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Agatha Itohan Oseghale
Federal University of Technology, Nigeria

Abigail John Jirgi
Federal University of Technology, Nigeria

Faith Dabaniyu Ibrahim
Federal University of Technology, Nigeria

Abu Ogaji
Federal University of Technology, Nigeria

Alaba Olanike Ojo
Federal University of Technology, Nigeria
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By Agatha Itohan Oseghale,¹ Abigail John Jirgi,² Faith Dabaniyu Ibrahim,³ Abu Ogaji,⁴ Alaba Olanike Ojo,⁵ Ramatu Usman Bako,⁶ and Halima Sallawu⁷

Abstract

Gender forms an integral element of every aspect of the economic, social, and private lives of individuals and societies. Growth and development can only be achieved if all resources and talents are harnessed; however, all over the globe, there are laws and regulations which can restrict or encourage women's economic opportunities. This study analyzed the before and after trends in women's economic empowerment among the members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) union. The study utilized the Women, Business, and the Law Index Score from 1970 to 2021 for the 15 member countries of ECOWAS which was sourced from the World Bank's Gender data. The Index was used as a proxy for the economic empowerment of women. Secondary data were downloaded and the mean, maximum, and minimum scores were generated for the selected variables and presented using line and bar charts. The Index was supplemented with qualitative assessments of the *de facto* status of women. The results showed that most of the ECOWAS member states adopted numerous commitments to gender rights post-ECOWAS. Specifically, Burkina Faso and Cape Verde made serious advancement post-ECOWAS, moving from an average score of 48 and 37 to 65 and 66 respectively while Nigeria and Gambia had the least advancement between the pre-and post-ECOWAS eras in the area of women's empowerment. Overall, ECOWAS countries did not thrive well in parenthood (mean score = 42.9) as only 6 countries adopted commitments for empowering women after having children. The study recommended that policies such as job-protected pay and leave of adequate length should be put in place to increase women's economic empowerment. In addition, member states should enact and enforce comprehensive equal pay legislation to ensure that men and women receive equal pay for equal work.

¹ Dr. Agatha Itohan Oseghale is a Senior Lecturer at the Federal University of Technology (FUT) in Nigeria. She holds a Ph.D. in Environmental and Resource Economics and has over 11 years of teaching and research experience. Dr. Oseghale is a member of the Nigerian Association of Agricultural Economists (NAAES) and the International Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE). She has promoted entrepreneurship within and outside the university. Email of Corresponding Author: itodine.agatha@futminna.edu.ng

² Dr. Abigail John Jirgi, Professor of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

³ Dr. Faith Dabaniyu Ibrahim, Professor of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

⁴ Dr. Abu Ogaji, Senior Lecturer of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

⁵ Dr. Alaba Olanike Ojo, Senior Lecturer of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

⁶ Dr. Ramatu Usman Bako, Lecturer of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

⁷ Dr. Halima Sallawu, Lecturer of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Economic empowerment of women refers to the process of providing women with the necessary tools and resources to enable them to participate fully in economic activities, access economic resources, and achieve financial independence (Kabeer, 2012). According to the World Bank (2019), the economic empowerment of women can have a significant positive impact on the overall economic growth of a country by increasing productivity, improving household income, and reducing poverty; no just society can be created without women's contribution. Across the globe, there is discrimination against women; women face hindrances in every aspect of work. For instance, depending on the country, the rural wage gap between men and women in Africa can be between an estimated 15–60% (World Bank, 2023). Women are a part of African society, but they have less authority. Women work largely on family-owned land, with little or no remuneration, and women's land ownership rates are also significantly lower than those of men (World Bank, 2023). Nearly 2.4 billion women of working age live in economies that do not provide them with the same rights as men, and globally, women only have 77% of the legal rights that men have (World Bank, 2022).

In West Africa, large gender discrepancies persist. This is true for almost all public sectors, ranging from unequal access to basic social services (health, education, water, sanitation, and energy), unequal property rights, and persistent gender gaps in the labor market and the public sphere (Badi et al., 2018). Empowering women to reach their full economic potential not only tangibly supports the key goal of reducing gender inequality but also has tremendous significance on the advancement, competitiveness, and future readiness of economies worldwide.

Empirical evidence shows that women's economic empowerment and the closing of gender gaps in key areas are crucial not only for gender equality but also for achieving sustainable economic development and poverty reduction with positive macroeconomic outcomes, including higher economic growth, lower inequality, increased productivity, better financial sector outcomes, and greater financial stability (United Nations, 2015). Conversely, gaps in access to education, health, and financial services, and legal barriers to women's economic participation can all negatively impact macroeconomic and financial stability and countries' ability to achieve strong and sustainable economic growth. A study by Woetzel and associates (2015) found that advancing women's economic empowerment could add USD 12 trillion to the global GDP by 2025. Similarly, a study by the International Labour Organization (2017) revealed that closing the gender gap in labor force participation rates could increase global GDP by \$5.8 trillion.

One of the major challenges facing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is gender inequality, particularly in terms of economic empowerment. The ECOWAS has recognized the importance of women's economic empowerment and has taken various initiatives to promote the adoption of gender-sensitive policies and programs, the establishment of gender units in its institutions, and the provision of funding and technical assistance to women entrepreneurs.

Several strategies have been proposed to promote women's economic empowerment in ECOWAS, including adopting legal reforms and institutional changes to promote gender equality in the region as suggested by Adewuyi and Ogunrinola (2020). The reforms include measures to improve women's access to financial services and markets, including credit, savings, and insurance products (Adewuyi & Ogunrinola, 2020). This approach is supported by research indicating that

increasing women's access to financial services has been shown to have a positive impact on their economic opportunities and outcomes (Gausman & O'Hara, 2021). Gender equality can be achieved by taking measures to eliminate gender-based violence and discrimination in the workplace, as well as by making reforms to property and inheritance laws that restrict women's economic opportunities, as mentioned in a report by ECOWAS (2017). The significance of promoting women's entrepreneurship and small business development as a means of enhancing their economic empowerment is also acknowledged in recent studies (Gambino & Sarr, 2021). This involves providing women with access to entrepreneurship training, mentorship, and financing, as well as creating a conducive environment for small business development (Wabb, 2020). The societal expectation that women prioritize caregiving over career pursuits can hinder their professional advancement, yet not much attention is given to the area of empowering women after they have children. This study assessed different indicator scores that offer quantitative benchmarks for global progress toward women's empowerment between the pre- and post-ECOWAS period. The study also explored the qualitative impact of gender on people's opportunities, social roles, and interactions and recommended intensified efforts to eliminate discrimination and promote equal rights. More needs to be done to address the structural barriers that limit women's economic opportunities and to promote gender equality in the region (Adelekan & Fatimah, 2021).

Methods

Study Area

The study comprised 15 countries from ECOWAS, also known as *CEDEAO* in French and Portuguese, a regional political and economic union located in West Africa. Collectively, these countries comprise an area of 5,114,162 km² (1,974,589 miles²), and in 2015 had an estimated population of over 349 million. Considered one of the pillar regional blocks of the continent-wide African Economic Community (AEC), ECOWAS has a stated goal to achieve collective self-sufficiency for its member states by creating a single large trade block and building a full economic union. The union was established on 28 May 1975, with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos, with its stated mission to promote economic integration across the region. A revised version of the treaty was agreed and signed on 24 July 1993 in Cotonou. ECOWAS has also worked to address some security issues by developing a peacekeeping force for conflicts in the region. The 15 members of ECOWAS countries are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: ECOWAS Countries

Country	Code
Benin	BEN
Burkina Faso	BFA
Cote d'Ivoire	CIV
Cabo Verde	CPV
Ghana	GHA

Guinea	GIN
Gambia	GMB
Guinea-Bissau	GNB
Liberia	LBR
Mali	MAIL
Niger	NER
Nigeria	NGA
Senegal	SEN
Togo	TGO
Zambia	ZMB

Data Source and Description

The study utilized the Women, Business, and the Law Index Score from 1970 to 2021 for the 15 member countries of the ECOWAS which were sourced from the World Bank's Gender data. The Women, Business, and the Law Index presents indicator scores that offer quantitative and measurable benchmarks for global progress toward gender equality. The Index is utilized to analyze the legal barriers that prevent women from accessing economic opportunities in 190 different economies. In this study 35 legal topics were rated using eight indicators noted in Table 2.

Table 2: Legal Barriers to Women's Economic Development

Indicator	
Mobility	Looks at restrictions on women's autonomy and freedom of movement
Workplace	Examines regulations that have an impact on women's decisions to enter and stay in the workforce as well as safeguards against sexual harassment and discrimination
Pay	Studies how laws and regulations impact female wage inequality and occupational segregation
Marriage	Evaluates legal restrictions on marriage and divorce
Parenthood	Investigates legislation influencing women's employment after having children
Entrepreneurship	Examines barriers that prevent women from starting and

	operating their businesses
Assets	Examines how inheritance and property law change according to gender
Pension	Evaluates the legislation that influences the amount of a woman's pension

Source: World Bank (2023)

The indicators are meant to capture many of the stages of a woman's career. The approach was created as an easily repeatable assessment of the regulatory climate for female employees and business owners. Based on comments from respondents with knowledge of family, labor, and anti-violence laws, the data is updated. Indicator-level scores are obtained by calculating the unweighted average of the questions within that indicator and scaling the result to 100. Overall scores are then calculated by taking the average of each indicator, with 100 representing the highest possible score. By computing the unweighted average of the questions within that indication and scaling the result, indicator-level scores are achieved. Thus, a score of less than 100 evidences at least one legal constraint on women as regards the said indicator.

Data Analysis

The Women, Business and the Law Index Score was downloaded on spreadsheets and disaggregated into pre-ECOWAS (1970-1974) and post-ECOWAS (1975-2021) to explore the state of economic empowerment of women in these periods. This is because most member states adopted numerous commitments to gender rights post-1974, for instance: the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1979), also known as the International Bill of Rights for Women, the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (1985), the Vienna Declaration (1993), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the Millennium Declaration (2000) with its accompanying Millennium Development Goal 3 of gender equality and women's empowerment, and finally the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). ECOWAS has also incorporated gender equality in Article 63, Women and Development, of its revised treaty, targeting the "enhancement of the economic, social, and cultural conditions of women" (ECOWAS, 2010). This was followed by the establishment of the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre (EGDC) in 2003, and the adoption of the ECOWAS Gender Policy in 2004. Mean, maximum, and minimum were used to describe the variables of interest. The results are presented using graphs (line and bar charts).

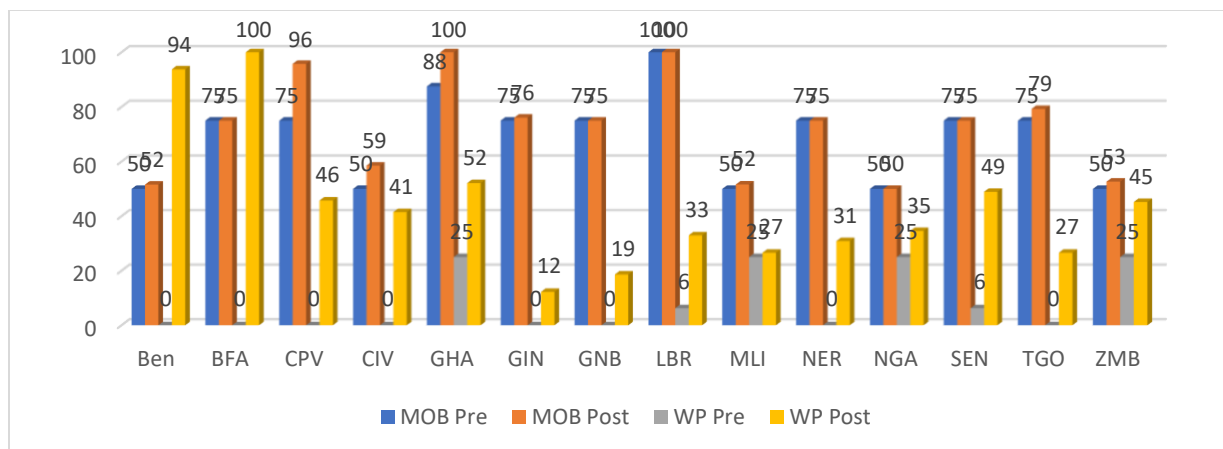
Results

Women's Mobility and the Workplace

Figure 1 shows the distribution of ECOWAS countries by women's mobility and workplace and the progress made between the pre- and post-ECOWAS era. Liberia had no restrictions on the movement of women pre- and post-ECOWAS with an index of 100, while Ghana made progress between the pre (88) and post (100) ECOWAS. However, Benin, Zambia, and Cote d'Ivoire had laws restricting the free movement of women because they had indices that were below 100. For instance, Zambian women have the legal *de jure* right to move freely within the country and travel abroad, just like men; however, in practice, there are still many *de facto*

barriers that limit women's mobility and freedom of movement. One of the main barriers to women's freedom of movement in Zambia is cultural and societal norms that reinforce gender roles and expectations (Mwaba, 2016). Women are often expected to prioritize their domestic responsibilities, such as caring for children and the elderly, over their own personal and professional pursuits. Another barrier to women's freedom of movement is the prevalence of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment and assault. Women who travel alone, especially in public spaces or at night, may be at greater risk of experiencing violence or harassment (Phiri et al., 2018; Muleya & Sinyangwe, 2019). This can make women feel unsafe and limit their ability to move freely. The case is not different for women in Cote d'Ivoire as hazards of instability and sexual abuse make mobility difficult in practice (Amani, 2016). The government's efforts to combat these practices have been undermined by inconsistent financial support and a failure to investigate and prosecute perpetrators.

Figure 1: Women's Mobility and Workplace pre- and post-ECOWAS



Source: World Bank Data (2023)

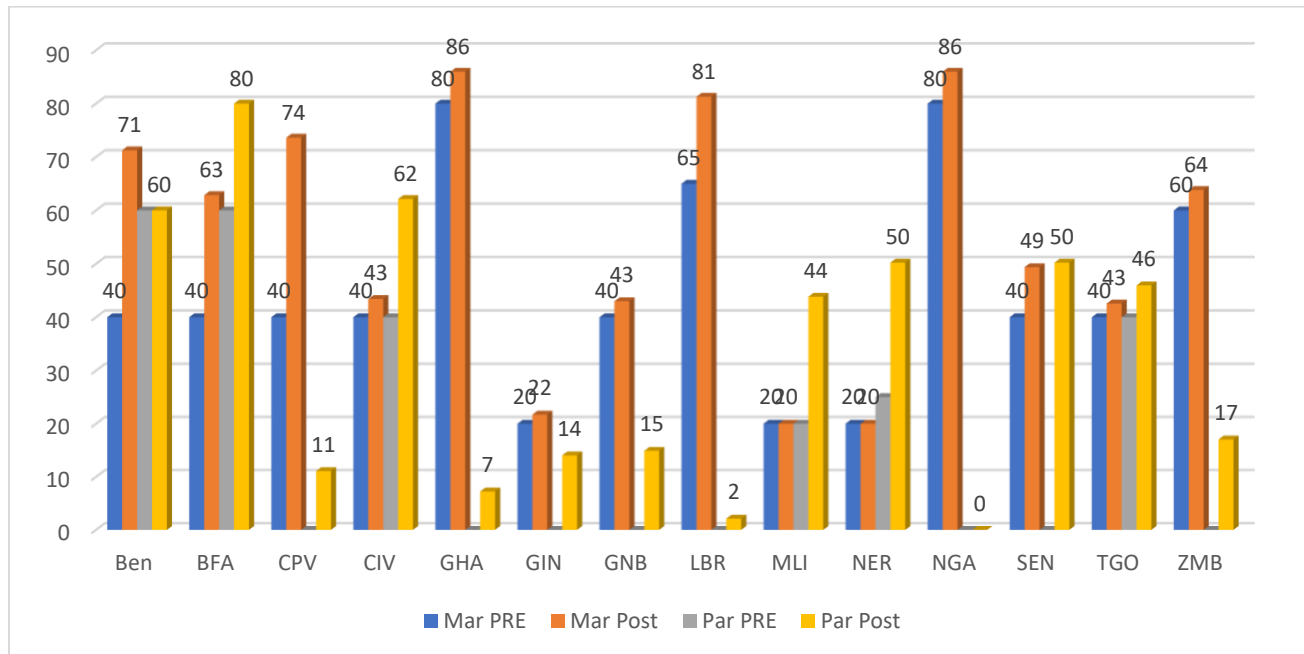
In terms of the workplace, Fig. 1 indicates that only Burkina Faso was able to eliminate legal limitations on a woman's job prospects. Burkina Faso put in place legislation against sexual harassment and criminal penalties or civil remedies to protect women in the workplace in the post-ECOWAS era even though there was nothing of that nature in the pre-ECOWAS era. On the other hand, Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Liberia, Nigeria, and Togo have a long way to go in terms of the workplace as their index within the pre-and post-ECOWAS era is far below average. Guinea Bissau had one of the lowest indexes, which could be attributed to limited educational opportunities, cultural and societal expectations, and discrimination in hiring and promotion. According to the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF (2018), only 37% of girls in Guinea Bissau were enrolled in secondary school, compared to 47% of boys, which contributes to a lack of opportunities for women in the workforce. Traditional gender roles that emphasize domestic responsibilities also limit women's ability to participate fully in the workforce (UN Women, 2021). Furthermore, discrimination in hiring and promotion is another significant barrier to women's participation in the workforce in Guinea Bissau, as women may face bias and prejudice from employers (African Development Bank, 2019). In Nigeria for example, the country's current legal framework does not broadly cover and recognize the rights of working women (Mbonu & Aforka-Emeka, 2022) and it falls short of offering sufficient security to cover the variety of needs. For

instance, Nigerian law restricts the nomination of female executives to key industrial positions, which makes it difficult for women to excel in this industry. The Labour Act of 2004 Section 55 prohibits women from working overnight in manual labor. This regulation, like a plethora of others, purports to protect women while denying them the freedom of choice.

Marriage and Parenthood

The problems of forced marriage and child marriage are two of the difficulties women and girls confront when it comes to marriage. No country has received the highest score of 100 for marriage (Fig 2). This could be attributed to early marriage, which is prevalent in Nigeria, where 23% of girls get married before they turn 18, and 3% get married before they turn 15 (Girls Not Brides, 2019). As a result, many girls drop out of school and face serious health risks from early pregnancy and childbirth. According to Smith (2005), women in Mali and Niger are expected to marry early and put their husbands' wants ahead of their own. In many cases, a woman's status in society is closely tied to her marital status (Kelly, 2013). In many cultures, the groom is expected to pay a significant sum of money or gifts to the bride's family as part of the marriage process (Aderinto, 2019). This practice can often result in the commodification of women, and in some cases, lead to financial exploitation and abuse within the marriage.

Just like the case of marriage, most countries (Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana) did not do well in terms of parenthood. Many women in ECOWAS countries experience discrimination and struggle to find and keep employment, especially after having children. This is partly due to cultural expectations that assign the role of childcare to women. Additionally, the implementation of maternal entitlements is not consistent across various subsectors in some of these countries which can make it difficult for women to work outside the home, unlike their counterparts in many European countries, where there are policies and programs in place to support working parents, such as paid parental leave, flexible working hours, and affordable childcare. These measures can help women stay in the workforce and continue to advance in their careers even after having children. According to Hyland and Shen (2022), reducing the gap between parental leave taken by mothers and fathers can increase female labor force participation. Furthermore, Fig. 2 shows that countries like Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire made some progress in parenthood between the pre- and post-ECOWAS era, while Benin did not make any advancement, though their parenthood index was already high. This is so because these countries have put in place laws empowering women and their spouses after having children.

Figure 2: Marriage and Parenthood pre-and post-ECOWAS

Source: World Bank Data (2023)

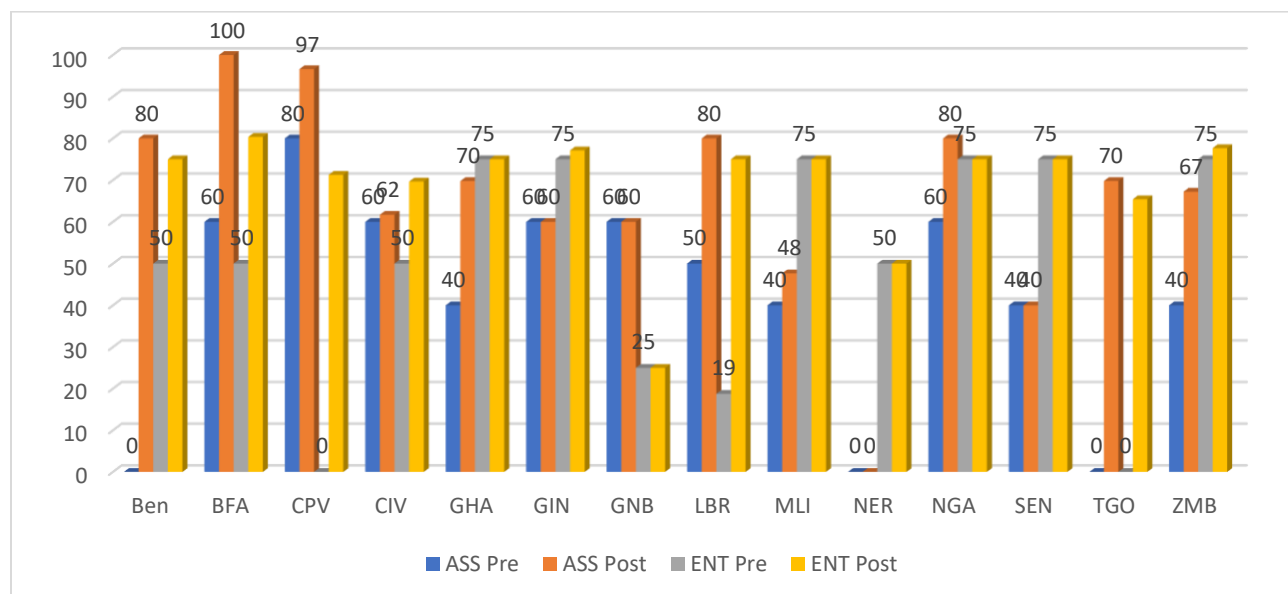
Assets and Entrepreneurship

Access to resources can have an impact on women's mobility, career, marriage, entrepreneurship, and even parenthood. However, due to cultural norms, legislative restrictions, and discriminatory practices, women in the ECOWAS region encounter substantial obstacles when trying to access assets. Only Burkina Faso did not restrict women's property rights by law, and this was achieved after ECOWAS (Fig. 4). However, women had limited access to assets in the other 14 nations, especially before the creation of ECOWAS. Ameyaw and associates (2021) assert that women in ECOWAS nations encounter societal and legal constraints that restrict their access to resources. Many nations place a higher priority on the inheritance and property rights of men than on those of women and the inability of women to access and manage assets is hampered by this, as well as their low levels of education and financial knowledge. Access to financial resources, such as credit and savings, is limited for women due to the lack of collateral or the need for a male guarantor. Since inheritance laws in Niger typically prioritize male heirs, this can leave women with limited access to property and other assets (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). This study concludes that this is a major reason why Niger had a score of 0 in both the pre-and post-ECOWAS period.

The ECOWAS has acknowledged the value of encouraging women's entrepreneurship as a way to spur economic growth and combat poverty in the area (ECOWAS, 2016). Although West African women entrepreneurs confront a variety of difficulties, such as restricted access to markets, education, and funding (Kitching et al., 2018), ECOWAS has put in place several measures geared at assisting female entrepreneurs to solve these issues. These include easing access to capital, offering training and mentorship programs, and encouraging networking and cooperation among female entrepreneurs (ECOWAS, 2016). This may be the reason why 12 out of the 15 ECOWAS countries progressed better in entrepreneurship than other indicators although

they did not attain the maximum score (Fig. 3). One notable initiative is the ECOWAS Female Entrepreneurship and Empowerment Program (ECOWAS-FEEP), which was launched in 2014 to promote women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship. The program provides training, mentorship, and access to finance for women entrepreneurs in the region (ECOWAS, 2016). Despite these efforts, women entrepreneurs in West Africa continue to face significant challenges; cultural norms and gender stereotypes may limit women's ability to access finance or participate in male-dominated industries (Kitching et al., 2018). Additionally, women may face discrimination and harassment in the workplace, which can further limit their economic opportunities (ECOWAS, 2016).

Figure 3: Women's Assets and Entrepreneurship pre- and post-ECOWAS



Source: World Bank Data, 2023

Women's Pay and Pension

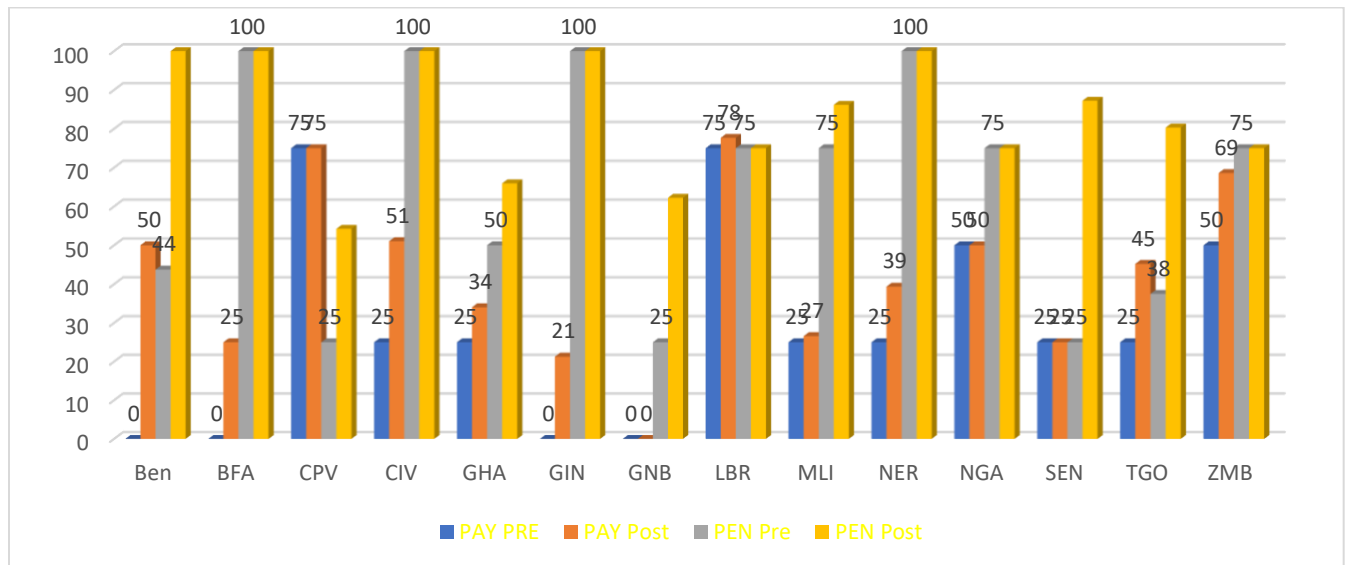
Results in Figure 4 show that the 15 ECOWAS countries did not fare well in terms of pay, as there exists occupational segregation and gender wage gap in the countries during the period in review. Liberia and Cape Verde did better than other countries. The World Bank (2021) reported that women in Cape Verde often earn less than men for comparable work. Men's average monthly earnings in Cape Verde were 16.7% higher than women's in 2018, as cited in United Nations Development Programme (2019). This gender pay gap persists across sectors and is particularly pronounced in the private sector (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Despite the existence of laws prohibiting gender-based pay discrimination, enforcement remains weak, and many women are not aware of their rights (World Bank, 2021).

Guinea Bissau was the lowest scoring country in terms of pay, and this confirms the International Labour Organization (ILO) report (2019) which stated that women in Guinea Bissau earn approximately 62% of what men earn for similar work. The wage gap in Guinea Bissau is wider in some sectors, such as agriculture, where women earn only 44% of men's wages (ILO, 2019). The low level of education among women in Guinea Bissau is a significant factor contributing to this pay gap. Embaló (2021) found that women's lack of access to education and training programs limits their employment opportunities and contributes to their lower wages.

Additionally, cultural norms and stereotypes also play a role in perpetuating gender-based pay disparities in the country (Embaló, 2021).

Figure 4 also shows that about 33% of the countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Niger) had laws that positively influenced the size of a woman's pension; thus, women had access to pensions that were the same as those available to men.

Figure 4: Women's Pay and Pension pre- and post- ECOWAS

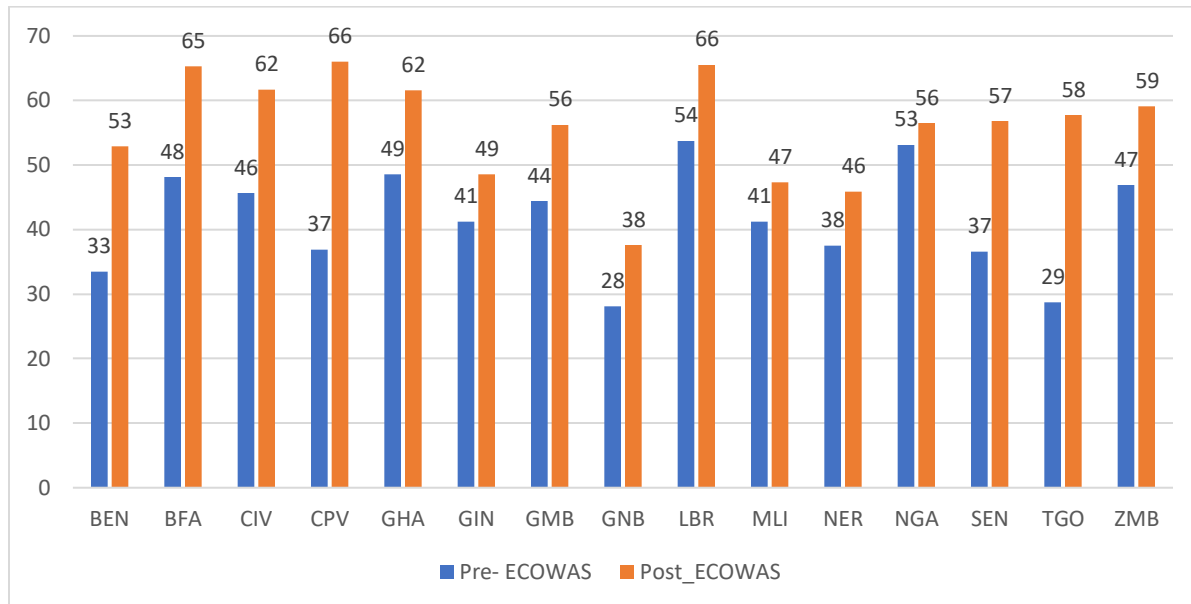


Source: World Bank Data (2023)

Women's Business and the Law

Overall, Figure 5 demonstrates that throughout the pre-ECOWAS (1970–1974) and post-ECOWAS (1975–2021) eras, all ECOWAS countries achieved some progress toward empowering women. However, only Burkina Faso and Cape Verde have made serious advancements between the pre- and post-era, moving from an average score of 48 to 65 for Burkina Faso and from 37 to 66 for Cape Verde between the pre- and post-ECOWAS period. Nigeria and Gambia had the least advancement between the pre- and post-ECOWAS eras in the area of women's empowerment. Generally, all ECOWAS countries had one legal constraint or other hindering women's empowerment in the region. Most countries did not thrive well in the metric for parenthood (mean score = 42.9) as only 6 countries empowered women after having children.

Figure 5: Women in Business and the Law Indication pre- and post-ECOWAS



Source: World Bank Data (2023)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that most countries have made progress in terms of women's autonomy and freedom of movement since the pre-ECOWAS era. This progress can be attributed to reforms in policies in ECOWAS countries regarding women although other factors may have contributed to this progress. Despite the fact that ECOWAS member states have made strides in promoting gender equality and women's rights, they still fall short when it comes to influencing women's decisions to enter and remain in the workforce, in empowering women after having children, and closing the wage gap between men and women. For ECOWAS to achieve sustainable growth, women's empowerment is critical. Thus, the study recommends that:

- Policies aimed at empowering women after having children, such as job-protected leave of sufficient length and pay, should be implemented.
- ECOWAS nations should enact laws and policies that support gender equality in access to resources. This category covers measures to promote gender equality in financial matters, such as inheritance and land tenure reforms, financial literacy and credit access for women, and programs supporting women's entrepreneurship. It also includes encouraging women's involvement in decision-making about asset ownership and management.
- ECOWAS nations should enact and enforce comprehensive equal pay legislation to ensure that men and women receive equal pay for equal work. This should include transparent salary structures and penalties for non-compliance.
- The wider international community should support the strong commitment demonstrated by the African governments within the framework of a clear allocation of responsibilities and a clear mapping out of specific steps and measures.

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