



# Regional Report

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**Getting to Parity: The ECOWAS Region's  
Journey Towards Closing the Gender Gap**

*June 2022*

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## ACRONYMS

Acronyms	Definitions
CHWs	Community Health Workers
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DER/FJ	General Delegation for Youth and Women's Rapid Entrepreneurship
DFS	Digital Financial Services
ENO	Open Digital Spaces
FAARF	Women's Income-Generating Activities Support Fund
FASI	Informal Sector Support Fund
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPS	Gender Parity Score
HCD	Human Capital Development
HCI	Human Capital Index
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
MMR	Maternal Mortality Ratio
MPP	Microcredit Program to support the Poor
MUFFA	African Women's Mutual Finance
NGO	Non-Profit Organization
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SLG	Savings and Loans Groups
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
USD	United States Dollar
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization

## TERMINOLOGY

Terminology	Definitions
Gender parity	<b>Gender parity</b> is an instrument at the service of equality, which consists in ensuring the access of women and men to the same opportunities, rights, and material conditions while respecting their specificities. The notion of parity constitutes the foundation of policies to combat the disparities between women and men.
Gender equality	<b>Gender equality</b> refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities granted to women and men and/or girls and boys regardless of their gender. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration – recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.
Gender equity	<b>Gender equity</b> refers to fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities (e.g., equal treatment before the law; equal access to social provisions; education; equal pay for work of the same value). Reaching gender equity often requires built-in measures to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages of women. Specific measurements and monitoring are employed to ensure that, at a minimum, programs, policies and projects implemented do not leave women worse off than men in their peer groups and families, and that measures are taken to compensate for historical and social disadvantages.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This regional report aims to provide an overview of the ECOWAS countries' gender parity performance as well as estimate the cost of not closing the gender parity gap in the West African region. Outlining the economic benefits of closing the gender parity gap by 2030, this study can support the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in building on and accelerating the progress made in achieving gender equality in West Africa. Furthermore, this analysis seeks to identify underlying drivers of gender inequalities and binding constraints preventing further progress across ECOWAS Member States. The report assesses the ECOWAS region's gender parity performance through gender parity scores (GPS) attributed to key indicators across education, health, economic participation and political empowerment dimensions. This regional report is complemented by six deep-dive case studies conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

**Closing the gender parity gap has become an economic imperative for the region as it could add up to USD 105.7 billion to the ECOWAS GDP by 2030.** Closing the gender gap is critical for the region to meet its human capital development (HCD) objectives and achieve sustainable economic growth. Developing women's human capital allows them to contribute to growing the region's productive capabilities. By reaching full gender parity in (i) primary school enrollment, (ii) secondary school enrollment, (iii) tertiary school enrollment, (iv) literacy rate; and (v) labor force participation by 2030, the region could increase its gross domestic product (GDP) by up to USD 105.7 billion, or USD 232.5 per capita. Closing the gender gap in the region across these five indicators alone would allow Member States to seize considerable untapped economic opportunities.

**The ECOWAS region has significantly improved women and girls' health and education outcomes due to strong investments aimed at expanding access to basic services and the adoption of inclusive policies.** In recent years, six Member States (Senegal, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and Burkina Faso) have successfully closed the gender gap in primary and/or secondary education while other countries in the region have managed to considerably reduce it. While still below global average (0.98) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) average (0.94), the literacy index has also improved across the region from 0.74 in 2010 to 0.83 in 2020. Major improvements in women's health outcomes were also observed across the region, particularly in Cabo Verde, which leads the region with a maternal mortality rate that has decreased from 70 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2010 to 40.8 in 2020. This progress across the ECOWAS region is the result of supply-side investments in infrastructure, with the construction of schools and health centers facilitating access to health and education services. In parallel, investments in human resources such as teachers and greater integration of community health workers (CHWs), who play a key role in underserved communities or conflict-affected areas, have also helped improve the quality of the care provided. For instance, in Burkina Faso, the number of midwives increased by 89% and by 67% for general practitioners between 2015 and 2020.<sup>1</sup> Finally, policies such as providing women free antenatal care in Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde and Togo have contributed to the increase of women's healthcare utilization.

**However, persistent gender-biased social norms prevent West African women from fully taking advantage of these services.** Despite progress in women and girls' health and education outcomes, religious considerations and negative sociocultural stigma continue to limit women's access to health services and particularly family planning. Consequently, in 2020, the fertility rate in the ECOWAS region averaged 4.6 births per woman (twice the global average of 2.4<sup>2</sup>), led by Sahelian countries such as Niger (6.7), Mali (5.6) as well as Nigeria (5.25). Similarly, while girls' enrollment rates in primary

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<sup>1</sup> Burkina Faso Ministry of Health.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank.

and secondary school have increased overall, their completion rates at the secondary level remains low, in part due to the prevalence of child marriage, which remains high across the region. The practice is prevalent in the region with an estimated 76% of Nigerien girls married before the age of 18, 53.6% of Malian girls<sup>3</sup> and 46.5% of Guinean girls.<sup>4</sup>

**Furthermore, while pioneering female politicians are paving the way for change across the region, women's presence in politics remains marginal.** Quota laws have been introduced across the ECOWAS region thanks to sustained efforts by both governments and local civil society organizations (CSOs). Yet, these laws are inconsistently enforced. Senegal remains one of the few exceptions, with the highest GPS reflecting the high proportion of women in Parliament (0.76), while Togo has the highest number of women in ministerial roles (0.45). In other Member States, sociocultural stigmas surrounding women's place in politics, and difficulties securing funding still discourage many women from running for office. Despite these barriers, there have been notable examples of pioneering women holding senior political leadership roles across the region, such as the region's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia or Togo's current female Prime Minister, Victoire Tomegah Dogbé. These women are gradually changing public mindsets about women's role in politics and paving the way for future generations.

**While relatively in better health, better educated and with a growing political voice, women tend to have less resources to turn this acquired human capital into productive livelihood opportunities.** Women continue to have less opportunities to thrive in the formal economy and they earn lower pay for the same work, with a regional GPS score averaging 0.64 for earned income. Additionally, women have less resources and opportunities to grow their businesses or their farms. These challenges are due to several structural barriers and persistent social norms. For instance, in higher education, women are usually concentrated in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs, that are shorter and more adapted to their household responsibilities. Besides, women are still poorly represented in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), making up less than 30% of STEM students in Senegal for instance.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, once they join the workforce, discrimination and persistent gender biased norms often limit women's career prospects. Women face similar hurdles in rural settings. Despite representing 75% of the agricultural workforce in Nigeria for example, only 13% of agricultural landowners are women<sup>6</sup>. Customary inheritance practices prevent women from owning land titles. These practices hamper both female entrepreneurs and farmers' ability to provide the required collaterals to secure loans. Digital devices and services have shown a potential to empower women and help reduce the gender gap by facilitating access to financial services, information and markets. As observed in Ghana, female financial inclusion has increased from 22.2% in 2010 to 61.9% in 2020, driven by the rise of digital financial services (DFS)<sup>7</sup>. Yet, without sustained support to women to facilitate access and use of these devices and services, the digital divide between genders will widen and may exacerbate the gender gap over time.

**In addition, further progress is threatened by both the region's fragile security situation and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.** While the ECOWAS region has demonstrated resilience amid the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks, at the current pace, it will not achieve its gender parity objectives before 2072, missing out on the economic benefits of closing the gender gap by 2030. Moreover, the security crisis in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin further threatens to slow down progress. Women and girls, who account for most of displaced populations are left more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse, and more at risk of food insecurity. This situation is also negatively

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<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 and child marriage in West and Central Africa, Plan International, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF.

<sup>5</sup> Gender equality in Senegal, Luxdev, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> UNDP data, SDG Goal 5: Gender equality, available [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Global FINDEX Database.



affecting women and girls more broadly, as schools and health infrastructures are regularly targeted in attacks. Finally, measures in place to curb the spread of the virus during the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately impacted women and girls, further decreasing their access to basic services and pushing them out of employment, which in turn further threatens their livelihoods. The pandemic has also increased women's vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV).

**Therefore, significant efforts will be required for the ECOWAS region to close the gender parity gap and reap the economic benefits of women's full participation in all aspects of society.** For the region to reach its gender parity objectives, it should foster the building blocks essential to creating an enabling environment that promotes inclusiveness and gender equality. These building blocks include (i) strong political commitment from the executive branch to advance gender equality; and (ii) the existence of a vibrant and organized civil society ecosystem advocating for women and girls' rights. These two elements will help gradually improve the third building block necessary for gender quality to take root within a society. Both the executive branch and CSOs contribute to gradually changing gender-biased norms, which remains one of the main hurdles to progress on gender equality.

**The ECOWAS Commission can be a catalyst to encourage change across the region and support Member States in their journey towards closing the gender gap.** The Commission can continue to play a key role in generating support and funding for greater action on gender equality initiatives. It can support Member States' efforts to close the gender parity gap, notably by (i) using its convening power to improve coordination between multiple stakeholders (Member States, donors, CSOs) to optimize interventions; (ii) supporting the development of professional groups and associations focused on advancing women's rights across the region; (iii) developing a robust and comprehensive regional monitoring & evaluation (M&E) dashboard to track performance; and (iv) scaling up existing initiatives aimed at strengthening Member States' implementation capacity.

## A. METHODOLOGY

### Make the business case for gender parity

**The business case measures the economic implications of not reaching gender parity at the regional level and estimates the size of opportunity for the ECOWAS region.** A statistical model was developed to predict the GDP value if gender parity scores of selected indicators were to move to full gender parity (score of 1). This scenario analysis identifies which gender parity indicators have the most impact on economic performance to better prioritize interventions and generate momentum for action. This approach demonstrates that fostering gender parity has now become an economic imperative that is key to the region's human capital development and inclusive growth.

### Identify lessons learned and propose recommendations

**The study assessed the current state of gender parity to identify both successful interventions implemented by Member States and remaining challenges to overcome.** Both successes and challenges informed the formulation of lessons to be learned from experiences across the six deep dive case studies conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. By analyzing successful outcomes in Member States that managed to make significant progress or close the gender parity gap, three foundational building blocks were identified as key elements necessary to foster inclusive societies. Furthermore, recommendations for interventions that complement the ECOWAS Commission's existing initiatives have been prioritized.

### Limitations

**While the study provides a comprehensive review of the ECOWAS region's gender performance, the analysis was constrained by the lack of data and time.** The study was conducted over a four-month period, covering a total of 128 interviews in six Member States. While these interviews were aimed at developing an understanding of both the current state of the gender gap as well as the challenges and opportunities, and at capturing broad perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders including government bodies, civil society organizations, development partners and private sector actors, this study by no means does full justice to the complex gender dynamics and their implications within each country.

**Furthermore, the limited availability of gender disaggregated data across all 15 Member States narrowed the depth of the analysis.** The availability of gender-disaggregated data is generally limited across ECOWAS Member States, and the lack of historical or consistent data is particularly acute. We were nonetheless able to build a reasonably robust model based on the data available and the projections for fourteen countries (with the exception of Guinea-Bissau). However, more consistent data would have allowed for a more precise and in-depth analysis that would have included econometric estimations of the impact of gender parity on each Member State's GDP. Despite these limitations, the study captured major trends, remaining barriers preventing full parity, as well as impactful innovations observed across Member States.

## B. CONTEXT

### Landscape analysis

**The people of the ECOWAS region represent its greatest asset and this human capital can be harnessed to drive economic growth.** In 2020, the total population of ECOWAS' 15 Member States<sup>8</sup> was estimated at 397.21 million (5.12% of the world population and 34.96% of that of Sub-Saharan Africa).<sup>9</sup> ECOWAS' overall population has been growing at a fast pace and saw a significant increase of 30.86% between 2010 and 2020. Nigeria alone accounts for more than half of the region's population (51.9%). The ECOWAS region is young, with an estimated 42.75% of the population under the age of 15 as opposed to 2.89% aged 65 and above. Women represent nearly half of the region's population (49.81%), highlighting the critical need to develop the region's human capital and to allow the population to contribute equally to the region's economic and social development.

**Through its Human Capital Development strategy, ECOWAS recognizes its role in ensuring West Africa's competitiveness and resilience.** Human capital development represents the skills, health and knowledge accumulated over time, allowing people to be productive members of society. HCD is essential to a country's economic performance and an engine for sustainable growth<sup>10</sup>. Considering the security challenges faced by the ECOWAS region and the rapid changes in the global economy induced, among other things, by the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States need to adapt more than ever and seek ways to remain competitive and develop a workforce with the appropriate skills to attract investments. In addition, higher human capital will enable the region to seize the opportunities that have emerged from disruptive technological advances such as e-commerce.<sup>11</sup>

**However, the ECOWAS region faces a series of complex crises that prevent it from fully tapping into this human capital.** Political instability has emerged in recent years within the region. Most recently, Guinea (2009 and 2021), Mali (2021) and Burkina Faso (2022) have experienced military coups d'état. According to Freedom House's 2021 'Freedom in the World' Report, of the 12 countries with the most significant year-over-year decline in democracy, five are in West Africa.<sup>12</sup> This instability is exacerbated by high poverty rates, leading to population discontent. Indeed, 13 out of the 15 ECOWAS Member States are classified as low human development countries, except for Cabo Verde and Ghana. An estimated 60% of the population currently lives with less than USD 1 per day.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the Sahel region is increasingly destabilized by cross-border crime and terrorism, further threatening progress on human capital development. The region's prospects are also worsened by climate change, which threatens food security and increases competition for resources such as water. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of people in need of food assistance in the West African region, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria, increased from 7 million to 27 million.<sup>14</sup>

**While significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, ECOWAS economies managed to weather the crisis.** The ECOWAS economy has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

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<sup>8</sup> ECOWAS' Member States are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank data, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> ECOWAS 2030 Integrated Regional Strategy for Human Capital Development.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, [World Development Report](#) The Changing Nature of Work, 2019.

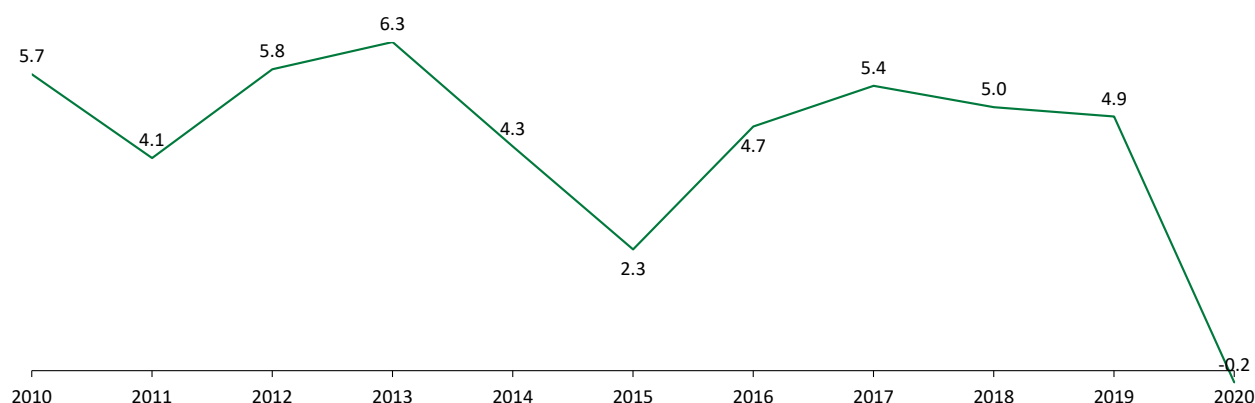
<sup>12</sup> Political Reforms and Implications for Democracy and Instability in West Africa, Mubin Adewumi Bakare, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> ECDPM, Understanding ECOWAS efforts in promoting a governance agenda, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Oxfam, [West Africa faces its worst food crisis in ten years, with over 27 million people already suffering from hunger](#), 2022.

due to containment measures put in place to curb the disease. Most countries in the region imposed store closures, partial lockdowns and border closures, leading to significant drops in commodity exports, cross-border trade and loss of tax revenues. Additionally, the increased health and social spending induced by the pandemic led to significant increases in government expenditures. Benin, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Togo saw spikes in overall expenditure between 31% and 47%.<sup>15</sup> The relatively low revenues and increasing expenditure levels resulted in the highest fiscal deficit-to-GDP ratio in more than a decade: -7.5% on average in 2020 for the region. Economic activity declined by 0.23% in 2020 across the region, compared to an average growth of +4.85% back in 2019, right before the crisis. Despite lower GDP growth rates, most Member States have weathered the crisis better than the rest of the world, which averaged a recession of -3.29% in 2020.<sup>16</sup> Real GDP growth in the ECOWAS region is expected to rebound to +4.4% in 2022 driven by a recovery of commodity prices.<sup>17</sup> However, growth trajectories will be uneven across Member States, as economies dominated by the tourism sector such as Cabo Verde will experience lower growth rates due to the modest recovery of this sector.

**Figure 1: Average GDP annual growth rate (%) of ECOWAS Member States (2010-2020)<sup>18</sup>**



**Gender inequalities persist in the ECOWAS region despite the commitment of its Member States to eliminate them.** While all the ECOWAS Member States are signatories to international gender equality legal frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the African Union Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, the actual impact of these international instruments on women's lives is limited and variable. Gender disparities are still widespread across the region. The average gender inequality index (GII) of ECOWAS Member States is high (0.592) compared to the world average (0.436) and slightly inferior to the Sub-Saharan Africa average (0.570). Bridging the gender gap and strengthening women's participation in economic activity is not only essential to building a fair society, but is also a prerequisite for achieving political, social and economic cohesion across West Africa.<sup>19</sup>

## Objectives of the regional report

**This regional report aims to provide an overview of the region's gender parity performance as well as estimate the cost of not closing the gender parity gap in the ECOWAS region.** Outlining the economic benefits of closing the gender parity gap by 2030, this study can support ECOWAS in

<sup>15</sup> ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), West African Development Outlook, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> World Bank data, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> EBID, West African Development Outlook, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> World Bank, Database, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> ECOWAS Parliament, 2010.

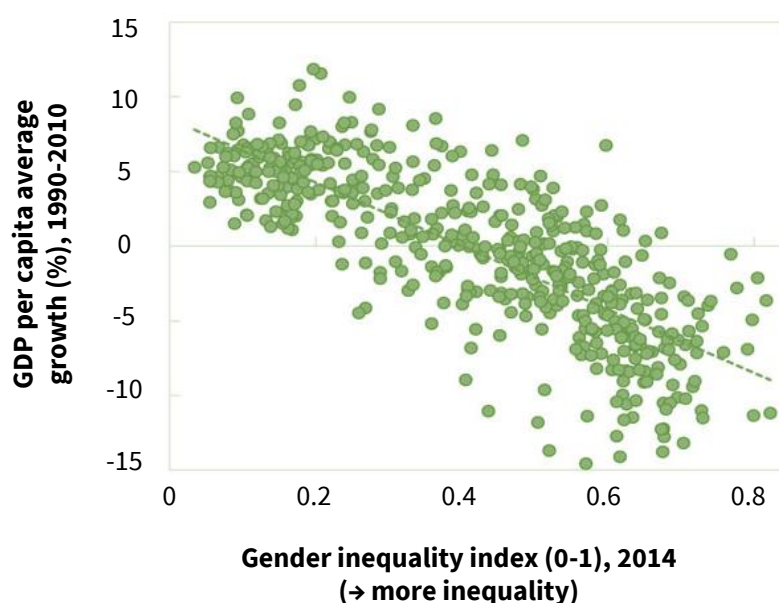
building on and accelerating the progress made in achieving gender equality in West Africa. Furthermore, this analysis seeks to identify underlying drivers of gender inequalities and binding constraints preventing further progress in ECOWAS Member States. While not an exhaustive list, this report is based on a set of selected gender indicators to consistently track the region's gender parity performance over time as well as insights from six country deep-dive case studies conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Finally, the report identifies key building blocks that are critical to fostering an inclusive society in addition to formulating gender-focused recommendations ECOWAS can implement to support Member States address remaining constraints to closing the gender parity gap.

**A mixed-method approach was adopted to assess the region's current gender parity performance, including desk research and stakeholder interviews.** Main gender constraints in the region were identified through extensive literature review and analysis across the four identified dimensions based on the ECOWAS HCD framework: (i) Education, skills and labor force participation, (ii) Health and nutrition, (iii) Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy; and (iv) Political empowerment. Hypotheses were developed and confirmed by conversations with key stakeholders including gender experts, government agencies, donors, private sector actors and civil society organizations. The analysis also highlighted successful country-level interventions that have contributed to advancing gender parity objectives and could inform future initiatives across the region. Furthermore, external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and food security were assessed to determine whether they have hindered the region's progress towards greater gender parity.

## C. THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE OF GENDER PARITY

**Closing the gender gap can boost the ECOWAS region's economic growth and productivity.** Studies have shown that there is a negative correlation between GDP per capita growth and gender inequality. In other words, countries with high gender inequality also have lower GDP per capita growth on average. Therefore, promoting gender parity and equality is key to reaching inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Developing both men and women's human capital allows them to live up to their full potential and contribute to growing the size of the labor force and the region's productive capabilities. Beyond a human rights question, promoting gender parity and equality has now become an economic imperative for all 15 ECOWAS Member States to fully leverage their human capital and seize untapped economic opportunities.

**Figure 2: Correlation between gender inequality and real GDP per capita growth<sup>20</sup>**



**Achieving full gender parity in five key indicators by 2030 could contribute an estimated USD 105.7 billion to ECOWAS' regional GDP.** This analysis found that reaching full gender parity in (i) primary school enrollment (ii) secondary school enrollment, (iii) tertiary school enrollment, (iv) literacy rate; and (v) labor force participation, will have the most significant impact on ECOWAS' GDP growth. By closing the gender gap in these five indicators, ECOWAS could benefit from an additional increase in its regional GDP of USD 105.7 billion (+15%), or USD 232.5 per capita (+13.4%), by 2030.

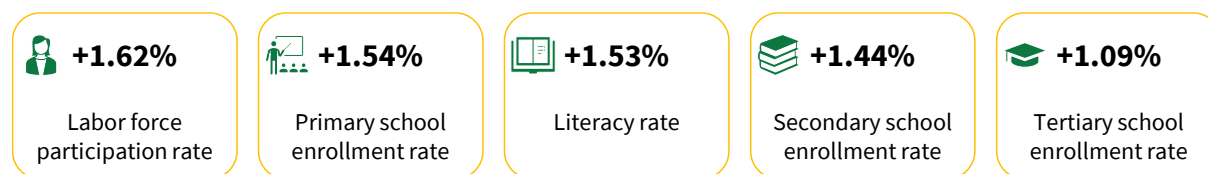
**In addition to its direct impact on wealth generation, achieving parity in education has a positive correlation with health indicators.** For instance, the higher the level of education of women, the better the health outcomes for their households. For example, in Sierra Leone, the prevalence of stunting among children under the age of 5 went from 32% for uneducated mothers to 20% for mothers with a secondary education in 2019.<sup>21</sup> This finding implies that in order to maximize the economic and social impact of gender interventions, priority must be given to girls' education. These are the gender-related interventions that are most likely to have the greatest return on investment.

<sup>20</sup> Gonzales and others (2015a). The graph represents the average growth rate of real GDP per capita for a sample of countries for which data are available during the period from 1990 to 2010 and the gender inequality index in 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Demographic and Health Survey 2019.



**Figure 3: Regional GDP growth impact of achieving gender parity in labor force participation, school enrollment and literacy rates**

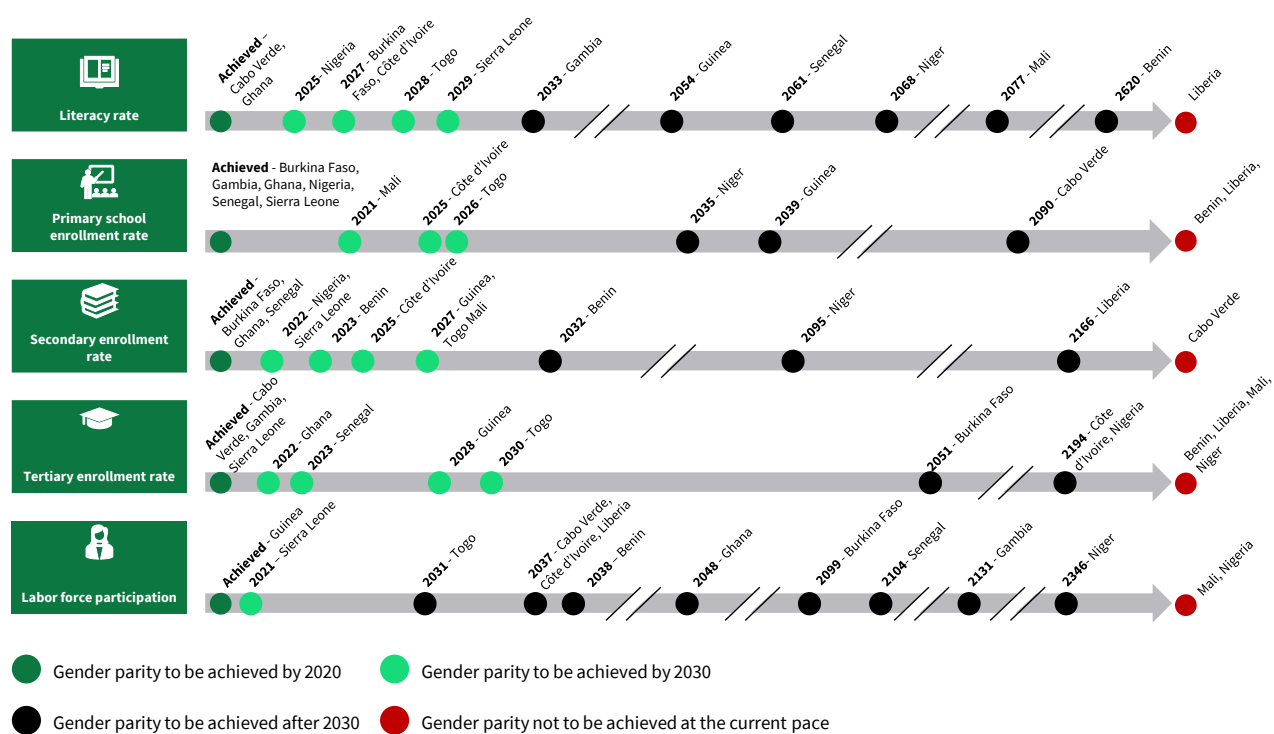


**However, at the current pace, gender parity in all five key indicators will not be achieved until 2072.** It is estimated that the ECOWAS region should be able to achieve gender parity in three of the five key indicators by 2030 at the current pace of change:

- **Estimated full parity in primary enrollment to be reached by 2022:** Notable progress has been made in primary school enrollment, with a regional average GPS of 0.99 in 2020. Full parity should be achieved as early as 2022 if the region stays on track at the same average growth of the last five years (Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of +0.77%).
- **Estimated full parity in secondary enrollment to be reached by 2027:** The ECOWAS region has also made great progress in improving the secondary school enrollment rate, the regional average GPS was 0.91 in 2020 and is expected to reach 1 (i.e., full parity) by 2027, given its CAGR of +1.39%.
- **Estimated full parity in tertiary enrollment to be reached by 2030:** The ECOWAS region still has progress to make to close the parity gap in tertiary enrollment rate, given the regional average GPS of 0.74. However, women enrollment rates have grown steadily with a CAGR of +3.11%, therefore the region is expected to reach full parity by 2030.
- **Estimated full parity in literacy to be reached by 2039:** The ECOWAS region will not achieve full gender parity in literacy by 2030. The GPS for the literacy rate of 15-24-year-olds was 0.83 on average in ECOWAS in 2020 with a CAGR of +0.99%, implying that the region will achieve full parity by 2039 at the current pace of growth.
- **Estimated full parity in labor force participation to be reached by 2072:** The ECOWAS region underperforms in women's labor force participation, with a regional GPS average of 0.82 in 2020. Progress on this indicator has been stagnant (CAGR of +0.36%), implying that the region will take the longest time to close the gap and is likely to achieve gender parity only by 2072.

**Consequently, most ECOWAS Member States will need to make additional efforts to close the gender gap by 2030 and reap the economic benefits of full gender parity.** Member States are currently at various stages of progress in closing the gender parity gap across these five indicators. At the current pace it is estimated that only Sierra Leone is poised to achieve full parity across all five key indicators by 2030 and generate +1.44% GDP growth per year. Therefore, significant efforts will be needed to reach full parity, particularly to (i) improve women's labor force participation (estimated at 55.20% on average in 2020) as the gender gap is widest on this indicator and potential economic gains are highest; and (ii) to improve girls' youth literacy rates (63.37% regional average in 2020) as well as girls secondary (50.93%) and tertiary (10.57%) enrollment rates, which are still relatively low across the ECOWAS region compared to the rest of the world (where the average rates are 90.78%, 76.14%, and 43.23% respectively). However, the region will have to overcome potential setbacks in children learning outcomes resulting from school closures during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 4: Projected year of gender parity achievement for ECOWAS Member States across five key indicators



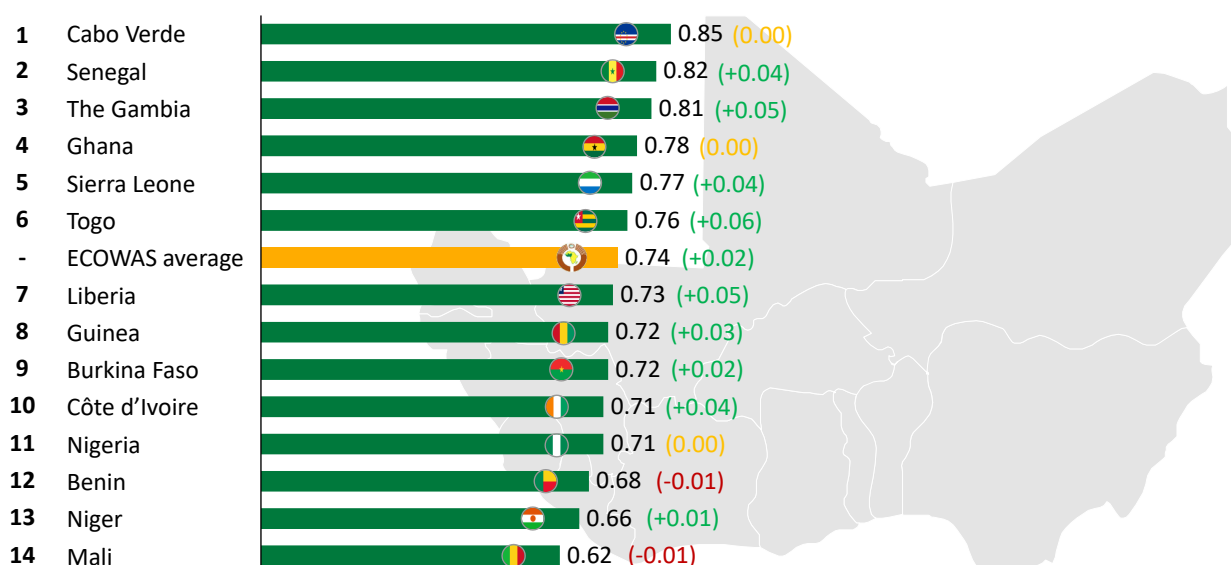


## D. THE CURRENT STATE OF GENDER PARITY

### D1. Gender parity performance overview

**ECOWAS Member States have made great progress toward closing the gender gap.** Between 2016 and 2020, gender parity scores have slightly improved across the region. Cabo Verde and Senegal continue to lead the region with GPS averaging 0.85 and 0.82 respectively. Togo (+0.06), the Gambia (+0.05), Liberia (+0.05) have shown the most notable improvements over the span of a year. Progress in the rest of the region has nevertheless been slower. GPS has stagnated in Nigeria (0.71) and Ghana (0.78), while Mali (0.62) and Benin (0.68) have slightly regressed.

**Figure 5: ECOWAS Member States Ranking (2020) based on average GPS (0-1)<sup>22</sup>**



### D2. Health & nutrition





**The region has seen some progress in terms of improving women's health outcomes.** Women's access to healthcare has progressed across most Member States thanks to sustained investment in infrastructure and human resources' capacity. The adoption of free antenatal care policies has helped increase women's healthcare utilization, while the promotion of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) strategies has led to a slight increase in modern contraceptive use, particularly among youth. Finally, sustained awareness campaigns led by civil society organizations and technical partners, focused on engaging with men and religious/traditional leaders are helping address stigma surrounding women's access to family planning and health services.

**Yet, maternal mortality, malnutrition and harmful acts against women and girls remain prevalent across the region.** Indeed, despite numerous programs implemented by Member States and their partners to fight child malnutrition, the prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years old is still high across the region. Moreover, despite demonstrated commitments to the protection of women and children's rights, child marriage and gender-based violence are still common. The persistence of these challenges is mainly due to (i) religious and cultural beliefs discouraging women from seeking modern care; (ii) poor access to quality care, particularly in underserved areas; (iii) the existence of loopholes in the legal frameworks in place; and (iv) the deterioration of the security context in the

<sup>22</sup> Due to missing data, regional average ranking excludes Guinea Bissau.

Sahel region and Nigeria, further limiting access to basic services and increasing women's vulnerability to abuse.

**Figure 6: Summary of ECOWAS Member States performances across health & nutrition key indicators (2020)<sup>23</sup>**

	Benin	Burkina Faso	Cabo Verde	Côte d'Ivoire	The Gambia	Ghana	Guinea	Liberia	Mali	Niger	Nigeria	Senegal	Sierra Leone	Togo
 <b>Maternal Mortality rate</b> (per 100,000 live births)	421.99	323.26	40.90	613.12	520.38	297.08	495.03	652.41	627.91	498.72	860.84	322.87	916.25	364.22
 <b>Fertility rate</b> (total births per woman)	4.70	5.03	2.21	4.54	5.09	3.77	4.55	4.18	5.69	6.74	5.25	4.49	4.08	4.20
 <b>Prevalence of stunting</b> (% of children under 5)	31.3	25.5	9.7	17.8	16.1	14.2	29.4	28.0	25.7	46.7	35.3	17.2	26.8	23.8
 <b>Child marriage</b> (% women aged 20-24 years married before age 18)	30.56	51.55	N/A	27.00	25.74	19.33	46.50	35.93	53.65	N/A	43.40	30.50	29.60	24.80

Performance: ■ Low ■ Medium ■ High

## Sexual and reproductive health

The ECOWAS region has among the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, as a result of **insufficient access to quality healthcare**. Maternal mortality ratios (MMR) in the ECOWAS region remain considerably higher than in the rest of the world (497 deaths compared to a global average of 211 deaths per 100,000 live births)<sup>24</sup>, while one of the targets outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030.<sup>25</sup> The situation is especially critical in Sierra Leone and Nigeria where maternal mortality ratios averaged 916 and 861 deaths per 100,000 live births respectively in 2020.<sup>26</sup> The high rate of maternal deaths in the region is attributed to a wide range of factors, including the insufficient number of health clinics and practitioners especially in rural areas limiting access to antenatal care, low literacy levels and poverty. It is also worth noting that the numbers for the region are likely higher as they exclude unrecorded deaths occurring outside hospital settings. Investments in recent years by local governments and their partners to improve women's access to health services have nevertheless helped reduce maternal mortality in the region from 538 in 2016 down to 497 in 2020. This progress has led to a regional average below the SSA average (534 deaths per 100,000 live births).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Due to missing data, the summary is excluding Guinea Bissau.

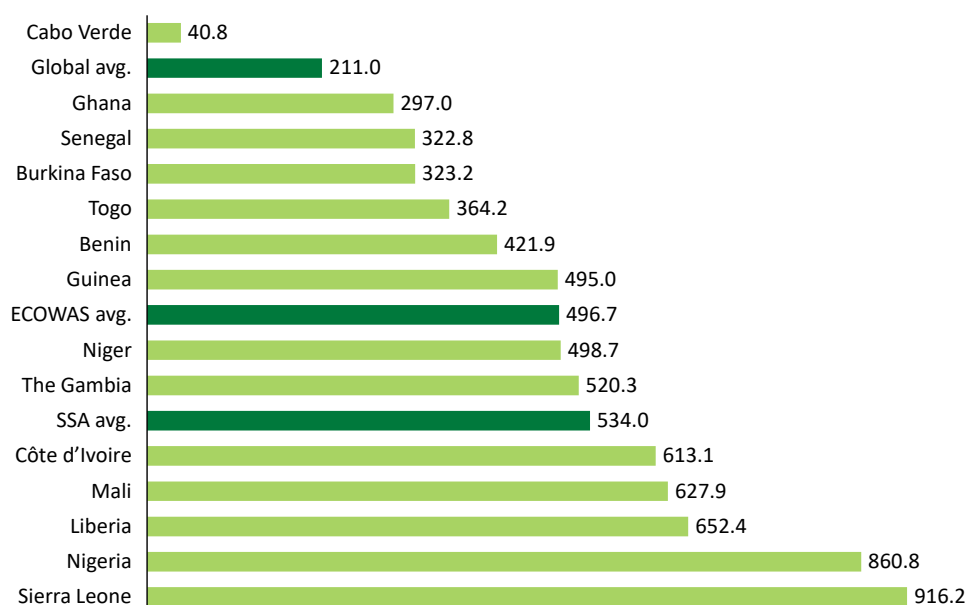
<sup>24</sup> World Bank.

<sup>25</sup> World Health Organization.

<sup>26</sup> World Bank.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 7: Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births) – ECOWAS Member States' scores compared to SSA and global average (2020)<sup>28</sup>**



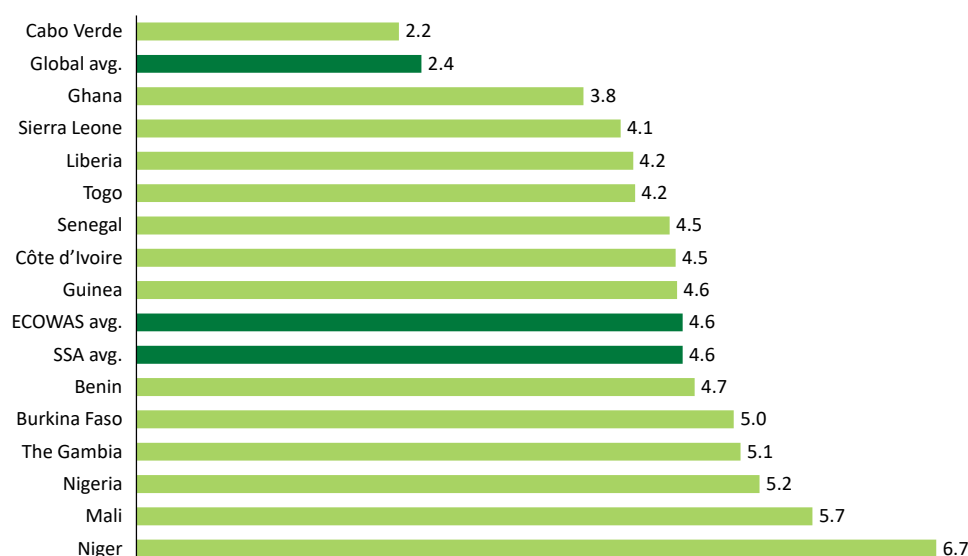
**The region also continues to register a fertility rate higher than the global average.** In 2020, the fertility rate in the ECOWAS region averaged 4.6 births per woman, twice the global average of 2.4.<sup>29</sup> However, there have been some efforts to improve women's access to family planning. Several Member States such as Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo have implemented reforms aiming to cut down the prices of modern contraceptives. Moreover, awareness campaigns were organized across the region by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to improve access to information and help improve stigma resilience. Still, women continue to face difficulties accessing family planning due to (i) limited availability of contraceptives in some areas, such as Nigeria that has a 48% unmet need for family planning among sexually active unmarried women and 19% among currently married women;<sup>30</sup> and (ii) religious considerations and negative sociocultural stigma associated with family planning. With sexuality still considered a taboo, unmarried girls who engage in sexual activities and use contraceptives are seen as promiscuous. The lack of confidentiality in health centers also deters many who fear ruining their reputation by seeking care. The myth that modern contraception will lead to infertility, leaving women less desirable for marriage, also plays a role in some young women's reluctance to taking it. Finally, there is the belief that a wife willing to bear many children is perceived as a sign of respect towards the husband, while oftentimes the need to secure permission from their spouses also impacts married women's ability and/or willingness to access contraception.

<sup>28</sup> World Bank. Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>29</sup> World Bank.

<sup>30</sup> National Population Commission (NPC) [Nigeria] and ICF Nigeria demographic and health survey 2018.

**Figure 8: Fertility rate – Total births per woman for each ECOWAS Member State (2020)<sup>31</sup>**



Nevertheless, sustained investments on the supply side of health services and the introduction of inclusive policies have helped alleviate the gender health gap in the region. Over the past five years, many Member States such as Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Togo and Ghana have invested in the construction of additional health infrastructure and the rehabilitation of existing health centers, thus improving women's access to primary healthcare, particularly in remote areas. An increased supply of medical professionals was also observed along with a greater integration of community health workers, who play a key role in underserved or conflict-affected areas. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of midwives in Burkina Faso increased by 89% and by 67% for general practitioners.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the quality of health services provided to women was improved with the development of inclusive training materials for health professionals in Côte d'Ivoire for instance. Finally, several ECOWAS Member States like Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde and Togo introduced reforms providing free antenatal care, which have led to an increase in women's healthcare utilization and a decrease in maternal mortality in these countries. In Ghana, which has the second lowest maternal mortality ratio of the region (297 deaths per 100,000 live births) below Cabo Verde (40.90) and far ahead the regional average (496), the implementation of inclusive health policies over the past ten years has helped to dramatically improve maternal health.

Successful Member States have improved health outcomes by encouraging women to seek care, thus promoting comprehensive sexual and reproductive health strategies, and focusing on enhancing men's participation. While overall fertility rates in the region remain higher than global average, some ECOWAS Member States have successfully reversed the trend. The introduction of a comprehensive national reproductive health program in Cabo Verde, integrating contraceptive and condom procurement in the state budget and tailored awareness-raising campaigns have helped the country lower its fertility rate from 2.5 in 2010 down to 2.2 births per woman in 2020. Similarly, Ghana has achieved a 3.8 fertility rate in 2020 down from 4.2 at the beginning of the decade. This is the result of strategies focused on teenagers such as the Adolescent Health Service Policy and Strategy (2016-2017) and the RMNCAHN Strategic Plan (2020-2025),<sup>33</sup> which aim to improve the availability of data around adolescent health, develop youth-friendly health services and prioritize the collaboration with communities and CSOs to promote adolescent health. The integration of

<sup>31</sup> World Bank. Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>32</sup> Burkina Faso Ministry of Health.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Health and Ghana Health Service, Integrated Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, Adolescent Health and Nutrition (RMNCAHN) Strategic Plan (2020-2025).

sexual and reproductive health modules into local school curricula in Burkina Faso has also helped to better inform the younger segment of the population and increase modern contraceptive use<sup>34</sup> from 16% in 2013 to 29% in 2019.<sup>35</sup> Finally, community-based interventions have helped challenge social norms and stigma towards family planning. The Bajenu Gox program (Godmothers program) in Senegal focused on enabling communities to take ownership of reproductive health issues. Programs targeting men like the Husbands and Future Husbands School in Burkina Faso and Niger, were also developed, helping change men's attitudes towards modern contraceptive and maternal healthcare.

## Women and food security

**Although initiatives were put in place to promote better nutritional practices, food insecurity continues to be a concern, particularly in the Sahel region.** Despite slight improvements, the nutritional situation remains a concern in the ECOWAS region, which experiences a malnutrition burden, particularly among children under 5 years old. Although the implementation of national strategies to improve nutritional habits have helped slightly decrease chronic malnutrition among children and women, the number of stunted children under 5 years of age continues to be high across the region, affecting both boys and girls (46.6% of boys and 42.2% of girls in Niger, 36.3% of boys and 31.2% of girls in Benin, 36.1% of boys and 26.9% of girls in Nigeria).<sup>36</sup> This is due to reasons such as inadequate child feeding practices especially amongst teenage mothers, the inequitable sharing of food in households resulting from the patriarchal system, and disparities in women's socio-economic backgrounds impacting children's nutritional statuses. Additionally, maternal education is found to play a major role in the prevalence of stunting in children; the 2020 Demographic Health Survey in Sierra Leone revealed that the more educated mothers are, the less prevalent stunting is, going from 32% among children whose mothers have no education to 20% among those whose mothers have more than a secondary education. Indeed, a higher level of education can enable women to secure higher paying jobs and afford better quality food, subsequently improving their children's nutritional status. In 2021, an estimated 631,787 children below the age of 6 and 128,672 pregnant and breastfeeding women<sup>37</sup> were estimated to suffer from acute malnutrition in Burkina Faso while nearly one child in six (17.8%) suffered from chronic malnutrition in Senegal.

**Climate change also increases women's vulnerability to food shortages, particularly in rural communities.** Women often practice subsistence farming in rural settings and are responsible for collecting water and addressing household energy needs. Desertification and decreased access to water compels them to travel further to find water, increasing their burden as well as their vulnerability to attacks. The negative impact on their crop and livestock production hampers their ability to feed their families. As a result, they are often forced to leave their homes for less affected

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<sup>34</sup> Contraceptive prevalence, modern method (% of married women ages 15-49), World Bank.

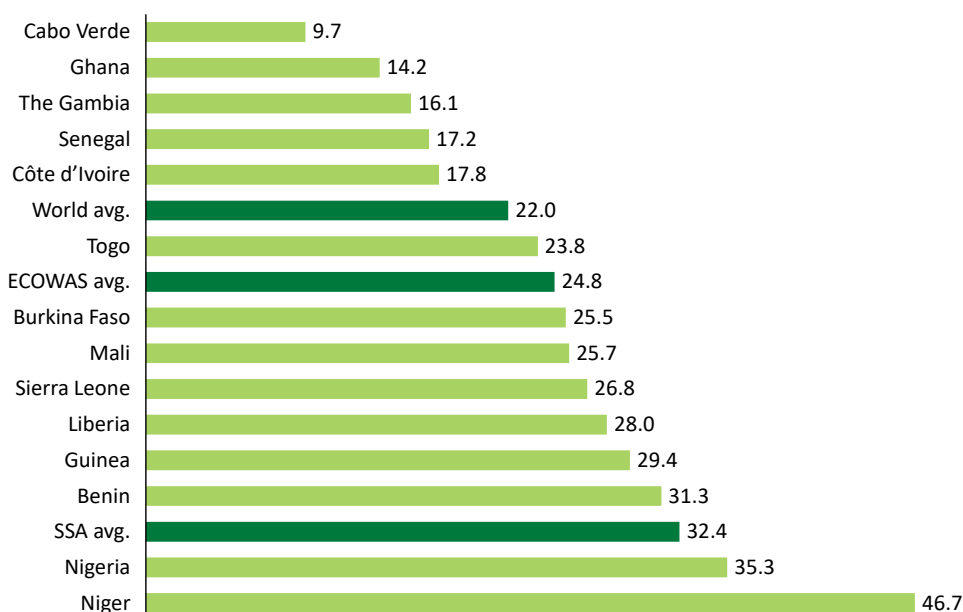
<sup>35</sup> World Bank.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Relief Web, Burkina Faso Acute Malnutrition, 2021.

regions, putting additional strain on the host communities' resources and increasing their exposure to gender-based violence.

**Figure 9: Prevalence of stunting in ECOWAS Member States (percentage of children under 5 as of 2020)<sup>38</sup>**



## Harmful practices against women

**In recent years, Member States' commitment to improving women and children's rights have helped address gender-based violence.** Over the past decade, ECOWAS Member States have made great strides in improving women and children's protection. Harmful practices against women were criminalized and existing laws and protection reinforced in several countries across the region. In Ghana for instance, the Domestic Violence (DV) Act led to the creation of the Domestic Violence and Victim support Unit (DOVVSU), responsible for preventing, investigating and prosecuting cases of child abuse, domestic and gender-based violence. Moreover, several countries implemented behavioural change strategies, like Togo where the government has been training law enforcement agents on how to handle women victims of rape or abuse. For their part, local CSOs organized awareness campaigns on harmful practices against women in collaboration with traditional and religious leaders across the region. In Cabo Verde, CSOs, the government and donors partnered to leverage the media (e.g., the TV program 'Breaking the Silence') to sensitize women and men to domestic violence.

**Still, gender-based violence incidents and child marriage remain prevalent across the region.** Driven by poverty, religious beliefs, persistent taboos around female sexuality linked to the perceived shame of a pregnancy out of wedlock, and limited access to sexual and reproductive information and services, child marriage continues to be highly prevalent. In 2021, 76% of Nigerian girls, 53.7% of Malian girls<sup>39</sup> and 46.5% of Guinean girls were married before the age of 18.<sup>40</sup> In Burkina Faso, the region's second poorest performer after Niger, one in ten girls is married before the age of 15,<sup>41</sup> leading to 50% of Burkinabè girls having their first child before the age of 15.<sup>42</sup> This harmful practice is facilitated by loopholes such as the age requirement for marriage. The Senegalese Family Code for

<sup>38</sup> World Bank, Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>39</sup> Plan International, <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2021/12/waca-plan-and-gnb-joint-policy-brief-on-cm-final-eng-aug2020.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> UNICEF.

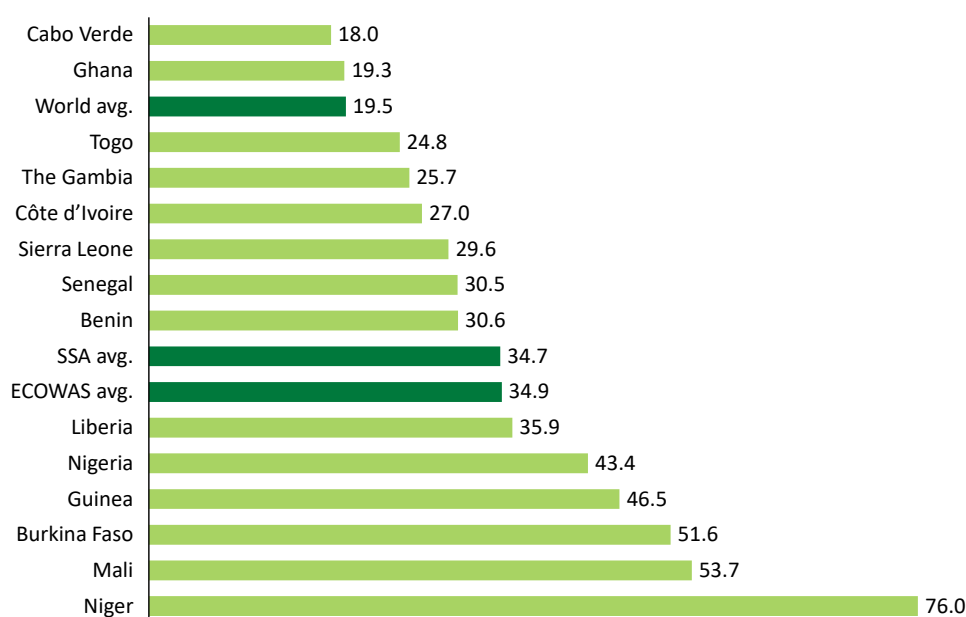
<sup>41</sup> Save the Children, [The legislative path to end child marriage in Burkina Faso](#), 2021.

<sup>42</sup> SIGI, Burkina Faso study, 2017.

instance, sets the minimum age of marriage to 16 for girls and 18 for boys while the current Code of Persons and Families in Burkina Faso authorizes the marriage of girls from the age of 17. Additionally, minimal punishments provided under most national laws barely serve as a deterrent. In Senegal for instance, while early marriage is punishable under civil law only by annulment of the marriage, no penalty is provided for in the Penal Code except in the case where the husband consummates the marriage with a minor under 13 years of age (Article 300 of the Penal Code).

**Overall, gender-based violence also remains rampant across the region, with most incidents taking place within the home.** In Mali, more than 35% of women experience sexual violence at least once in their lives, but the actual figures are much higher, as many of the victims often do not have the opportunity to seek help.<sup>43</sup> Forms of social tolerance have also emerged as sources of legitimization of gender-based violence, including by women, leading to a culture of impunity for perpetrators. This is the case in Guinea-Bissau for instance, where 42% of women aged 15-49 consider abuse to be normal, while 24% of married women accept this practice as justified.<sup>44</sup>

**Figure 10: Child marriage in the ECOWAS region (percentage of girls married before 18 as of 2020)<sup>45</sup>**



**With the deterioration of the security context in several Sahelian countries and Nigeria, women, particularly those in displaced communities, are left vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse.** Women make up the majority of internally displaced people (IDPs) and often find themselves becoming heads of households, putting them under increased financial strain and leaving them vulnerable to more abuse and sexual exploitation. Young girls are also regularly kidnapped by armed groups to be married off to fighters or used as baits.

### D3. Education, skills, and labor force participation

**The ECOWAS region has managed to considerably reduce gaps in access to education for girls at both the primary and secondary levels, although several barriers limit women's access to higher**

<sup>43</sup> Kabore Ouédraogo Pascaline, Étude exploratoire sur la prévention et l'élimination de la violence basée sur le genre au Burkina Faso, Trust Africa, 2019.






<sup>44</sup> UNICEF, Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Child marriage data are sourced from the UNICEF Data warehouse which contains data gaps across years: calculated averages are based on the most recent data by country between 2012 and 2019, Nigeria data is from 2018; Cabo Verde and Niger data are from World Bank database.



**education and the labor market.** The institutionalization of free and compulsory schooling and investments in both infrastructure and teachers have helped several Member States successfully close the gender parity gap in primary and/or secondary school. However, barriers such as the lack of inclusive facilities and child marriage negatively impact girls' academic progress particularly at the secondary level. The security challenge in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin also adds another layer of complexity to girls pursuing education, as schools are forced to close or run under capacity. Additionally, despite incentives to boost female enrollment, women are still underrepresented in higher education institutions across the region. They tend to be concentrated in low-skill technical programs, resulting in them ending up in lower paid occupations. Despite programs launched to promote female labor force participation, access and career progress in formal employment is riddled with challenges like discrimination, the absence of holistic support frameworks dedicated to women and the burden of unpaid domestic work.

**Figure 11: Summary of ECOWAS Member States performances across education, skills and labor force participation key indicators (2020)<sup>46</sup>**
















	Benin	Burkina Faso	Cabo Verde	Côte d'Ivoire	The Gambia	Ghana	Guinea	Liberia	Mali	Niger	Nigeria	Senegal	Sierra Leone	Togo
 <b>Literacy rate</b> - GPS (0-1)	0.68	0.88	1.02	0.85	0.92	1.01	0.67	0.68	0.70	0.71	0.88	0.84	0.86	0.93
 <b>Primary school enrollment rate</b> - GPS (0-1)	0.93	1.01	0.94	0.94	1.12	1.02	0.85	0.96	0.98	0.88	1.02	1.15	1.03	0.97
 <b>Secondary school enrollment rate</b> - GPS (0-1)	0.81	1.06	0.98	0.83	0.99	1.00	0.78	0.77	0.82	0.76	0.96	1.16	0.98	0.80
 <b>Tertiary school enrollment rate</b> - GPS (0-1)	0.40	0.55	1.47	0.69	1.14	0.90	0.59	0.68	0.32	0.54	0.76	0.78	1.01	0.56
 <b>Labor force participation</b> - GPS (0-1)	0.94	0.79	0.75	0.71	0.73	0.90	0.99	0.87	0.73	0.74	0.80	0.59	1.01	0.94

Performance: ■ Low ■ Medium ■ High

<sup>46</sup> Due to missing data, the summary is excluding Guinea Bissau.



**Figure 12: Education, skills and labor force participation, ECOWAS Member States ranking (2020) based on average GPS (0-1)**<sup>47</sup>

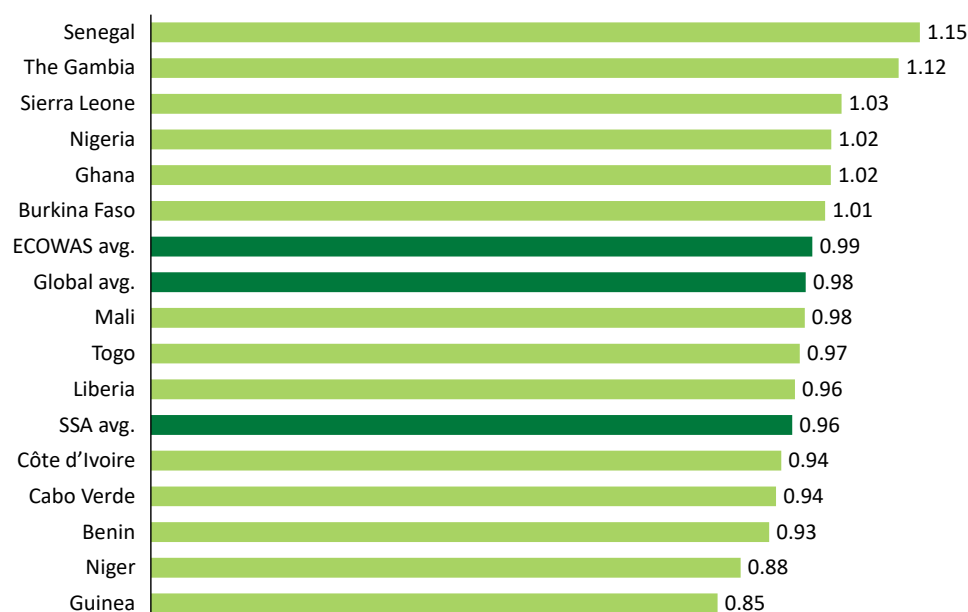
Rank	Country	GPS	Trend
1	 Cabo Verde	<b>1.03</b>	→ 0.00
2	 Sierra Leone	<b>0.98</b>	↗ +0.10
3	 The Gambia	<b>0.98</b>	↗ +0.05
4	 Ghana	<b>0.97</b>	↗ +0.05
5	 Senegal	<b>0.94</b>	↗ +0.06
6	 Nigeria	<b>0.91</b>	↗ +0.05
7	 Burkina Faso	<b>0.88</b>	↗ +0.05
-	 ECOWAS average	<b>0.87</b>	↗ +0.04
8	 Togo	<b>0.84</b>	↗ +0.05
9	 Côte d'Ivoire	<b>0.82</b>	↗ +0.06
10	 Liberia	<b>0.79</b>	↘ -0.02
11	 Guinea	<b>0.78</b>	↗ +0.05
12	 Benin	<b>0.76</b>	→ 0.00
13	 Niger	<b>0.74</b>	↗ +0.01
14	 Mali	<b>0.72</b>	↗ +0.01

### Girls' primary and secondary education

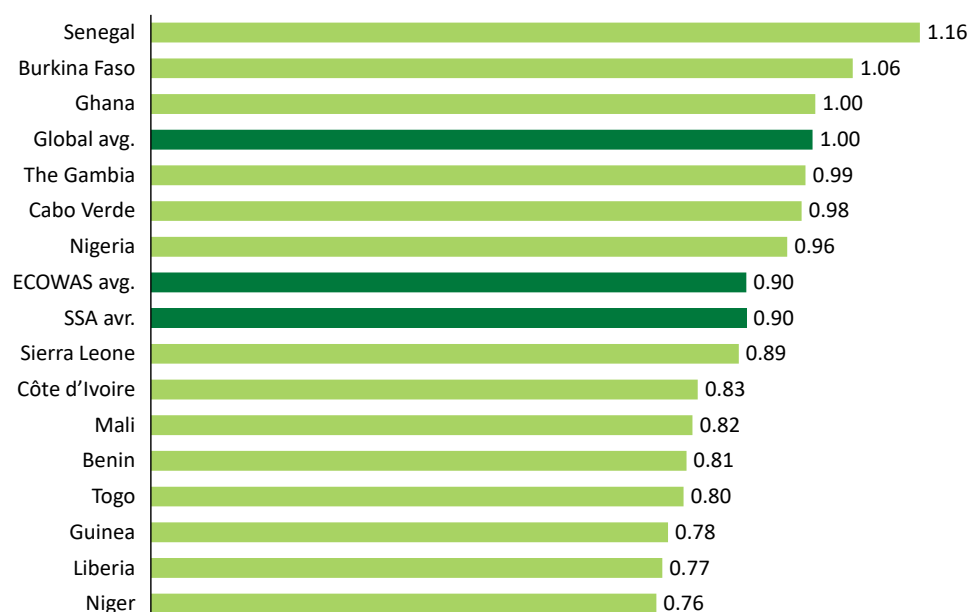
Several Member States have closed the parity gap in primary education thanks to the institutionalization of free and compulsory primary education and investments in school infrastructure. While all Member States are close to reaching parity in primary school, six have successfully closed the gap, with girls often outnumbering boys at that level: Senegal (1.15), the Gambia (1.12), Sierra Leone (1.03), Ghana (1.02), Nigeria (1.02) and Burkina Faso (1). Moreover, female literacy rate has improved across the region (0.83) although still scoring below the SSA average (0.94) as well as global average (0.98). These achievements are the results of key reforms like free and compulsory education from age 5-6 for all children in most Member States. Additional initiatives were carried out in successful countries, most notably (i) the construction of new schools, reducing the travel distance and thereby encouraging girls' attendance, (ii) the construction of separate latrines in schools, (iii) the intensification of awareness-raising campaigns promoting girls' education, especially in rural areas where the gender gap persists, (iv) the systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data used to effectively identify gaps and formulate evidence-based inclusive education policies which is common practice in Member States like Senegal and Cabo Verde; and finally (v) a greater synergy of actions between the various stakeholders involved in eliminating gender disparities in school.

<sup>47</sup> Due to missing data, regional average ranking is excluding Guinea Bissau.

**Figure 13: Primary school enrollment rates (2020) – ECOWAS Member States' average GPS (0-1)<sup>48</sup>**



**Figure 14: Secondary school enrollment rates (2020) – ECOWAS Member States' average GPS (0-1)<sup>49</sup>**



**Despite relative gender parity in primary school, disparities widen at the secondary level across the region due to the lack of inclusive policies and persistent gender-biased norms.** While most Member States in the region have successfully improved gender parity in primary school, only three Member States have closed the gap at secondary level: Senegal (1.16), Burkina (1.06) and Ghana (1), with the Gambia (0.98), Cabo Verde (0.98) and Nigeria (0.96) close to reaching gender parity in secondary school. Furthermore, while girls' enrollment at that level is increasing, female completion rates remain low due to multiple hurdles such as (i) the lack of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure which impacts girls' attendance during their periods, (ii) girls' vulnerability to early marriage; and (iii) teenage pregnancies which concerns 40% of girls in Niger, 36% in Mali and 25% in

<sup>48</sup> World Bank, Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Burkina Faso.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, pregnant schoolgirls often find themselves discriminated against, and unable to return to school although countries like Senegal have voted in favor of reforms allowing pregnant girls to return to school after childbirth, while Sierra Leone has overturned its ban on pregnant schoolgirls. Ghana also implemented a reform aiming to facilitate the re-enrollment of pregnant girls and teenage mothers which resulted in 10,869 out of 22,147 pregnant girls resuming school between 2017 and 2020.<sup>51</sup>

**Still, the disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work as well as harassment constitute additional hurdles that prevent girls from completing their education.** The absence of childcare facilities, flexible schedules to accommodate pregnant teens or returning mothers, and the need to sometimes work to support their family, often result in girls dropping out of school. Furthermore girls are disproportionately responsible for unpaid household chores and caring for younger siblings and ailing parents. On average, Burkinabè girls spend six and a half hours a day on domestic tasks compared to half an hour for boys.<sup>52</sup> This situation limits time left for schoolwork, increasing the likelihood of them dropping out. Finally, sexual harassment creates a hostile environment for female students, interfering with their learning experience. In Ghana for instance, 11% of girls reported sexual harassment events in school.<sup>53</sup>

**Figure 15: Girls' lower secondary completion rates (2020) – ECOWAS Member States' average GPS (0-1)<sup>54</sup>**



**Conflict and insecurity in the Lake Chad and Sahel regions are also causing a setback in girls' education.** Conflict and violence lead to a de-prioritisation of girls' education, which becomes secondary over immediate survival needs. Destruction of school infrastructure in affected regions reduces girls' access to education, while quality is impacted by the lack of teachers, who are often targeted. Finally, recurrent attacks on schools and abduction of girls also lead to a decrease in their school attendance. In the Sahel, four million girls were estimated to have dropped out of school due

<sup>50</sup> World Bank.

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of Education.

<sup>52</sup> OECD/INSD, SIGI Country Study – Burkina Faso, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> UNICEF/GES. A Safe School Program Survey, 2018.

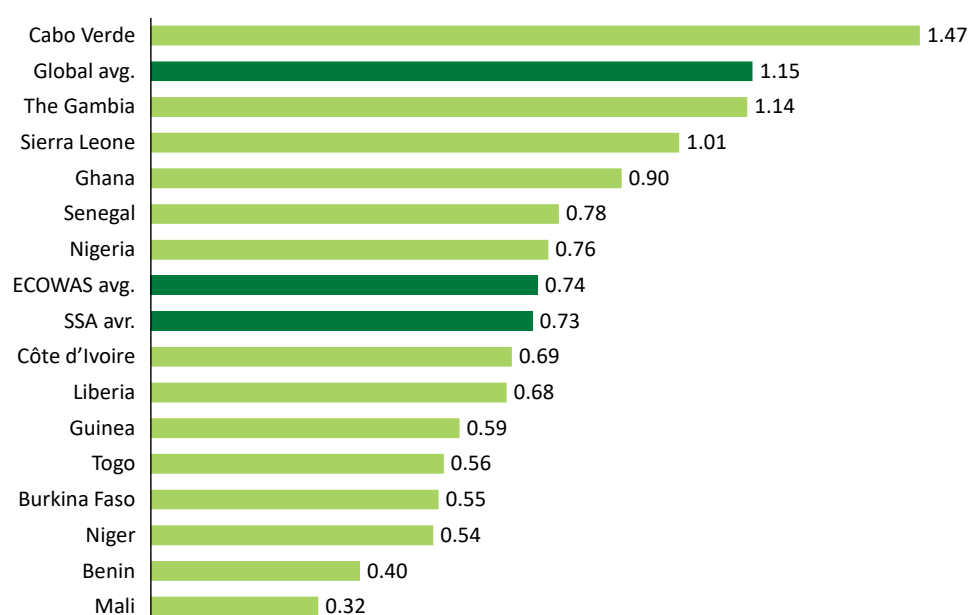
<sup>54</sup> World Bank.

to insecurity,<sup>55</sup> while 600 women and girls were abducted from their schools in Nigeria in 2018, to be married off, serve as baits or become maids.<sup>56</sup>

## Women's higher education and vocational training

**Across the region, women tend to be largely underrepresented in tertiary education and concentrated in low-skill technical programs.** Only three Member States have achieved gender parity at tertiary level: Cabo Verde (1.47), the Gambia (1.14) and Sierra Leone (1.01), with Ghana closing in (0.9) as female enrollment has improved from 7.34% to 17.71% between 2010 and 2020.<sup>57</sup> In the rest of the ECOWAS region, women are still poorly represented in higher education and vocational training institutions as the regional average stands at 10.52%. In 2020, only 8.3% of Nigerian girls enrolled in tertiary education compared to 12.0% for their male counterparts.<sup>58</sup>

**Figure 16: Tertiary school enrollment rates (2020) – Member States' GPS<sup>59</sup>**



**The number of women in higher education the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics remain low, mainly due to persistent gender stereotypes.** The number of women in higher education is still low across the region, particularly in master's and PHD programs. Women are usually concentrated in Technical and Vocational Education and Training programs, that are shorter and more adapted to their household responsibilities. Women also continue to be poorly represented in STEM fields. In Senegal, girls make up less than 30% of STEM students.<sup>60</sup> Accessing STEM tracks remains a challenge for women as poor career counselling services along with cultural norms traditionally orient them towards female-dominated fields such as catering, manufacturing or textile. Their high concentration in low-skill TVET programs also results in them ending up in lower paid jobs.

**Harassment, the high cost of programs and limited availability of infrastructure constitute additional barriers to women's tertiary school enrollment.** Women in tertiary institutions also face

<sup>55</sup> Aide et Action, [Africa: In the Sahel, 4 million girls have dropped out of school](#), 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Relief Web, ["I Will Never Go Back to School": The Impact of Attacks on Education for Nigerian Women and Girls – Summary](#), 2018.

<sup>57</sup> World Bank.

<sup>58</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> World Bank. Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>60</sup> Gender equality in Senegal, Luxdev, 2021.

discrimination and harassment from their male peers and teachers, exposed by scandals like the 'sex for grade' scandal in Ghanaian and Nigerian institutions. Professors were found to withhold female students' exam results who refused their sexual advances, leading them to drop out of school. Additional structural barriers such as high program fees and the limited availability of tertiary infrastructure particularly in remote areas, further limit women's enrollment in these programs.

**In recent years however, incentives were put in place by governments and technical partners to help encourage female enrollment in tertiary education.** In Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau and Senegal for instance, scholarships were set aside for girls wishing to attend university. The maximum age limit for eligibility was also raised from 28 to 34 years for women in Burkina Faso to take into account academic delays and accommodate mothers. In Nigeria, initiatives such as (i) the establishment of a vocational skills curriculum and training program by the National Centre for Women's Development; (ii) the activation of 774 women development centers with 3,000 women trained on vocational skills in 12 states; (iii) the introduction of skills training and vocational education projects funded by partners such as the African Development Bank<sup>61</sup>; and (iv) the 2019 push by President Muhammadu Buhari's for girls to acquire science-based knowledge in schools, have all helped reduce the gender gap and increase female enrollment in Nigerian universities from 37.9% to 43.8% in 2020<sup>62</sup>. Other innovative methods were introduced to facilitate women's access to higher education like the Virtual University (UVS) and Open Digital Spaces (ENO) created in Senegal to address the issue of physical access to learning institutions, as it is still considered improper and unsafe for unmarried girls to be away from home on their own.

### Labor force participation

**While women are better educated today, gender inequalities labor market remain, particularly in terms of access to opportunities, formal employment and equal pay.** Women's access to formal employment is riddled with challenges such as discrimination and the absence of legal protection in the workplace. Besides, in 2020, women's participation in the labor force averaged 55.20% in ECOWAS, which is much lower than the participation of men at 67.51%.<sup>63</sup> Female graduates seeking to join the formal workforce also often face discrimination and sexual harassment, particularly in male-dominated fields. One of the most common forms of discrimination is pay inequality. West African women tend to earn less than men, except in Liberia where full parity in earned income for similar work has been achieved. However, Nigerian women for instance, earn ₦7,700 for every ₦10,000 a man earns for the same work<sup>64</sup>. While well integrated in the formal workforce in Sierra Leone, Benin and Cabo Verde, women earn considerably less than their male counterparts as illustrated by their gender parity scores of 0.74, 0.73 and 0.69 respectively. Furthermore, women are still poorly represented in senior management positions across key industries. This gender gap in the workplace is attributable to a number of factors, many being structural barriers such as (i) the limited pool of female candidates in higher education, which formal employment often requires, especially in high-demand STEM fields; (ii) the failure to accommodate mothers by having a daycare system and flexible work schedules; (iii) the limited mentoring and sponsorship opportunities available to women, which impacts their entry into and progression in formal employment; and (iv) the fact that persistent gender inequalities in society often mirror gender inequalities in the workplace.

**Facilitating women's labor force participation and higher income remains a challenge across the region due to their burden of care and concentration in low-skill, low-productivity sectors.** Women's inequitable burden of care within households results in higher time poverty for working women. For example, women in Mali spend more than ten times as much time on unpaid care work as men (241

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<sup>61</sup> Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, National Beijing+25 Review, May 2019.

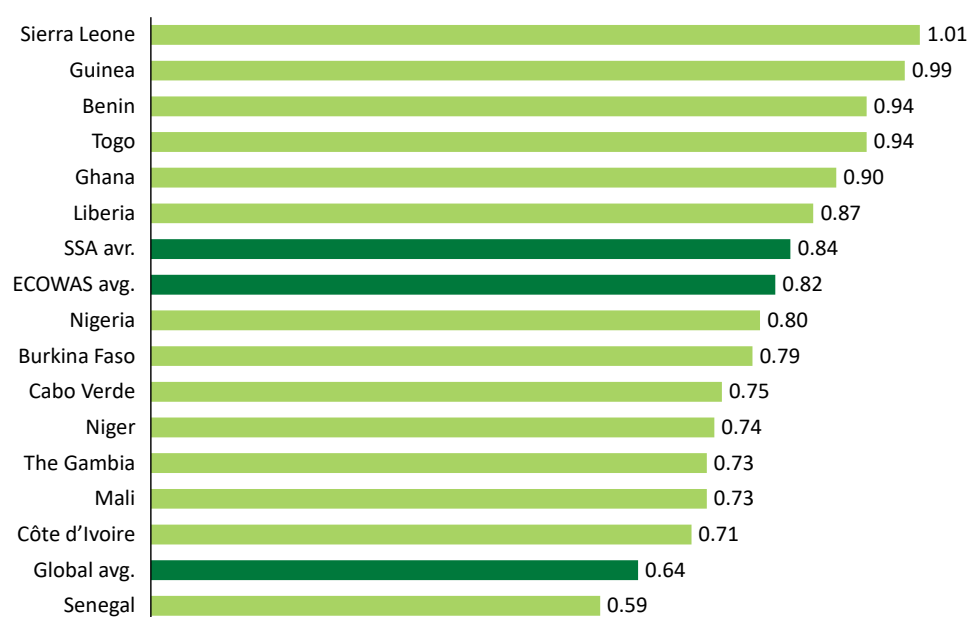
<sup>62</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, Statistical report on Women and Men in Nigeria, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> World Bank data.

<sup>64</sup> UNDP, SDG Goal 5: Gender equality, available [here](#).

minutes versus 21 minutes per day).<sup>65</sup> Women dedicating more time to household responsibilities results in working fewer hours and limited opportunities to climb the career ladder. Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive paternity leave across the ECOWAS region (leave for fathers is often limited to only a few days), perpetuates the idea that childcare is the sole responsibility of women. In recent years, countries like Nigeria have, however, made efforts to reverse the trend by expanding the number of weeks allocated to fathers. Nigerian civil servants are now entitled to 14 days paternity leave,<sup>66</sup> which highlights progress. Additionally, women disproportionately work in lower-skill, lower-productivity sectors such as agriculture, where African women represent on average a 40% share of crop production labor,<sup>67</sup> rather than higher value professional sectors such as financial services. Bridging the gender gap in labor force participation is critical for the region to reap the economic benefits of gender equality, yet still requires significant efforts to address.

**Figure 17: Labor force participation<sup>68</sup> – ECOWAS Member States' GPS (2020)**



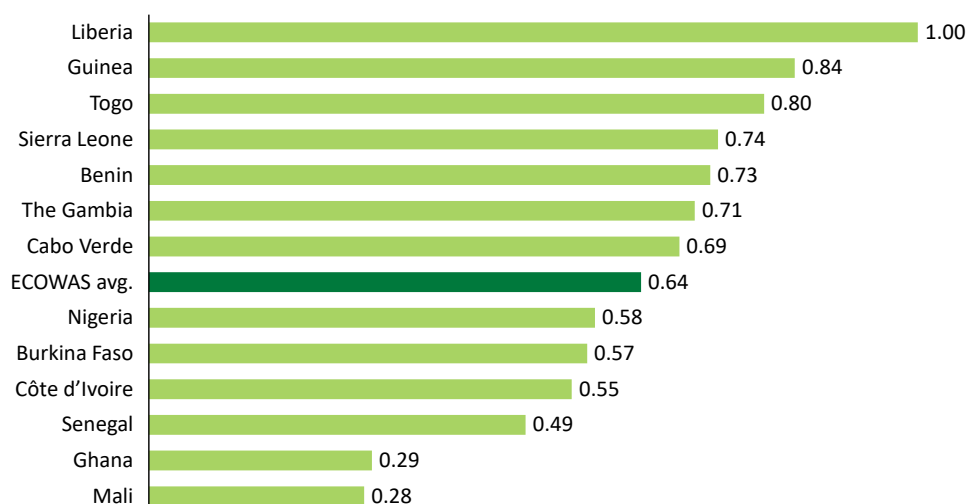
<sup>65</sup> ILO, The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market. An analysis of time use data based on the latest World. Compilation of Time-use Surveys, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> The Guardian, [FG approves paternity leave for civil servants](#), 2021.

<sup>67</sup> World Bank, [Women, Agriculture and Work in Africa](#), 2021.

<sup>68</sup> WEF. Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau and Niger.

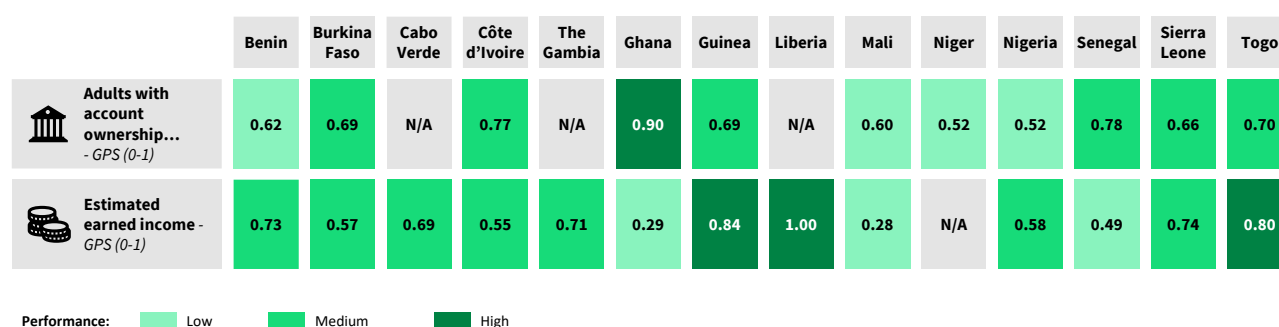
Figure 18: Estimated earned income<sup>69</sup> – ECOWAS Member States' GPS (2020)



## D4. Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy

Despite significant progress on women's financial inclusion, the region is still struggling to close the digital and financial gender gap to offer female entrepreneurs equitable growth opportunities. While the development of mobile-money financial services has helped improve women's financial inclusion, they often lack sufficient digital literacy and access to the tools needed to leverage these opportunities. Additionally, several mechanisms such as financing schemes were put in place by Member States and technical partners to promote female entrepreneurship. However, these mechanisms remain poorly tailored to the needs of women, for whom securing capital and accessing markets continues to be a significant challenge due to prevailing gender-biased norms and customary laws. As a result, female-owned businesses in the region overwhelmingly remain informal, subsistence-driven and at the small or micro level, lacking support and capacity to formalize and eventually scale up.
















Figure 19: Summary of ECOWAS Member States performances across financial inclusion key indicators (2020)<sup>70</sup>



<sup>69</sup> WEF. Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau and Niger.

<sup>70</sup> Due to missing data, the summary is excluding Guinea Bissau.

Figure 20: Entrepreneurship and financial inclusion, ECOWAS Member States ranking (2020) based on average GPS (0-1)<sup>71</sup>

Rank	Country	GPS	Trend
1	 Liberia	1.00	↗ +0.47
2	 Guinea	0.77	↗ +0.07
3	 Togo	0.75	↗ +0.08
4	 The Gambia	0.71	↗ +0.29
5	 Sierra Leone	0.70	↗ +0.01
6	 Cabo Verde	0.69	↗ +0.20
7	 Benin	0.67	↘ -0.12
8	 Côte d'Ivoire	0.66	↗ +0.04
-	 ECOWAS average	0.66	↗ +0.02
9	 Senegal	0.63	→ 0.00
10	 Burkina Faso	0.63	↘ -0.05
11	 Ghana	0.60	↘ -0.22
12	 Nigeria	0.55	↘ -0.04
13	 Niger	0.52	→ 0.00
14	 Mali	0.44	↗ +0.04

## Women and entrepreneurship

**Financing mechanisms and capacity-building programs implemented have helped boost female entrepreneurship across the ECOWAS region.** In recent years, most Member States have strengthened their support mechanisms for female entrepreneurs. Financial and non-financial tools dedicated to female entrepreneurs were set up by Member States and their technical partners to facilitate women's access to finance and technical support. In Senegal, the General Delegation for Youth and Women's Rapid Entrepreneurship (DER/FJ) has granted credits amounting to USD 103 million (FCFA 60 billion),<sup>72</sup> of which 50% of the beneficiaries were women-owned businesses, with a particular focus on key sectors such as agriculture and handicraft. In Guinea, 65,000 women benefited from subsidized loans through the African Women's Mutual Finance (MUFFA) while the Microcredit Program to support the Poor (MPP) and the Savings and Loans Groups (SLG) have helped local women, particularly those in the agricultural sector, access loans and finance. The support tools developed also extended to women in the informal sector with funds like the Informal Sector Support Fund (FASI) in Burkina Faso. Finally, across the region, civil society organizations have also played a key role, providing technical support such as training and business development to women-owned businesses, and supporting the establishment of cooperatives like in the case of Guinea, where women were able to have savings and access finance and loan facilities as a collective.

**Still, female entrepreneurs are often driven by necessity rather than innovation as they face multiple hurdles limiting their ability to move out of informality and scale up their businesses.** West African women are some of the most entrepreneurial in the world. In Ghana an estimated 51.1% of

<sup>71</sup> Due to missing data, regional average ranking is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>72</sup> DER/FJ, 2022.



businesses and 43.8% in Nigeria are owned by women.<sup>73</sup> Yet, female entrepreneurs in the ECOWAS region face multiple barriers that prevent business growth including (i) time poverty due to the unequitable burden of care within the household, reducing available time to grow their businesses; (ii) limited access to productive resources such as land, infrastructure or transportation; (iii) limited access to market information caused by the insufficient availability of networking opportunities for women; (iv) limited technical knowledge such as digital skills to access information; (v) low financial literacy; and (vi) limited access to financial tools and services. Consequently, a majority of women-owned businesses are not formally registered. While women in Nigeria own 40% of the country's Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)<sup>74</sup>, more than half of female-owned companies are not registered with a local or national authority. In Burkina Faso, where 30% of working-age women are entrepreneurs, only 21% of them are formal business owners.<sup>75</sup> Women who do go on to formalize their business, are often stuck at the micro level (80% in Ghana<sup>76</sup>). The high number of women-owned informal enterprises can also be explained by the fact that female entrepreneurship in the region is still largely necessity-driven. Their profits are mainly channeled into supporting their families' basic needs, limiting their ability to formalize and scale up their businesses. Finally, the dedicated mechanisms are often not tailored to female entrepreneurs' needs. The Women's Income-Generating Activities Support Fund (FAARF) in Burkina Faso, for instance, requires prospective applicants to be already formalized, organized in cooperatives, and/or able to provide collateral, failing to recognize that most female-owned businesses are still informal and that women continue to face difficulties securing land rights to use as collateral.

### Women's financial inclusion

**In the past ten years, the ECOWAS region has made tremendous strides unlocking women's access to basic financial services.** The regional average of adult women who own a financial account at a financial institution or with a mobile-money service provider has increased from 10.5% in 2010 to 30% in 2020, but is still far below both the global average (64.8%) as well as the Sub-Saharan average (36.9%).<sup>77</sup> In Ghana, which has nearly closed the gender financial gap, female financial inclusion has increased from 22.2% in 2010 to 61.9% in 2020, driven by the rise of Digital Financial Services (DFS) across the country. In Senegal, the number of female-owned accounts rose from 27% in 2011 to 53.7% in 2017.<sup>78</sup> These improvements in women's financial inclusion in the ECOWAS region were the outcome of the development of mobile-money financial services (i.e., online transactions, access to savings, micro loans or insurance), which has served as a catalyst for vulnerable groups' inclusion. In Ghana, female access to mobile-money services grew by 183% between 2014 and 2017.<sup>79</sup> In addition to providing a safe option to store money, mobile money enables women to send and receive remittances and benefit from payment services, giving them greater agency in managing day-to-day household finances.

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<sup>73</sup> Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Maison de l'Entreprise, 2021.

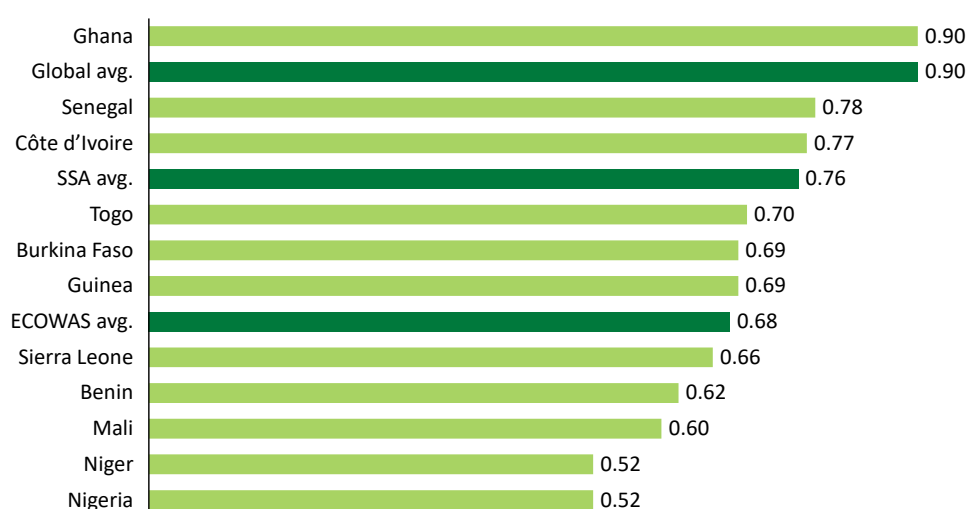
<sup>76</sup> United Nations, Africa Renewal, Tapping women's entrepreneurship in Ghana, [here](#).

<sup>77</sup> World Bank.

<sup>78</sup> Global Findex Database.

<sup>79</sup> World Bank, Global Findex Database.

**Figure 21: Adults with account ownership at a financial institution or with a mobile-money service provider<sup>80</sup> – ECOWAS Member States' GPS (2020)**



**While financial inclusion has improved, women nevertheless continue to face disparities in access to and usage of finance.** Discrimination in access to formal employment and gender inequalities in earnings result in women generating less income, making opening accounts in traditional finance institutions more difficult. Indeed, disparities in income, education and trust in financial institutions result in women's exclusion.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, financial products offered by commercial banks remain poorly aligned to women's needs and realities, partly explained by women's limited involvement in the design of financial products and services. Constraints related to collateral requirements prevent women – who generally do not own land titles or personal wealth due to customary inheritance practices favoring male heirs – from securing loans. Indeed, while they represent 75% of the agricultural workforce in Nigeria, only 13% of agricultural landowners are women.<sup>82</sup> The same is true in Burkina Faso, where despite accounting for 70% of the workforce in agriculture, particularly in the shea and cotton production, women own less than 20% of the land.<sup>83</sup> This situation precludes them from using property as collateral to access loans, credit or start a formal business. While microfinance institutions help fill in the gap by supporting female entrepreneurs, the typical size of the small ticket personal loans they provide limits prospects for long-term business growth and scaling. Savings groups also known as 'tontines' or 'esusu' provide an alternative source of financing to women, particularly those living in rural areas, although the support provided is insufficient. As a result of these factors, women across the ECOWAS region still largely depend on informal finance. In Senegal, 43.9% of female entrepreneurs rely on borrowings from family members to scale up their businesses.<sup>84</sup>

## Women and digital skills

**Digital devices and services have a potential to be powerful tools to equip and empower women by enabling greater access to financial services and professional opportunities.** Mobile money has the potential to help close the gender gap in account ownership of previously unbanked populations. Women represent 34% of mobile-money account owners in Ghana, 30% in Côte d'Ivoire and 29% in

<sup>80</sup> World Bank. Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Cabo Verde, the Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Liberia.

<sup>81</sup> EFinA, [Assessment of Women's Financial Exclusion in Nigeria](#), 2019.

<sup>82</sup> UNDP data, SDG Goal 5: Gender equality, available [here](#).

<sup>83</sup> Wikigender, [Africa for Women's Rights: Burkina Faso](#), 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie (ANSD).

Senegal.<sup>85</sup> Recognizing this potential, many Member States are therefore seeking ways to develop women's digital skills. In Senegal for instance, the Digital Senegal 2025 strategy aims to develop women's leadership in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector and empower girls to pursue careers in ICT. These efforts are supported by technical partners, civil society organizations as well as private sector actors. In Senegal still, the Orange and Sonatel Foundations launched in 2017 the 'Maison Digitale' (digital house) where women can receive training in the use of digital tools, as well as in financial literacy. The development of ICT creates a level-playing field for women, as it provides easy access to important information as well as new opportunities to network, search for jobs, market their products and develop their businesses through e-commerce platforms such as Sooretul in Senegal. Moreover, ICT enables women to also work remotely in case necessary, allowing for greater flexibility overall.

**Yet, women and girls still benefit insufficiently from the advantages of digital technology, and the gender digital divide might lead to a wider overall gender gap.** While education institutions across the region are seeking ways to equip young people with the necessary digital skills to seize business opportunities, women and girls are still being left behind, often due to gender stereotypes, discrimination, a lack of mentoring opportunities and adequate infrastructure. In Nigeria, women make up just 22% of the total number of engineering and technology graduates. Consequently, men are twice as likely as women to have a career in computer science and technology-related fields.<sup>86</sup> In Nigeria still, which captures more than a third of all venture capital tech start-up funding on the continent, women make up 15% of tech start-up co-founders, highlighting the need for greater gender inclusivity in the digital ecosystem.<sup>87</sup> Additional factors such as poverty, limited access to devices, lack of electrical infrastructure and reliable internet are driving this digital divide between men and women as well as urban and rural population. While e-commerce is creating new opportunities for women in the digital space, only a handful of women in urban centers benefit from better access to digital devices and connections. Finally, limited data on the access to and the use of digital devices and services in many Member States leads to insufficient awareness and efforts among governments when it comes to investing in closing the digital gender gap.

## D5. Political empowerment

**While women's political representation has slightly improved in recent years, major cultural and structural barriers must be overcome to ensure their active participation in the political landscape.** A region-wide trend of adopting gender parity quota laws determining minimum thresholds of political seats reserved for women has contributed to an increase in the number of women running for office, particularly in Senegal. Still, poor enforcement of existing parity laws, persistent sociocultural stigmas surrounding women in politics, the high cost of political campaigns and difficulties securing funding still severely limit women's participation in politics. Additionally, despite efforts to improve gender mainstreaming in public programs and policies that yield promising results, capacity limitations and insufficient budget allocations limit further progress on the implementation of gender inclusive policies.

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<sup>85</sup> World Bank, Financial Inclusion Index (FINDEX).

<sup>86</sup> Women's Technology Empowerment Centre, [The Gender Gap](#).

<sup>87</sup> Harvard University, Women and the digital economy in Africa, Policy Brief, 2020.

Figure 212: ECOWAS Member States performances across political empowerment key indicators (2020)<sup>88</sup>

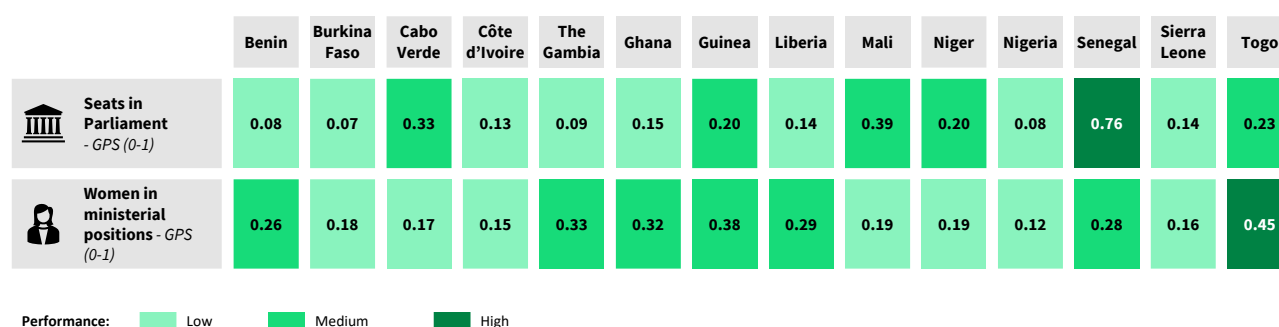


Figure 223: Political empowerment, ECOWAS Member States ranking (2020) based on average GPS (0-1)<sup>89</sup>

Rank	Country	GPS	Trend
1	Senegal	<b>0.52</b>	↗ +0.02
2	Togo	<b>0.34</b>	↗ +0.11
3	Guinea	<b>0.29</b>	→ 0.00
4	Mali	<b>0.29</b>	↗ +0.08
5	Cabo Verde	<b>0.25</b>	↘ -0.07
6	Ghana	<b>0.24</b>	↗ +0.07
-	ECOWAS average	<b>0.23</b>	↗ +0.02
7	The Gambia	<b>0.21</b>	→ 0.00
8	Liberia	<b>0.21</b>	↗ +0.06
9	Niger	<b>0.20</b>	↗ +0.01
10	Benin	<b>0.17</b>	↗ +0.05
11	Sierra Leone	<b>0.15</b>	→ 0.00
12	Côte d'Ivoire	<b>0.14</b>	→ 0.00
13	Burkina Faso	<b>0.12</b>	→ 0.00
14	Nigeria	<b>0.10</b>	→ 0.00

## Women's political representation

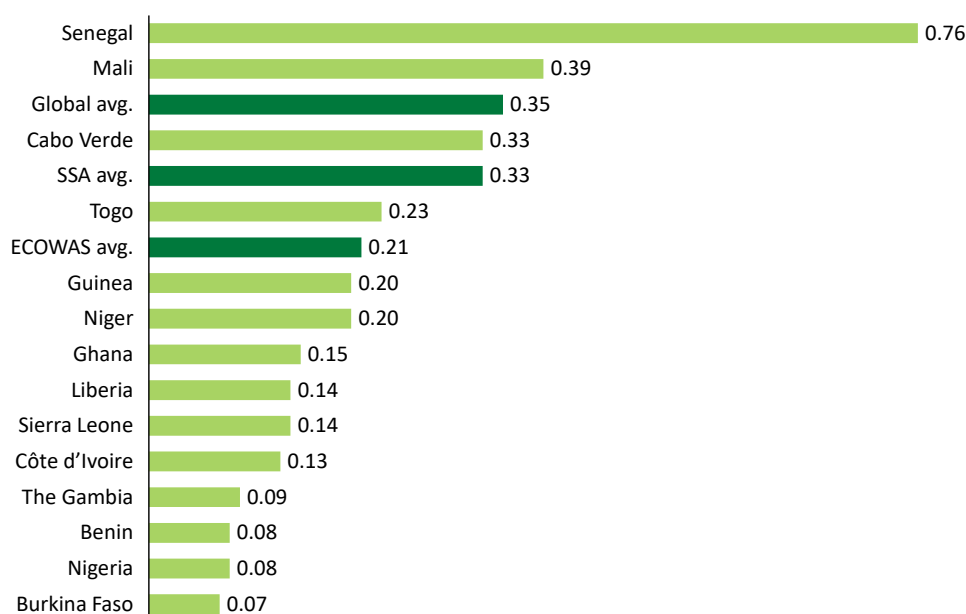
In the past decade, a continent-wide trend of instituting gender quota laws has helped improve women's participation in both local and national politics. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of women in politics in the ECOWAS region has improved, particularly in the legislative branch, where their presence now averages 16% from 12.9% in 2010. This progress is led by Senegal, which has adopted a law on absolute parity between men and women in elected institutions, resulting in an increase in the number of female Members of Parliament from 19.2% in 2001 to 43% in 2020, well above regional average. The number of female municipal councilors has also improved from 15.9% in the 2009-2014 term to 47.9% in the 2014-2019 term.<sup>90</sup> Other Member States like Burkina Faso, Ghana and Liberia have also formulated inclusive policies although results have been more mixed.

<sup>88</sup> Due to missing data, the summary is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>89</sup> Due to missing data, regional average ranking is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>90</sup> Parity in public policies in Senegal, ONP, 2020.

**Figure 234: Number of seats held by women in Parliament – GPS in ECOWAS Member States, SSA and globally (2020)<sup>91</sup>**



The progress observed across the region was achieved thanks to sustained lobbying campaigns by local women's groups, which played a key role in advocating for greater female political representation. These CSOs ensured lawmakers were held accountable to this commitment and helped disseminate information about women's rights. In Senegal, the 'Conseil Sénégalais des Femmes' (COSEF) engaged the media to familiarize the public with the concept of parity, while in Cabo Verde, the Network of Women Parliamentarians (Rede de Mulheres Parlamentares, RMP) advocated for 40% women-held seats in Parliament.<sup>92</sup>

**Pioneering female political leaders are changing public mindsets about women's role in politics, paving the way for more women to enter the political arena.** While West African women have always played an instrumental role in the background, fundraising and mobilizing crowds, they are now stepping into the spotlight and positioning themselves as key government leaders and/or vocal opposition leaders. Women like Kafui Adjamagbo-Johnson, a former Togolese presidential candidate, currently represents a coalition of opposition parties. Furthermore, women's increased visibility is helping change the public's perception about their place in politics. In Togo still, the appointment of women in powerful presidential cabinet positions, particularly traditionally male-led positions like that of the Defense Minister have resulted in a change in mindsets. The vast majority (84%) of Togolese people now perceive women as being as eligible for political office as men.<sup>93</sup> Finally, the appointment of women in senior leadership positions helped pave the way for more women who aspire to election to political office. Upon her nomination, Togo's first woman Prime Minister, Victoire Tomegah Dogbé, allocated 30% of the 33 ministerial positions in her cabinet to women.<sup>94</sup> In Liberia, President Ellen Sirleaf's administration, the first female head of state in the ECOWAS region, had 10 female ministers in her two cabinets combined<sup>95</sup> which contrasts with the present number of three under the current administration.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup> World Bank. Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Graça Sanches, Presidente 2013-16 da Rede de Mulheres Parlamentares (RMP).

<sup>93</sup> Akinochi, H, [L'égalité Genre au Togo](#), 2019.

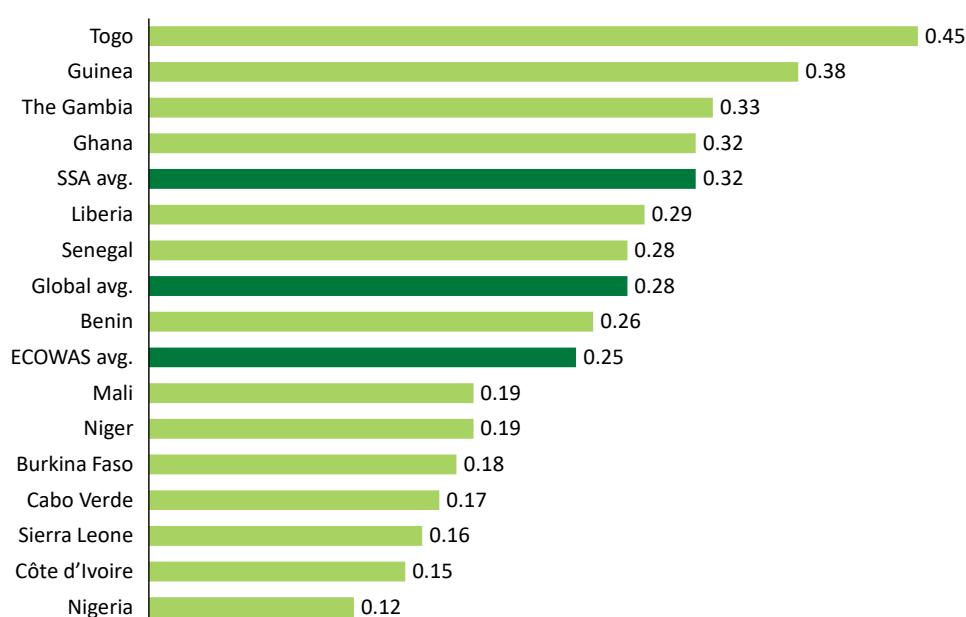
<sup>94</sup> Reuters, [Togo names new government with record number of women ministers](#), 2020.

<sup>95</sup> Emansion, [here](#), 2012-2014.

<sup>96</sup> Emansion, [here](#), 2018.

**Figure 245: Number of women in ministerial positions – GPS in ECOWAS Member States, SSA and globally (2020)**

97



**Despite being more visible, female political representation remains low across the region due to structural barriers, persistent sociocultural biases and minimal enforcement of parity laws.** Despite the reforms in place to increase women's political participation, women continue to be underrepresented in politics, particularly in the executive branch where a downward trend is observed. Between 2010 and 2020, the regional average number of women in ministerial positions has dropped from 20.3% to 19.3%. Indeed, while quotas were legislated in several countries, they are poorly enforced and often do not extend to nominative roles such as cabinet ministers. Women seeking to enter the political arena face unique challenges including: (i) sociocultural stereotyping of women in politics pushing them to stay in career paths perceived as more 'feminine'; (ii) limited availability of mentoring opportunities and female political networks; (iii) institutions that fail to adapt to women's realities, as key political meetings and decisions are often held late at night; (iv) poor media coverage for female candidates; and (v) exposure to moral and physical harassment to deter women from engaging in electoral processes. Campaign financing also remains a major hurdle for female candidates across the region. The high cost of political campaigns and women's struggle to secure funding limits them in their ability to compete with well-established male candidates. In Liberia for instance, registration fees for the House of Representatives are set at USD \$500 and USD \$750 for the Senate, which is a prohibitive cost for female candidates with minimal support.<sup>98</sup>

## Gender mainstreaming

**In recent years, ECOWAS Member States have made efforts to mainstream gender across political institutions and incorporate gender considerations in policymaking.** Governments in the region are making increasing efforts to place gender at the heart of public-led interventions. Consequently, several Member States like Benin and Ghana have created national action plans for gender-responsive budgeting. Gender units were also set up within ministries in Benin, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Sierra Leone to ensure gender considerations are consistently included. In Benin, dedicated resources were allocated towards capacity building of these gender units as well as monitoring and evaluation units in the various sectoral ministries.

<sup>97</sup> World Bank, Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau.

<sup>98</sup> Local Voices Liberia, [here](#), 2020



**Despite these efforts, insufficient budget allocation, capacity constraints and internal resistance to the implementation of inclusive policies slow down progress.** Gender mainstreaming has been slow to take root due to several barriers including: (i) the limited availability of up-to-date and comprehensive gender-disaggregated data, impacting Member States' ability to inform policymaking and design evidence-based interventions; (ii) insufficient funding, often limiting their ability to make significant changes; (iii) a failure to understand women's specificities, resulting in programs considering women and girls as a homogeneous category, and therefore marginalizing groups with distinct needs such as women with disabilities and those living in IDP communities<sup>99</sup>; and (iv) resistance from lawmakers constitute yet another challenge. In Nigeria for example, several bills aimed at improving women's condition such as the Gender Equality bill, have been rejected by the Senate due to severe resistance from northern states' senators related to sociocultural and religious concerns.

## D6. Impact of COVID-19

**Drawing on the lessons learned tackling the Ebola crisis, ECOWAS Member States were quick to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.** Before the first cases had been declared, most Member States adapted their response to the pandemic, setting up crisis management committees and implementing public measures to stem the spread of the virus. While no nationwide lockdowns were imposed, movement limitations and other restrictive measures were in place across region. As of May 20th, 2022, 838,499 cases and 11,014 deaths had been recorded in the ECOWAS region.<sup>100</sup>

**Movement restrictions disproportionately affected women and girls' access to healthcare.** Movement restrictions imposed across the region impeded women and girls' ability to seek care as health workers and technical partners were unable to reach facilities and provide on-site care. This situation particularly impacted women and girls in rural areas and those in IDP communities, who were confined to camps or informal settlements with few healthcare options. The disruption in the global supply chain further limited the availability of essential reproductive health commodities including contraceptives. Where access to health centers had not been compromised, the loss of income and anxiety associated with contracting the virus in hospitals, have led to a decrease in hospital visits. In Ghana for instance, an estimated 36.2% of women admitted to skipping an antenatal care visit due to the fear of being infected by COVID-19.<sup>101</sup> At the beginning of the pandemic in Sierra Leone, there were reported cases of both healthcare workers and patients fleeing health facilities for fear of infection.<sup>102</sup> This situation led to an increase in homebirths as well as a growing reliance on self-medication, both with potentially negative implications for maternal and child mortality. As frontline health workers – most of whom are women – were more exposed to the virus, the fear of infection led to their stigmatization. More than 230,000 healthcare workers contracted COVID-19 and an estimated 600 nurses, mostly women, died from the virus as of June 2020.<sup>103</sup> This added an extra burden to their challenge of protecting themselves and their loved ones.

**Movement restrictions also increased women's vulnerability to abuse.** Movement restrictions also resulted in women's increased exposure to spousal or familial abuse, and a higher chance of cases going unreported due to disruptions in victims' support pathways. In Ghana alone, between March

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<sup>99</sup> CEDAW Committee, Women Peace and Security in Nigeria, 2017, [here](#).

<sup>100</sup> ECOWAS Countries' Ministries of Health and WAHO Regional data warehouse.

<sup>101</sup> COVID-19 is increasing Ghanaian pregnant women's anxiety and reducing healthcare seeking, November 2020, [here](#).

<sup>102</sup> WANEP – Sierra Leone NEWS (Situation Tracking, April 2020).

<sup>103</sup> West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women: Lessons from the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, 2020.

and May 2020, over 4,000 cases<sup>104</sup> of abuse were reported while the number of domestic violence incidents increased by 160% in Senegal from 2,109 in 2019 to 5,496 in 2020.<sup>105</sup>

**Schools' closures further limited girls' access to education in the region.** The increased domestic workload and childcare burden that fell on women and girls during this period, left many girls unable to keep up with their studies while at home and resume their education once schools reopened. Additionally, closures led to an increase in early pregnancies, making a return to studies more difficult for teenage girls. In Ghana for instance, 13 teenage pregnancies were recorded every day at the peak of the pandemic.<sup>106</sup> Finally, the pandemic widened learning gaps between wealthy and vulnerable children, especially in displaced communities, which had limited home-schooling support or access to distance-learning options put in place by the authorities and technical partners, which included TV and radio programs.

**The COVID-19 pandemic also worsened food insecurity for women and girls.** Border closures led to a surge in food prices, while movement restrictions complicated women's ability to secure food and water, particularly for those living in remote areas. Moreover, in times of food crises, women are found to be the first to sacrifice themselves and ration food to feed their children. This situation most likely further exacerbated maternal malnutrition. The absence of school feeding programs also increased the risk of malnutrition and prevalence of stunting among schoolchildren.

**The deterioration of the macroeconomic landscape led to an increase in women's unemployment rate and further exacerbated gender disparities in the labor market.** Women were the most impacted by unemployment and precarity during the pandemic. While brief, market closures and other health measures taken by the authorities have negatively impacted daily wage earners in the informal economy. In 2021, about 48% of informal workers in Burkina Faso were reported to have lost their jobs during the pandemic, while 65% experienced a decrease in their earnings.<sup>107</sup> Unemployment rates in service industries such as hospitality where women are heavily represented, have also increased, further reducing their purchasing power. Furthermore, the inability to leave their camps due to measures in place, prevented women refugees from engaging in income-generating activities, further increasing their vulnerability. Additionally, women-owned micro, small and medium enterprises in Sub-Saharan Africa have been particularly affected by the pandemic due to their small size, informality and concentration in heavily affected sectors such as commerce and tourism.<sup>108</sup>

**Finally, COVID-19 put an additional strain on women due to a higher burden of unpaid care work, further widening gender disparities in the workplace.** Closures of schools and nurseries disproportionately impacted women who bear the burden of childcare. Unpaid care work has been increasing for women as they have been working from home while doing household chores and taking care of children throughout the day with little support systems in place. It is estimated that domestic duties during lockdown accounted for an average of one-third of women's time in Nigeria,<sup>109</sup> leading to increased levels of stress and fear of uncertainties. This situation further widened disparities between men and women in the workplace.

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<sup>104</sup> Stakeholder's interview 2022.

<sup>105</sup> UNICEF, The race against COVID, Outpacing the pandemic for children in Senegal, 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Ghana Health Service (GHS) data.

<sup>107</sup> The Conversation, [Informal workers in Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso have been hit harder by COVID-19](#), 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Dalberg/IFC, Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs owned or led by women in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2021

<sup>109</sup> PAWN survey, Rule of Law and Empowerment initiative, Impacts of the COVID-10 pandemic on women in Nigeria, [here](#).



## E. BUILDING BLOCKS FOR GENDER PARITY

Member States within the ECOWAS region that succeeded in closing the gender gap have in common the existence of three building blocks: (i) a strong political commitment from the executive branch to champion gender equality; (ii) an active and organized civil society ecosystem; and (iii) a gradual change in negative sociocultural norms hindering women from fulfilling their full potential. These three elements constitute the foundational building blocks necessary to achieve gender equality and inclusiveness in a society.

### 1. Political commitment to advancing gender equality and equity

Countries that demonstrate the strongest political commitment to achieving greater gender parity in society have managed to successfully reduce the gender gap. Strong political will to champion gender equality initiatives across the ECOWAS region has been characterized by:

- a. **A commitment to ensuring female political representation, translated in the appointment of women in key senior leadership positions.** In Togo and Cabo Verde for instance, the appointment of women in powerful, traditionally male-led roles such as in the Defense Ministry, Ministry of Finance and Foreign Affairs Ministry has helped change the public perception of women's role in politics. This contributed to an estimated 84% of the Togolese population and 88% of the Cape Verdeans perceive women as being as capable as men to hold political office.<sup>110</sup> In Senegal, President Abdoulaye Wade supported the law on parity, initiating the process in Parliament and championing it until the law was passed two years later, resulting in Senegal leading the region in women's political representation. In the Nigerian context however, while women have been appointed in key senior leadership roles under various administrations, they continue to be reluctant to enter the political arena. The continuous rejection of gender bills in the Nigerian Parliament demonstrates a reluctance to ensure greater gender equality in society, resulting in only 53% of the population in support of women's equal access to politics.<sup>111</sup>
- b. **A sustained inclusion of gender and equity considerations in the process of public resource allocation.** Strong government commitment to advancing gender equality directly translates into budget allocation to inclusive social policies that ultimately benefit women and girls. In 2021, education expenditure averaged 15.1% of total government expenditures in Cabo Verde and 21.1% in Senegal, remaining consistently above the SSA average (14.1%).<sup>112</sup> Such financial commitment enabled authorities to invest in programs promoting greater gender parity and inclusiveness such as free education. Cabo Verde, which was successful in drastically reducing the parity gap in the provision of health and education services, went a step further by introducing gender markers in the public finance system to track budget allocation.
- c. **The executive branch spearheading campaigns for greater public awareness of women and girls' rights.** The Senegalese President Wade has declared November 11<sup>th</sup> as National Girls' Education Day by decree in a bid to gather momentum around the importance of girls' schooling. This day, which is celebrated in all school districts across the country, focuses on awareness, advocacy and strategic orientation on issues related to the participation of girls and women in the development of the nation. First Ladies can also act as powerful advocates for women. First Lady Dominique Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, who regularly calls for easier access to land and funding for women, set up a low-interest fund (Fonds d'Appui aux Femmes

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<sup>110</sup> Akinocho, H, [L'égalité Genre au Togo](#), 2019.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Government expenditure on education (% of government expenditure), World Bank Database, 2021.

de Côte d'Ivoire – FAFCI) that caters to women who are not eligible for conventional loans due to the collateral requirement. Since its creation in 2012, the fund has assisted more than 300,000 Ivorian women fund income-generating activities.<sup>113</sup>

## 2. A vibrant and active civil society advocating for women and girls

**Countries that have achieved greater gender parity have in common the existence of a vibrant and active civil society ecosystem.** CSOs play a key role in (i) lobbying for the adoption of equitable laws; (ii) raise public awareness and disseminate information to end gender discrimination; (iii) serve as strategic technical partners to both governments and donors; and (iv) hold the authorities accountable to their commitments to advance gender equality.

1. **CSOs lobby decision makers for the adoption of more inclusive laws.** Women's movements played a critical role in advancing women's rights and reforms to legal frameworks across ECOWAS Member States. In Senegal, a coalition of CSOs, including the Conseil Sénégalais des Femmes (COSEF) and the Association of Senegalese Jurists (AJS), were critical to the adoption of the 2010 law on gender parity, requiring all political parties to introduce absolute gender parity in electoral lists.
2. **CSOs help raise awareness and disseminate information on women and girl's rights to local populations.** CSOs are often anchored within communities, and well positioned to craft messages that will resonate directly with target populations. As a result, their involvement in the public debate is critical to gradually changing mindsets on women and girls' role in society. In 2011, Cape Verdian CSOs like Associação de Mulheres Juristas launched a public awareness campaign which led to the adoption of the Law on Gender-based Violence (GBV). The public campaign combined with anti-GBV policies helped reduce the number of cases from 20% in 2005 to under 11% in 2019.<sup>114</sup> In Ghana, CSOs have been instrumental in raising awareness to the availability of free health schemes, sharing information on maternal mortality risks and emphasizing that husbands should play an active role during their wives' pregnancies.
3. **CSOs often have a wider reach particularly in underserved areas, which can be leveraged for partnerships with both governments and donors.** Governments and technical partners often do not have the reach of CSOs that work in closer proximity to communities. As a result, CSOs' direct engagement and support is key for gender equality initiatives to be successful and sustainable. In Burkina Faso, the 'Programmes Emploi' launched by Expertise France relies on close partnership with multiple CSOs to identify local populations' needs in terms of employment and tailor the response.<sup>115</sup>
4. **CSOs hold the government accountable for enacted laws by monitoring the implementation of adopted policies.** All Member States are signatories of key gender equality frameworks and many<sup>116</sup> have passed gender parity laws such as political quotas and anti-discrimination laws (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo). Countries that were able to see direct results from these policies are those where CSOs helped educate the public on the importance of these laws, thus pressuring decision makers to enforce them. Following the introduction of the absolute parity law in Senegal for instance, a coalition of women's groups (Coalition de la Société Civile Sénégalaise) helped hold the government accountable

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<sup>113</sup> Abidjan.Net, [here](#), 2022.

<sup>114</sup> Gomes, R., [Gender Markers Cabo Verde](#), 2017.

<sup>115</sup> Expertise France, [here](#), 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, [Gender Quota Database](#).

by writing reports assessing its implementation. Additionally, the COSEF set up a dedicated committee in charge of monitoring the law's implementation during elections, particularly in rural areas.

Member States with weaker CSO capacity or a fragmented CSO ecosystem are often less effective in advancing inclusive policies. Indeed, civil society's ability to amplify messages has proven to be effective in pushing for change.

### 3. Commitment to addressing gender-biased norms

**The positive evolution of traditional sociocultural norms regarding the place of women in society requires both political will and a strong CSO ecosystem to ultimately overcome gender parity constraints.** While initiatives have been launched to improve women's access to education and health services, empowering them economically and politically, negative cultural norms and beliefs regarding their role in society hinder further progress. Addressing gender-biased norms is therefore critical for any country to achieve its gender parity objectives. Member States that have harnessed the power of the first two building blocks (i.e., political will and strong CSOs) have seen a gradual evolution of mindsets regarding women and girls. Indeed, a sustained commitment from the executive branch to increase female representation, combined with a strong network of CSOs conducting advocacy work in collaboration with technical partners, has proven to be the most effective way to achieve sustainable change in mindsets regarding women's place in society.

## F. LESSONS LEARNED

Key insights emerge from the six deep dive case studies conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. These Member States' successes and challenges throughout their journey towards greater gender parity highlight lessons both cross-cutting and specific to each dimension that other Member States can learn from and leverage in their future gender-focused interventions.

### Cross-cutting lessons learned

**Efficient coordination and synergy across key actors are essential for gender initiatives to be successful.** With a wide array of actors involved in the same area of intervention, it is essential to encourage greater coordination and synergy of action. Dedicated national committees such as the National Committee on Gender-Based Violence (NaC-GBV) model in Sierra Leone – which brings together governmental institutions, technical partners, and CSOs all working in the same field – can help optimize resources, develop a more holistic approach to implementation and as a result increase the effectiveness of key initiatives.

**The development of robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks and gender-disaggregated data gathering are critical requirements for effective policy design and implementation.** Despite the enactment of gender-related laws and policies across the region, their implementation has been limited due to the insufficient availability of data gathering and monitoring tools. Up-to-date, comprehensive gender-disaggregated data are essential to develop evidence-based policies and interventions tailored to the realities of beneficiaries and monitor their effectiveness.

### Lessons learned in health and nutrition

**Regional disparities need to be addressed to improve women's access to basic health services.** Substantial disparities in women's ease of access to basic healthcare services exist between rural and urban areas. Hospitals are concentrated in urban centers and rural infrastructure is often poorly equipped. Moreover, limited human resources continue to hinder the provision of quality services in remote areas. Consequently, in Ghana, the average birth rate in health facilities is 92% in Greater Accra and 59% in the Northern Region.<sup>117</sup> Burkina Faso has been working to improve women's access to health services in underserved areas by including community health workers into the formal healthcare system. CHWs are particularly key in countries facing similar security challenges, where regular health facilities are often closed due to frequent security threats.

**Engaging with traditional and/or religious leaders and securing men's buy-in is essential to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of gender health initiatives.** Legal provisions alone are not enough to change gender-biased norms or prevent harmful practices against women and girls. The involvement of cultural/religious leaders, who can provide interpretations that resonate with their communities and use their influence, also contribute to changing behaviors and eliminating gender biases. Initiatives such as the school for Husbands and Future Husbands in Burkina Faso, Niger and Sierra Leone, that include men as part of the solution to achieve gender equality rather than part of the problem, have helped reduce cases of domestic violence and improve maternal health in pilot communities. Moreover, communities are more open to discuss topics that are considered taboo in society, such as reproductive health, when they are raised by community members rather than by outsiders. Programs like Bajenu Gox in Senegal, which identifies respected local women to serve as

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<sup>117</sup> GSS, GHS, and ICF. 2018. Ghana Maternal Health Survey 2017, 2018.

intermediaries between the community and health workers, has helped to better convey reproductive health awareness messages within tight-knit communities.

**Women's level of education has a major impact on their health outcomes and that of their families.**

Women are more vulnerable to malnutrition as they are more likely to ration their food portions to feed their children. The prevalence of stunting is found to decrease with increasing a mother's education. Maternal education is also found to play a major role on women's likelihood to show up for their prenatal check ups and on their choice to deliver in a health facility. Investing in female literacy and post-secondary education is therefore key to improving women's health and that of their children.

**Incorporating sexual and reproductive health topics in school curricula is an effective way to change youth behavior.**

The lack of awareness and education on sexual and reproductive health among young people increases the risks of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), often leading to girls dropping out of school and being rejected by their communities. Programs like the Family Life and HIV Education (FLHE) in Nigeria targeting teenagers in schools has contributed to significantly improving teenagers' awareness of HIV/AIDS. The program resulted in increased gender parity in terms of HIV/AIDS awareness: [f] 71%, [m] 74% in 2018 from [f] 24%, [m] 33% in 2013.<sup>118</sup> This approach could be scaled up and applied to other topics around sexual, reproductive and maternal health, that are still considered taboo and therefore unlikely to be addressed at home.

**Adopting a holistic model that supports victims of gender-based violence at every stage of the process can help better address all forms of GBV.**

Most assistance to GBV victims tends to only provide one type of support whereas a holistic model of support that encompasses medical, psychological, social and legal assistance at every stage, has proven to be more effective. In Nigeria, the Mirabel Centre, the country's first Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC), provides both medical and psychosocial support to GBV victims. Additionally, victims of GBV are found to be more likely to bring their case to court if they are supported at every stage of the process. On the legal side, 'Boutiques de droit', set up in Senegal in partnership with the Association of Lawyers of Senegal (AJS), help provide free legal advice and assistance to women and girls who are victims of GBV. A combination of these interventions would therefore lead to more effective assistance to these victims.

### Lessons learned in education, skills and labor force participation

**The introduction of inclusive policies such as free education, paired with supply-side investments in infrastructure and human resources were key to closing the gender gap in education.**

Free and compulsory primary and secondary education contributed to closing the primary and secondary education parity gap in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Senegal. Furthermore, the construction of schools in rural communities in parallel with the recruitment of additional teachers were also a determining factor of success. In Burkina Faso for instance, over 28,000 teachers were recruited and trained between 2016 and 2020, a 31% increase from 2016.<sup>119</sup>

**The region will need to urgently address the issue of out-of-school children to close the gender parity gap in education.**

The number of out-of-school children remains high across the region and disproportionately affects girls. In Nigeria alone, 10.2 million children are estimated to be out of school.<sup>120</sup> It is therefore paramount for the region to address this issue to achieve its gender parity

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<sup>118</sup> Annual National Demographic Health Surveys (NDHS), 2018.

<sup>119</sup> Ministry of Education.

<sup>120</sup> Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), Digest of Basic Education Statistics 2018.

objectives. Innovative programs like the Speed School ('Ecole Passerelle') in Burkina Faso can contribute to overturning this trend. The program has helped re-integrate more than 2,941 school children in 2021.<sup>121</sup>

**Women's increased enrollment in tertiary education does not necessarily translate into higher income and career opportunities.** In the past 10 years, the number of women attending tertiary education has increased, from 7.9% in 2010 to 10.5% in 2020.<sup>122</sup> Still, women's access to the formal employment market remains riddled with hurdles and the gender gap in earned income persists due to gender stereotypes and discrimination. In Nigeria for instance, women earn on average ₦7,700 for every ₦10,000 a man earns for the same type of work.<sup>123</sup> Closing the income gap will require (i) encouraging young women to pursue higher-skilled fields of study, including STEMs that will help them access higher-income jobs, as opposed to the vocational training most of them pursue; and (ii) addressing gender stereotypes which hinder women's ability to join and thrive in the formal sector, particularly in male-dominated sectors.

**The lack of mentoring opportunities and guidance limit girls' career prospects.** The lack of guidance, role models and mentorship opportunities for girls in their transition to higher education and later to the labor market contributes to perpetuating gender gaps in the workplace. Allowing girls and young women to see different paths and role models enables them to embrace various options. Programs like those carried out by Junior Achievement (JA) in Nigeria which set up residential lead camps for girls from low-income communities, can help address the need for positive representation.

### Lessons learned in entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy

**Financial products available on the market need to be tailored to women's needs to improve their financial inclusion.** Limited access to property ownership is one of the key factors driving women's financial exclusion. This curtails women's ability to use property as collateral, resulting in barely any borrowings from commercial banks (i.e., 0.5% in Sierra Leone).<sup>124</sup> Women's financial inclusion will require that financial institutions such as commercial banks and micro-finance institutions rethink their policies surrounding collateral and develop alternative instruments.

**Building women's digital and financial literacy is key to improving women's financial inclusion and thus empowering them.** West African women experience a gender gap in digital and financial literacy, impacting their ability to capitalize on the available opportunities. Building women's literacy around digital tools and financial services through capacity-building initiatives is therefore key to secure their inclusion in the digital economy.

**Women entrepreneurs cannot thrive without access to adequate support networks.** The availability of support networks dedicated to women entrepreneurs allows for continuous information sharing, learning and mentoring. Support networks enable women to update their knowledge as the need arises by tapping into external expertise and benefit from mentoring. The non-profit organization Women in Management, Business and Public Service (WIMBIZ) in Nigeria for instance, runs a mentoring program designed to prepare women to hold key leadership positions in the private sector.

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<sup>121</sup> AFDR Burkina Faso, [here](#), 2021.

<sup>122</sup> World Bank.

<sup>123</sup> UNDP, SDG Goal 5: Gender equality, available [here](#).

<sup>124</sup> Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) 2018.

## Lessons learned in political empowerment

**Passing quota laws is insufficient to promote greater female participation in politics.** Indeed, while most ECOWAS Member States have enacted quota laws with minimum thresholds for female participation, these laws continue to be poorly enforced. Additional incentives need to be designed to encourage women to run for office and for political institutions to encourage their participation. In addition to incentives, advocacy work from CSOs can contribute to sensitizing populations about the benefits of women engaging in political discourse, thus gradually helping to overcome the resistance to women's presence in politics is critical.

**Appointing gender focal points with a certain level of seniority has proven to be an effective way to champion gender mainstreaming in the public sector.** The appointment of experienced staff as gender focal points with sufficient experience and influence within Ministries to engage with senior policymakers and enact change, has helped support the inclusion of gender considerations in national programs and policies.



## G. RECOMMENDATIONS

**Significant efforts will be required to address existing challenges to advancing gender equality, considering existing barriers threatening further progress.** The COVID-19 pandemic and the security threats the ECOWAS region currently faces resulted in setbacks to gender parity, particularly to women and girls' access to health and education. Despite these challenges, the ECOWAS region is poised to capitalize on the considerable progress made to date and can accelerate the pace of change to ultimately generate up to USD 105.7 billion in additional wealth by 2030. The ECOWAS Commission can play a determining role as a catalyzer for change. The following recommendations solely focus on initiatives the ECOWAS Commission can implement at the regional level to support Member States achieve their gender equality objectives.

**It is recommended that the ECOWAS Commission focus on fostering an enabling environment to support all Member States in developing the core building blocks required to advance gender equality and equity.** Namely, the Commission can use its convening power to generate political support and momentum to advance gender initiatives and support the development of a strong network of CSOs. Furthermore, the Commission can draw from lessons learned from the region's challenges to focus on strengthening Member States implementation capacity of gender focused interventions.

### Generate support for greater action on gender parity initiatives

**Synergy of actions between various stakeholders (e.g., governments, donors, technical partners, CSOs) can lead to a greater effectiveness and optimization of available resources.** The ECOWAS Commission can play a key role by using its convening power to coordinate and oversee regional efforts. This could be achieved with the creation of a dedicated taskforce and/or a platform to facilitate the coordination of gender-related interventions as well as harmonize gender data-collection methodologies.

**Support from the executive branch has been identified as one of the key building blocks to accelerate progress towards greater gender parity.** The ECOWAS Commission could therefore seek to identify heads of states willing to be champions of gender equality in their respective countries by making it a national priority.

**The ECOWAS Commission can provide greater visibility to the performance of each Member State and encourage efforts to advance gender parity and equality across the region.** To do so, the ECOWAS Commission could seek to develop an annual gender-parity performance ranking of its Member States with the aim to celebrate progress and compel poor performers to improve. However, ranking Member States performance will require a robust performance tracking system.

**Finally, the ECOWAS Commission can mobilize resources from international partners to support gender equality initiatives.** As a regional institution, the ECOWAS Commission can leverage its wide network of technical partners and donors to support fundraising efforts and fund new gender initiatives.

### Support CSOs to innovate, share knowledge and scale up

**The ECOWAS Commission can build on its existing civil society networks to support the development of a robust ecosystem across West Africa.** Civil society organizations play a pivotal role in advocating for women's rights and advancing gender equality in the region. Recognizing this, the ECOWAS Commission has supported the creation of associations and networks to promote collaborative work towards greater gender parity. These include the Network on Peace and Security for Women in the ECOWAS Region (NOPSWECO), the West African Network of Young Women



Leaders (ROAJELF) and the Association of ECOWAS Female Parliamentarians (ECOFEPa), who advocate for more inclusive laws, the removal of barriers to participation in politics and greater involvement of women in diplomacy when it comes to matters of peace and security. The recent technical and financial support provided to the national branches of NOPSWECO and ROAJELF by ECOWAS was instrumental in advancing the fight against the feminization of poverty. The Commission could seek to leverage these existing networks and encourage the creation of similar organizations to support women's professional groups across the region (e.g., female doctors, women in law, women in STEM fields, etc). Furthermore, the Commission can support the development and/or scale up of innovative solutions that have yielded positive results at the local level by acting as enablers for foreign donors to fund local CSOs.

### Develop a robust and comprehensive regional MEL dashboard

**Develop a region-wide gender dashboard to help Member States establish processes and capacity to collect and monitor gender-disaggregated data.** Creating a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation & learning (MEL) dashboard embedded in national systems with clear performance targets for the region could help effectively track progress on key gender initiatives. A dashboard with clear processes will allow for the smooth collection of data from field surveys to government activity data, thus allowing accurate progress monitoring. The data retrieved will be critical to inform future policies implemented across the region. Member State governments' consistent collection of gender-disaggregated data will facilitate the introduction of similar policy requirements in both the private and social sectors. These policies could ultimately encourage businesses, commercial banks or multinational organizations to build internal capacity to collect and report on gender-disaggregated data as well. As a result, tracking the progress of women's financial inclusion or access to digital tools will be made significantly easier. A MEL gender dashboard will contribute to strengthening the region's implementation capacity and the Commission's ability to effectively support Member States' efforts to advance gender equality. Furthermore, greater visibility on their performance will allow the ECOWAS Commission to publicly laud top performers and hold those that do not prioritize gender equality accountable during regional meetings.

### Strengthen implementation capacity

**Capacity reinforcement is paramount to improve the execution and impact of gender parity initiatives.** Across the region, gender mainstreaming is slowed down by civil servants and partners with a lack of knowledge of and familiarity with relevant tools. The ECOWAS Commission, already active in the provision of support to build Member States' skills, could aim to scale up its existing capacity building programs, particularly on gender mainstreaming and gender program management. Additionally, delivery units in key ministerial departments and agencies could be introduced to provide technical support and share knowledge. In addition to managing capacity building trainings, the Commission could also facilitate knowledge transfer.

## H. APPENDIX

### H1. Approach and methodology used for the regional report

#### Anchoring the gender equality and parity study in the 2050 ECOWAS HCD strategy

The ECOWAS Human Capital Development framework evaluates regional performance metrics across three dimensions, which measure social, economic and educational elements, all critical for societies to thrive. Dimensions selected include:

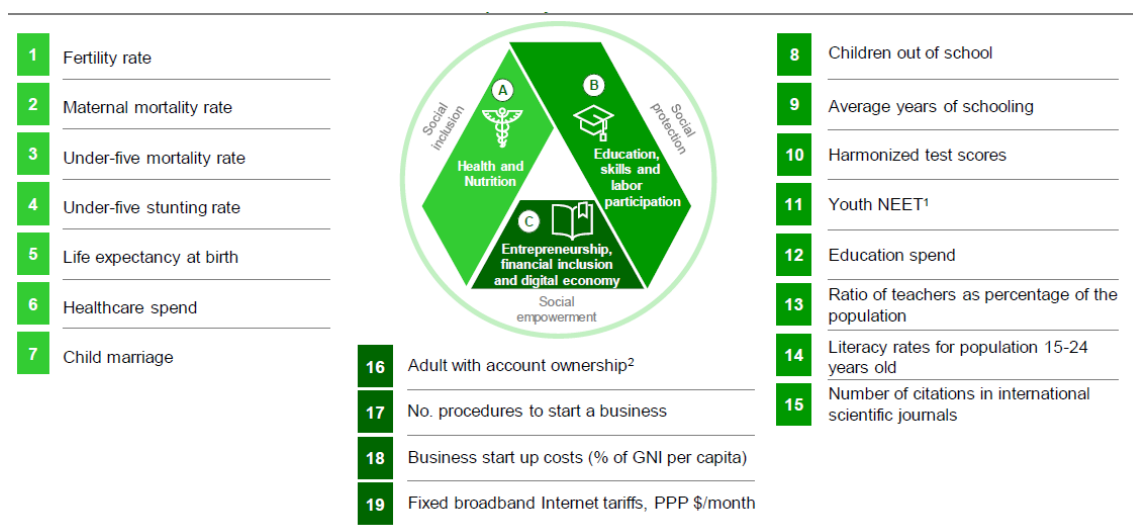
- Health and nutrition;
- Education, skills and labor force participation;
- Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy.

We have also added a political empowerment dimension to assess women's representation in the political arena and capture the challenges they still face.

The gender-transformative human capital development strategy is anchored into this overall HCD approach and aims to promote gender equity and equality as key to reaching inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Gender inclusion is critical to drive economic growth and increase societal value. All fifteen Member States have untapped opportunities when it comes to gender equality and parity. For these reasons, gender inclusion is a cross-cutting enabler of the HCD Strategy aligned around the previously outlined dimensions.

Each one of these dimensions breaks down into a set of priority indicators as illustrated in the figure below:

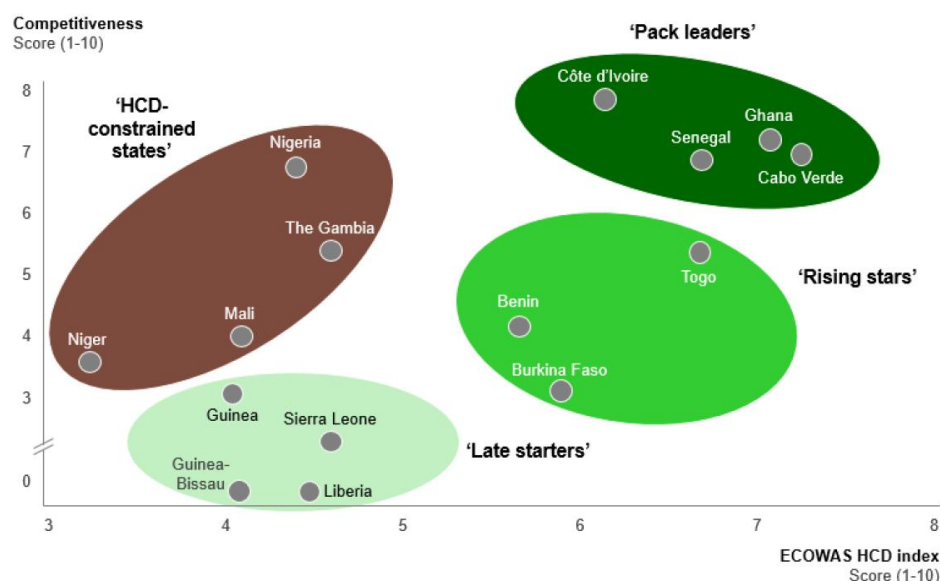
**Figure 26: The ECOWAS HCD framework**



The ECOWAS HCD strategy categorizes countries into four clusters based on their HCD performance and economic competitiveness:

- **The Pack Leaders** are the strongest performers on both HCD and competitiveness;
- **The Rising Stars** have registered average performances on both HCD and competitiveness;
- **The HCD-constrained States** are lagging behind their peers on HCD indicators despite strong economic competitiveness;
- **The Late Starters** have experienced a stunt in their progress on HCD indicators resulting in underperformance in terms of economic competitiveness.

Figure 27: ECOWAS country clusters based on economic competitiveness and HCD performance<sup>125</sup>



The country performance assessment is framed around these four archetypes and uses the selected indicators across each HCD dimension as guidance to evaluate Member States' gender parity performance. This clustered approach captures the region's diversity and allows to make comparisons between the performance of countries facing similar constraints. This study, then, reviews the gender parity performance for each dimension of the HCD framework to understand the drivers and binding constraints to reach total parity (Score of 1 for the index).

### Key indicators selected to assess gender parity performance

This study seeks to assess gender equality and parity across a set of key indicators under each dimension (health, education, entrepreneurship and political empowerment). The figure below is an initial selection of relevant indicators for the gender parity analysis that are used to frame this country assessment. These indicators were chosen because they relate to gender parity and equality. While not an exhaustive list of indicators for lack of gender disaggregated-data across all 15 Member States, these indicators capture the state of gender parity consistently across the region.

<sup>125</sup> ECOWAS 2030 Integrated Regional Strategy for Human Capital Development.

Figure 28: Selected indicators across HCD dimensions for regional and country gender-parity analysis

Selected indicators			
Dimension	Health and Nutrition	Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy	Education, skills and labor participation
HCD Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fertility rate</li> <li>Maternal mortality ratio</li> <li>Child marriage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adults with account ownership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Average years of schooling</li> <li>Literacy rate</li> </ul>
Additional indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life expectancy</li> <li>Prevalence of stunting for height</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estimated earned income</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Labor force participation</li> <li>Primary school enrolment rate</li> <li>Secondary school enrolment rate</li> <li>Tertiary enrolment rate</li> <li>Average years of schooling</li> </ul>
Additional dimension	<b>Political Empowerment</b> Seats in parliament Women in ministerial positions		

## H2. Methodology used to conduct interviews and type of stakeholders interviewed

In order to draft the regional report, a total of 128 stakeholder interviews were conducted across six Member States during this study:

- 25 interviews with ministries and government agencies allowed us to identify challenges and potential opportunities in current gender-focused interventions implemented by Member State governments;
- 32 interviews with technical partners were conducted to identify both successful gender-focused interventions to scale up as well as synergies between their activities and ECOWAS interventions;
- 40 interviews with civil society organizations focused on promoting women and girls' social, political and economic inclusion. These conversations were critical to identifying successful initiatives implemented by these organizations to advance gender-parity objectives;
- 31 interviews with private sector actors were held and conversations with female-led businesses across a wide range of sectors were prioritized to better understand the hurdles women face when pursuing their professional aspirations.

We applied a hypothesis-driven approach to develop tailored interview guides for each interviewee/stakeholder archetype.

## H3. Methodology used to measure the economic impact of gender parity

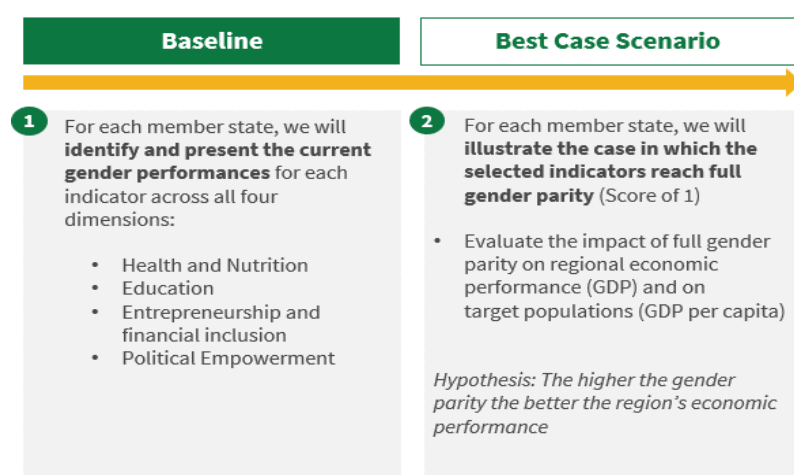
The methodology focused on testing several hypotheses, the main one being that the higher gender parity scores lead to a more inclusive society and drive sustainable economic growth. The objective of the modeling exercise was to determine the size of the economic potential across each dimension if the region is to achieve gender parity. The purpose is to understand how improvements in gender

parity in each dimension can positively impact economic performance. To that end, a series of hypotheses was developed as follows:

- An improvement in parity in education in favor of women significantly increases economic growth;
- An increase in parity in favor of women in terms of participation in the labor market has a positive and significant influence on economic growth;
- A greater presence of women in ministerial or in parliamentary positions has a positive and significant impact on economic growth;
- An increase in the fertility rate, the child marriage rate, the maternal mortality ratio and/or the prevalence of stunting have negative effects on growth;
- An increase in the index for adults with account ownership at a financial institution, as well as an increase in the number of female salaried workers and their wages, impact GDP growth positively.

By using gender parity scores for selected indicators and for each country, a baseline and a best-case scenario were developed as illustrated below.

**Figure 259: Illustration of the scenario-modeling methodology**



Prior to running the simulations, the pre-selected indicators were presented to ECOWAS to review their relevance to gender. Upon validation of the indicators, a baseline was created for each country using their current gender-parity performance scores and their current economic performance.

Panel data on the evolution of economic growth were used for each year between 2000 and 2030 in fourteen (14) West African states, namely Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.<sup>126</sup> Although data for some years were missing, we were able to impute all the data by using the Principal Components Analysis (PCA) method. Indicators for which the dataset is completely unavailable were excluded, as was the case for Guinea Bissau. The PCA data analysis method reduces dimensionality and allows highly correlated variables to be converted into new, decorrelated variables, which are often used to impute missing data quantitatively.

This model analyzed the impact of these different variables on the economic growth for the 14 countries.

<sup>126</sup> Guinea Bissau was excluded from the model due to insufficient data availability.

$$\text{GDPgrowth}_{it} = \alpha + \delta \text{GPS}_{it} + \beta X_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

**GDPgrowth<sub>it</sub>** = dependent variable – GDP growth for the country (i) at time (t)

**α** = the constant

**δ** = the coefficient of Gender Parity Index for country (i) at time (t)

**GPS<sub>it</sub>** = Gender Parity Score is the variable of interest – independent variable for country (i) at time (t)

**β** = the coefficient of the control variables

**X<sub>it</sub>** = control variables for country (i) at time (t)

**ε<sub>it</sub>** = error term

A baseline and a best-case scenario simulation were conducted to estimate the impact on the economic performance and targeted populations, with GDP growth as the dependent variable and the GPS as the independent variable of interest. World Bank databases on population growth, the share of international trade in GDP, the gross savings rate, and the corruption index were used as control variables in the model. Thus, the indicators whose coefficients were found to be more significant on GDP growth were retained. As a result, primary, secondary and tertiary enrollment rates, the literacy rate and labor force participation were determined to be the indicators with the most significant impact on GDP growth.