long-term reintegration support, and gender-sensitive security frameworks is essential to ensuring that women are not only included in peacebuilding efforts but are also given the tools and resources needed to rebuild their lives.

Additionally, this study highlights the need for stronger institutional accountability in ECOWAS's approach to gender mainstreaming. While the organization has developed progressive policies on women, peace, and security, their implementation remains weak and inconsistent, particularly in high-conflict regions. Without enforceable accountability mechanisms, many of these policies remain theoretical commitments rather than actionable interventions. Strengthening policy enforcement, ensuring gender-sensitive budgeting, and fostering collaboration between ECOWAS and national governments will be crucial in ensuring that gender mainstreaming efforts translate into real, measurable impacts for women in separatist-affected areas.

Ultimately, this study has shown that women's participation in separatist movements cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socio-political and economic structures that shape their experiences. By adopting a more intersectional, trauma-informed, and community-driven approach, ECOWAS can develop policies that not only prevent women from joining separatist movements but also ensure their meaningful participation in post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable peacebuilding. Addressing these challenges will require a paradigm shift in how gender mainstreaming is approached—one that prioritizes lived experiences, dismantles systemic barriers, and fosters inclusive peace processes.

Recommendation

1. Expand Trauma-Informed Support: ECOWAS should implement trauma-informed services, including counseling and mental health support, to address the psychological impacts of conflict on women involved in separatist movements.
2. Strengthen Economic Empowerment Programs: Increased funding and targeted outreach in conflict-affected regions are necessary to make economic empowerment initiatives more accessible to women at risk of separatist involvement.
3. Enhance Political Inclusion Mechanisms: ECOWAS should collaborate with local governments to create frameworks that promote women's participation in governance and peacebuilding, even in politically unstable areas.
4. Implement Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: Robust monitoring and evaluation systems are essential to track the progress of gender mainstreaming initiatives and adapt programs to better serve the needs of women in separatist contexts.
5. Develop Gender-Sensitive Reintegration Programs: Reintegration strategies should be tailored to the specific needs of women disengaging from separatist movements, ensuring they receive legal, financial, and psychosocial support to reintegrate successfully into society.
6. Promote Community-Based Conflict Resolution: ECOWAS should invest in community-driven peacebuilding initiatives that engage women in conflict mediation and reconciliation efforts at the grassroots level.
7. Enhance Legal Protections Against Gender-Based Violence: Strengthening legal frameworks to protect women from gender-based violence, particularly in conflict zones, will reduce vulnerabilities that push women toward separatist groups.
8. Integrate Gender Mainstreaming into Security Sector Reform: ECOWAS should ensure that security sector reforms incorporate gender-sensitive policies that protect women's rights and increase their representation in law enforcement and peacekeeping forces.
9. Facilitate Access to Education and Skills Training: Expanding access to education and vocational training programs for women in separatist-affected regions will provide alternative pathways to economic independence and reduce their susceptibility to recruitment.
10. Strengthen Regional and International Partnerships: Collaborating with international organizations, civil society groups, and national governments will enhance the effectiveness of ECOWAS's gender mainstreaming initiatives and provide additional resources for sustainable peacebuilding.

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