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***Gendered Institutions and
Locked Paths: The Case of
FemWise-West Africa
(2019-2024)***

Ewaoluwa Jadesola Oyewo
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Coordinating Institution:
University of Glasgow
University Avenue
Glasgow G12 8QQ
Scotland, United Kingdom
E-mail: ilgspd@glasgow.ac.uk
www.globalsecuritylaw-erasmusmundus.eu

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GENDERED INSTITUTIONS AND LOCKED PATHS: THE CASE OF FEMWISE-WEST AFRICA (2019-2024)

*Ewaoluwa Jadesola Oyewo**

Introduction

The landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security recognises the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and children and emphasises the crucial role that women play in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding. However, women are still mostly missing from high-level international peace negotiations and from peace talks worldwide. According to UN Women, statistical data after 1990 indicates that delegates of women's groups are rarely included as signatories in peace agreements and of the 18 peace accords that were made in 2022, only one had the signature of a women's organization delegate. It is worth noting that the UN only delegated a woman as a lead mediator for the first time in 2013 (O'Reilly & Súilleabháin, 2013). Despite the presence of excellent female figures in Africa, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union also lacks female representation (Potter & CHD, 2005). In the same vein, women in West Africa continue to have little representation in peace processes (GIZ, 2021).

The African Union has made substantial strides in promoting gender equality and safeguarding women's rights through the adoption of legal frameworks. However, there is a significant gap between policy implementation and actual practice (African Union, 2018). The African Union established the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation, also known as FemWise-Africa, in 2017 to enhance the involvement of women in conflict prevention and mediation within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)

* Ewaoluwa Jadesola Oyewo is a graduate of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree in International Law of Global Security, Peace and Development, specialising in peace, security and conflict. Contact email: ewaoluwaoyewo@gmail.com

and to promote women's inclusion in peace-making in Africa by facilitating strategic advocacy, capacity building, and networking (African Union, 2018).

Following the establishment of FemWise-Africa, the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) formally launched FemWise-West Africa as a supporting mechanism of the Panel of the Wise in November 2019 (ECOWAS, 2022). Its primary objectives include “providing a platform for strategic advocacy, capacity building and networking to implement the commitments for women’s inclusion in conflict prevention and peace-making processes in the region; strengthening the role of ECOWAS female citizens in conflict prevention and mediation within the ECOWAS mediation and security framework and the APSA; and reinforcing the initiative of the ECOWAS Commission to mainstream gender into its peace and security architecture to increase professionalism and inclusiveness in its mediation initiatives and all political processes” (ECOWAS, 2022).

In 2022, the ECOWAS Commission organised a regional stakeholders’ workshop to validate a set of documents for the effective institutionalisation and operationalisation of FemWise-West Africa, including monitoring, evaluation and the development of a Road Map. This document stipulated that in the first three years of implementation (2022-2024), FemWise-West Africa will focus on the following nine action areas: operationalisation of the Network; support for the establishment of national FemWise Chapters; strategic involvement in relevant activities and meetings of ECOWAS and other Networks and partners; deployment of members in ECOWAS conflict prevention and mediation missions with the Council of the Wise or in African Union-led missions, initiatives of FemWise-West Africa (Activities independent from the Council of the Wise); training and Capacity building activities; strategic engagement with partners; development of knowledge management systems; and a communication and Visibility plan. These action points were accompanied with 88 quantitative and qualitative indicators in total to measure the progress and effectiveness of the Network (see Annex 1). Based on these indicators and the status quo, it is clear that the Network has been largely ineffective as less than 30 percent of the action points have been implemented and only meagre records of the Network’s activities are available despite its commitment to communication and visibility.

Thus, this working paper sets out to investigate the barriers to the implementation and effectiveness of the mandates of FemWise-West Africa. Given that this Network is relatively new and is yet to implement its mandate, it is largely under-researched. Hence, this working paper aims to make an important contribution to the existing literature on women, peace and security initiatives by focusing specifically on the West African context and providing new insights for further research. This is particularly crucial given the context of the dire security situation in the region, marked by a resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government and budding peace processes, which requires the deployment of every mediation and conflict prevention capacity that ECOWAS possesses, including its female leadership for lasting peace. Moreover, over 50 percent of peace agreements fail within five years of signature partly because talks suffer from the absence of women negotiations and accords often do not address the underlying causes of conflict or seek to prevent its resurgence (De Langis, 2011). More generally, it is part of global efforts to address the challenges to women's inclusion and effectiveness in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section presents a review of the literature based on themes of the women, peace and security agenda, women in mediation, and Women Mediation Networks (WMN) initiatives. The second section contains a theoretical framework to reveal established explanations as to why women peace organisations tend to be ineffective. The fourth section features a description of the research design and methodology. The final section presents findings and conclusions from collected data.

1. Literature Review

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted the landmark Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in recognition of “the impact of armed conflict on women and girls and the importance of their participation in peace processes to international peace and security”. In addition to this, nine other resolutions on WPS including UNSCR 1820 (2008), UNSCR 1888 (2009), UNSCR 1889 (2009), UNSCR 1960 (2010), UNSCR 2106 (2013), UNSCR 2122 (2013), UNSCR 2242 (2015), UNSCR 2467 (2019), UNSCR 2493 (2019) adopted by the Security Council have formed the normative framework and foundation for the operationalisation of the WPS agenda by the UN system and Member States (Mader et al, 2020). Consequently, an extensive body of literature has been developed on WPS as scholars engage with specific themes within it such as women’s participation in peace processes, implementation of the agenda, and women and mediation among others.

Within the WPS literature, only a limited amount of literature exists on the subject of women in mediation. Arguably, all of them trace their origins to the ground-breaking UNSCR 1325. Since 2005, several have, in nuanced ways, posed the question: “Where are the women (in mediation)?” — a means of evaluating the extent to which UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda have achieved their goals, if at all (Potter, 2005; O’Reilly & Súilleabháin, 2013; Aggestam & Svensson, 2018; Turner, 2018). For this question, they have answered that women are largely absent and barely visible, particularly in leading high-level mediation roles, as it is a largely overlooked objective of UNSCR 1325 as the field remains staunchly male-dominated. This is also reflected in the existing literature, which focuses more on women’s roles in general peace initiatives, particularly in grassroots peacebuilding, while comparatively fewer studies examine participation in high-level mediation. Scholars agree that the situation has been slowly improving since 2000 although the WPS agenda is still far behind from achieving its goals.

These paltry results have been justified by invoking factors such as the narrow definition of mediation, structural discrimination, the family factor and the choices women make, and the masculine nature of violent conflict and its protagonists (Potter, 2005; Turner, 2018). Potter (2005) discovered that these obstacles could be overcome or were mostly insignificant.

Particularly, the perception of mediation solely as a means to leverage power and as a form of high-level diplomacy while undermining the important role that women play at Track 2 and 3 levels leaves female mediators invisible and excluded (Turner, 2018). The most attention is given to Track 1 mediation, which is formalised diplomatic engagement, involving high-ranking official representatives of conflicting parties, who are mostly men, and typically facilitated by international organizations. Track 2 processes operate informally alongside Track 1, involving influential non-state actors such as civil society leaders. Track 3 comprises grassroots peacebuilding efforts focused on community engagement and social cohesion

The recognition of the diverse responsibilities and competence that women already possess in mediation can only occur when mediation is perceived as a process of fostering and maintaining dialogue (Kleiboer, 1996). Scholars argue that beyond rhetoric, it is crucial to have a greater number of women serving as mediators because women bring vital concerns to the discussion that contribute to long-lasting peace and stability. This is due to their unique perspective and, fundamentally, it is a matter of achieving equality (Potter, 2005, O'Reilly & Súilleabháin, 2013).

Women mediation networks (WMNs) emerged to redress the issue of underrepresentation of women in mediation processes. Given that they are still in their early stages, very little academic research has been conducted on them. There exists some form of classification in existing literature on women mediation networks. On the one hand, Turner and Fellin (2021) refer to “new regional women mediation networks” which began with the Nordic Women Mediators in 2015. Limo (2018) and Murray et al (2021) provides a more extensive account of these networks, some dating back to 1994, primarily in Africa, before the emergence of more recent networks.

Earlier WMNs arose from a coalition of grassroots women-focused and women-led civil society organisations (CSOs) to have their voices heard in the entire peace lifecycle (Murray et. al, 2021). They were situated at the local and regional level and found their bearing from regional commitments to women and peace that predated UNSCR 1325 (Limo, 2018; Murray et al, 2021). The likes of *Le Collectif des ONG et Associations Féminines du Burundi* was formed

following the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) 1994 Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace to mobilise women for participation in their peace processes. This network has been credited for spotlighting unknown female mediators in Burundi, who have successfully resolved more than 5000 local conflicts in 2015 (Limo, 2018). Likewise, the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MAWORPNET) facilitated the involvement of women from Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in the peace processes in the region. As a result, they were able to participate in the Akosombo discussions in June 2003 (Murray et al, 2021).

The new generation of WMNs mostly work at the regional and international level with the overarching objective of implementing the WPS agenda, meaning their objectives are not limited to mediation (Turner & Fellin, 2021; Murray et al, 2021). Most of them are state-led ones, arising from existing positions that such states have carved out for themselves in global politics (e.g. the Nordic Women Mediators leveraging on the existing reputation of Nordic countries as peacemakers), and others as an offshoot of the state-led National Action Plan for WPS (e.g. the UK-led Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth (WMC) and Italy-led Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN). FemWise-Africa stands out of these two categories as an organ of the African Union, and similarly FemWise-West Africa which is a subsidiary organ of ECOWAS. All of these WMNs have a common overarching goal of addressing the underrepresentation on women in mediation. Their shared objectives encompass enhancing the prominence of female mediators, fostering the growth of women's mediation skills and capabilities, utilising networks to connect global actors with local initiatives to amplify women's presence in mediation, and contributing to the broader objective of bolstering inclusive mediation and advancing the durability of peace agreements (Turner & Fellin, 2021).

FemWise-Africa places special emphasis on skills development as a central goal due to the notion that there is a shortage of adequately trained female mediators in many African nations (Limo, 2018; Turner & Fellin, 2021). According to Turner (2018), the validity of this assertion is questionable as women are frequently required to provide explanations for their qualifications or expertise for high-level mediation positions, whereas men are not subjected to the same scrutiny. Nevertheless, in pursuit of its objectives of professionalising the role of women in mediation and bridging the gap between Tracks 1, 2 and 3 mediation, in 2020,

FemWise-Africa co-hosted the FemWise Capacity Building Initiative to build the capacities of women at the Track 3 level through training sessions and facilitated Knowledge Sharing sessions with Track 1 mediators (African Union, 2018; Murray et al, 2021).

According to Turner and Fellin (2021), WMNs face fundamentally unresolved conceptual difficulties in their connection to the field of mediation. More specifically, the challenges revolve around the core dispute between the distinct logics and norms of gender and mediation, and whether they are situated as gender or mediation support initiatives, and their alignment with the flawed tracks of conflict mediation. Furthermore, scholars agree that WMNs grapple with many practical challenges (Turner & Fellin, 2021; Murray et al, 2021; Engel, 2023). They are faced with the challenges of ensuring long-term financial support and political dedication, the persistent underestimation of the importance of women's efforts for peace, and reliance on the ever-changing objectives of governments. FemWise-Africa, for example, has relied heavily on financial assistance from international partners (Engel, 2023). However, these partners have become dissatisfied with the network's recent prospects, resulting in reduced investment (Engel, 2023).

Overall, the bulk of the existing literature on women and mediation focus on Track 1, especially at the UN level until the emergence of WMNs that tend to combine all three tracks. Limo (2018), Murray et al (2021), and Turner & Fellin (2021) are the only scholars that have examined WMNs and understandably so because they are a relatively new phenomena. In fact, the aforementioned studies are limited in scope: Turner and Fellin (2021) conducted an exploratory study aimed at mapping and introducing existing WMNs, which, while useful for identifying key themes and generating hypotheses in emerging areas, do not serve to produce findings that are generalizable across contexts or supported by extensive data. Similarly, Limo (2018) and Murray et al. (2021) are policy briefs, which are designed to provide timely and accessible insights for policymakers, and as such, they typically prioritize brevity and clarity over methodological rigour and empirical breadth. Moreover, FemWise-West Africa is not addressed in these works even though it has been active for five years. Thus, this research aims to fill this gap by introducing and assessing FemWise-West Africa and contributing to the body of work on WMNs.

2. Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory of international relations (IR) aims to comprehend the prevailing dominance of male identity over femininity at all levels and aspects of life while seeking to change the status quo (True, 2010). Hence, the widespread use of the theory in much of the research on the WPS agenda examines its language, focus, pillars, and implementation. Among a myriad of arguments, Heathcote (2014) contends that the focus of the agenda is flawed because it only seeks to increase the number of women in decision making positions instead of a total overhaul of the gendered structures and norms that disadvantage women. Moreover, there is a risk that the inclusion of women in new institutions may be reduced to a "tick-box exercise" (Heathcote & Otto, 2014).

While feminist IR academic research has examined the institutionalisation of UNSCR 1325, there is limited focus on how the fabric of institutions shape the execution of the WPS agenda (Thomson, 2019). This is particularly important given the emergence of WMNs as new institutions for implementing the WPS agenda and the fact that they are embedded within existing state and international institutions and the questions of continuity and change that they raise. Contemplating the gendered characteristics of institutions promotes a reconnection with the reformative objectives that constitute the foundation of the WPS agenda (Thomson, 2019). Feminist institutionalism (FI) addresses and fills this gap.

FI emerged as a collaborative effort between new institutionalism (NI) and feminist political science. It is founded on the fundamental ideas that both formal and informal institutions have a significant impact on political life and that political institutions are inherently gendered (Mackay, 2011). By employing these distinct elements, FI aims to provide a method for interpreting the gendered dynamics of political life more effectively (Krook & Mackay, 2011). In the context of NI, feminists assert a perspective which reveals the gendered power dynamics in institutions and mechanisms that bolster and erode them. Feminism enhances the ability of NI to conceptualise causality by recognising the significance of evolving gender relations as a possible catalyst for institutional change (Lovenduski, 2011). So, while establishing definitive causality for FemWise–West Africa's

ineffectiveness lies beyond the scope of this research, feminist institutionalism offers the most useful lens for identifying likely contributing factors, as it enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and conditions through which gendered institutions produce specific outcomes.

A core tenet of feminist institutionalism is the recognition that past and present political institutions are deeply interconnected, and that these interconnections actively shape gendered patterns and outcomes. It also draws attention to the often subtle ways in which power dynamics are embedded in and sustained by institutional processes through gender (Burns, 2005; Hawkesworth, 2003). The scholarly foundation of FI has also contributed valuable insights into institutional resistance and the constraints of reform. This body of work emphasises specific gendered processes of reproduction that support political institutions and restrict opportunities for transformation, such as how institutions and institutional actors adapt to changes in membership while also putting newcomers at a disadvantage through informal mechanisms (Mackay et al, 2011).

FI is an appropriate theoretical framework for examining FemWise-West Africa because it facilitates understandings of how institutional processes and practices contribute to and perpetuate gender inequality (Krook & Mackay, 2011). It also highlights the power dynamics inside institutions that can impede the success of initiatives such as FemWise-West Africa, which seek to alter the existing state of affairs. Furthermore, by contributing critical insights into the gendered institutional dynamics of inclusion and exclusion through informal processes, this discussion also allows us to interrogate similar claims found within the women in mediation literature. For example, Mackay et al (2010) highlight how male-dominated political elites have moved the source of power from formal to informal systems to oppose women's growing participation and influence in formal decision-making structures (Mackay et al, 2010). This echoes Potter's submission (2005) that one of the factors contributing to the exclusion or ineffectiveness of women in mediation is the atypical inclusion of women in men's informal networks, such as drinking or sports activities. Indeed, these activities play a crucial role in conflict mediation as they are necessary to establish connections with and among the opposing parties, who are typically male leaders and may originate from societies where women's involvement in

public affairs is not commonly embraced (Potter, 2005). This provides us with an understanding on the role of informal institutions which may impede the efficacy of FemWise-West Africa.

FI also provides useful insights on the gendered aspects of continuity and change, which are frequently overlooked in conventional approaches. The analysis of institutional power dynamics, resistance, reproduction, continuity, and change should be approached from a gendered perspective (Mackay, 2011). The notions of nested newness and path dependency can be applied to evaluate the substantial obstacles that FemWise-West Africa encounters in changing the widely entrenched patriarchal norms within the peace process and in ECOWAS.

Finally, as Thomson (2019) argues, the value of feminist institutionalism for research on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda lies in its capacity to prompt critical reflection on the transformative ambitions of both the WPS agenda and feminist international relations. Applied to FemWise–West Africa, FI not only helps to diagnose institutional shortcomings but also offers a basis for developing meaningful reform strategies. By exposing the gendered biases embedded within institutional structures and highlighting the specific barriers that hinder progress, FI provides a framework for reimagining and restructuring institutions to be more inclusive and supportive of women's participation in mediation and conflict prevention

2.1 Feminist Institutionalism Framework: Gendered (Formal & Informal) Institutions, Continuity and Change (Path Dependency & Nested Newness)

According to Mackay (2011, p.181), “[t]he gendered character of institutions and the gendering effects of institutions are foundational tenets of a feminist institutionalism”. FI offers a framework to examine the functioning of gender norms inside institutions and the ways in which formal and informal institutional processes establish and sustain gender power dynamics (Curtin, 2019). Some key themes within the various approaches to FI include formal and informal institutions, continuity and change, agency and structure, which will be discussed in this section.

FI scholars recognise that institutions encompass both formal and informal dimensions, which work together to shape political outcomes. According to North (1990, pp. 3-4), institutions are “the rules of the game in a society or... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interactions; formal constraints — such as the rules that human beings devise — and informal constraints — such as conventions and codes of behaviour”. More specifically, Peters (1999) identifies an institution as a “structural feature of the society and/or the polity... that may be formal (a legislature, an agency in the public bureaucracy, or a legal framework), or may be informal (a network of interacting organizations, or a shared set of norms)”. While formal institutions are explicitly constituted, informal ones are mostly implicitly obtained. Informal rules arise when the formal are insufficient, or when players desire, but are unable to obtain, a formal institutional resolution; or when actors are pursuing objectives that are not socially acceptable (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Mackay et al, 2011).

FI argues that both formal and informal institutions are influenced by gender and interact in either supportive or conflicting ways to influence political results (Mackay, 2011). Thus, the notion of masculinity and femininity both manifest in the culture of political institutions. However, the masculine ideal prevails and influences institutional structures, practices, discourses, and behaviours within these institutions (Duerst-Lahti & Kelly, 1995).

In terms of the interplay between formal and informal institutions, informal institutions have received much attention from FI scholars as they are considered crucial aspects of continuity and change. Informal ‘rules-in-use’ play out in different scenarios during periods of reform and transition. From one perspective, they can strengthen the process of transformation when there is a strong alignment and close integration between the previous informal and the new formal institutions. Conversely, informal norms can function as a main source of opposition that exists simultaneously or even contradicts formal regulations (Leach & Lowndes 2007, 186). This restrictive capacity of informal rules has garnered much more inquiry. Gendered practical manifestations of this phenomenon have been identified by scholars in aspects such as parliamentary procedures and cultures that impose limitations on the capacity of female legislators to advocate for women

(Dodson, 2006). Additionally, informal practices and sanctioned rule-breaking have been identified as means by which male politicians can reaffirm their dominance in politics (Puwar, 2004). While formal regulations can undergo rapid changes by an injunction, informal institutions reflected in norms, traditions, and standards of conduct are far more resistant to intentional policies (North, 1990).

In this respect, Mackay (2014) developed the concept of nested newness which “is a metaphor used to capture the ways in which the new is embedded in time, sequence, and its institutional environment”. It flows from the logic that once institutions are created, they can be difficult to change although there comes a permissive stage where old settlements can be destabilised and the new embedded. However, this is not a linear process as these new establishments do not guarantee change because they must contend with institutional legacies, existing patterns of power distribution and path dependencies. Furthermore, the euphoria of this new can easily become a risky, inefficient, and unrealistic addendum. As a gendered concept, nested newness is based on the assumptions that the persistence of gender norms and regimes creates legacies and processes that reform efforts must negotiate with. They also serve as essential mechanisms by which institutional arrangements and power imbalances are established or opposed systematically and over time create gendered patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

Hence, Mackay (2014) observes “the stickiness of old rules (formal and informal) about gender, the “nestedness” of new institutions within the wider environment, and the way newness functions as a gendered liability provides a powerful explanation for why it is so hard to make gender reforms — and wider institutional change conducive to the regendering of politics — stick”. Gender reforms end up either actively resisted or passively neglected through the mechanisms of “remembering the old” and “forgetting the new” (Mackay, 2014).

Historical Institutionalism also provides a similar perspective on continuity and change in institutions known as path dependency, which has been adopted by FI. Path dependency is defined as “historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties” (Mahoney, 2000). Path

dependence occurs when a contingent historical event triggers a subsequent sequence that follows a relatively deterministic pattern. Mahoney (2000) describes that in the case of a self-reinforcing sequence, the contingent period equates to the initial acceptance of a specific institutional arrangement, whereas the deterministic pattern indicates the steady recurrence of this institution. Self-reinforcing sequences frequently demonstrate increasing returns, such that as the returns grow, an institutional pattern, once adopted, provides greater benefits with its ongoing adoption. Consequently, it becomes increasingly challenging to change the pattern or choose formerly available alternatives, even if these alternatives are more profitable (Mahoney, 2000).

Like nested newness, Mackay (2010) argues that path dependency operates by allowing periods of institutional reproduction to coincide with moments of institutional creation. As a result, institutional actors encounter a blend of “lock in” and “innovation”, where pre-existing institutional structures to some degree “lock” actors onto specific paths. Not to imply that there is completely no possibility for innovation, since institutional change can take place through displacement, layering, drift, and conversion. This is because path dependency can act as both a significant obstacle and a gradual process of change (Waylen, 2013). Armed with this knowledge, we may more effectively examine the inconsistent and partial outcomes of newly established institutions aimed at questioning prevailing gender norms and gender-based power imbalances (Mackay, 2010). Fundamentally, while FI focuses on identifying how institutions perpetuate gendered power dynamics, its primary objective is to identify opportunities to transform the existing state of affairs and bring about institutional change (Mackay & Meier 2003).

3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology for this research will be discussed, to ascertain and justify the appropriateness of the design and method used in answering the research question. It provides a detailed account of the methods and procedures used to collect, analyse, and interpret data in this research.

3.1 Research Methods

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology. Qualitative methods provide several advantages over statistical methods, although they are not entirely infallible (Odell, 2001). Qualitative studies allow for a more thorough and detailed engagement with events, thereby enhancing clarity in variations. It encourages development of new concepts, typologies, and hypotheses and serves as a means for refining established theory (Odell, 2001). Case studies also offer similar benefits as they give more in-depth information compared to a statistical study, enabling readers to formulate different interpretations and develop new hypotheses. Moreover, case studies are better for capturing processes in phenomena. Quantitative methods tend to skew theory from processes toward structures, failing to account for variation within those structures. Whereas processes are crucial for comprehending structures and institutions (Odell, 2001). Thus, employing this method affords us an opportunity to study the new phenomenon of WMNs such as FemWise-West Africa in-depth, to apply existing theory, and to potentially refine it.

According to Odell (2001), the FemWise-West Africa case study is classified as a disciplined interpretive case study. An interpretive case study systematically analyses an event by employing an established theory in a novel context. This method does not test a theory; however, the case study demonstrates that existing theories can be extended to explain a new event. This method is not atheoretical; it promotes a more rigorous application of theories, leading to stronger theories and possible new recommendations for theory enhancement (Odell, 2001).

In terms of the data collection method, both primary and secondary data sources were consulted. The secondary data was mainly collected from policy documents such as UN Resolutions, policy briefs, and published literature on women and mediation. It is

important to note the novelty of FemWise-West Africa as published literature on this body is virtually non-existent. With the permission of the mediation affairs team in the Directorate of Political Affairs (DPA) of the ECOWAS Commission, FemWise-related documents have been used and analysed for the purposes of this paper. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of FemWise-West Africa to supplement documents from the ECOWAS Commission and to provide deeper insights for answering the research question. Given the existing knowledge of the dynamics of the network, a purposive sampling style was employed. The choice of semi-structured interviews was based on the understanding of the advantages it offers. Flexibility is one of the core strengths of this style of interview as it allows participants to tell their own stories and experiences, as opposed to a regimented approach. However, an interview guide was employed to structure the interview with some pre-set relevant questions and to ensure uniformity in all interview sessions. Since the interviews were semi-structured, the participant could change the direction of the interview, or the interviewer could ask follow-up questions based on their answers. The goal of the interviews was to obtain a first-hand insight into FemWise-West Africa.

The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom and an information sheet and informed consent form was sent to the participants beforehand to provide background information on the topic, to confirm consented participation, and to obtain agreement to record the session. Moreover, as a core ethical consideration, participants' anonymity was guaranteed and reaffirmed. Firstly, on the informed consent form, where it was stated that no data obtained will be identified with their name, but rather with a code that will only be known to the researcher and their digital data will be stored with access control systems. Additionally, this was consistently reaffirmed during the interview to ensure that the participants were comfortable to express themselves on the topic and their experiences.

In terms of analysis, a comprehensive document analysis was conducted on relevant documents including the Statute of the Network, Standard operating procedures, road map, and monitoring and evaluation plan to introduce FemWise-West Africa. It was also intended to give an overview of the overall essence of network, certain design elements, and the viability of the operational environment and structure within which the Network

was intended to function. Then, a thematic analysis was conducted on the interview responses alongside relevant documents to determine some of the reasons why the Network has not succeeded in fulfilling its goal.

The study encountered some limitations. The data available on FemWise-West Africa activities is limited. This is likely because it has not been fully operationalised and has limited visibility in the literature. Furthermore, there was a limited number of available participants when this research was conducted which posed a possible limitation for this study. If more interviews were completed, more data and insights from the Network might have been obtained. Only six members of the Steering Committee were identified as the existing members of the Network since it has failed to be operationalised. Of the members conducted, only two are Anglophone, one is Lusophone, and three are Francophone. Since the author is mainly Anglophone, it is possible that some expressions were lost in translation during the interviews. This may have been exacerbated by the mode of communication through teleconferencing due to constraints on time, resources, and distance from Europe to West Africa, the latter being where the participants are located. This specific limitation may have hindered the author's ability to read body language or other non-verbal cues of the participants, alongside other technical difficulties through the mode of communication.

4. Analysis

This section begins with a background to the ECOWAS Peace and Security and Mediation Architecture to show the institutional context within which FemWise-West Africa was constituted and to determine where it aligns within the existing structures of ECOWAS. Subsequently, FemWise-West Africa will be introduced in terms of its organs, statute, goals and objectives. Then, the findings of this research are analysed and its results discussed. Importantly, this analysis and research in general is shaped by the author's perspective as a female West African who has lived through the challenges of the region prompting critical questions about the persistence of the status quo and the efforts being made to transform it. The author's professional experience at ECOWAS involved working alongside many other citizens whose roles were, in essence, dedicated to addressing the very questions that initially motivated this research and to challenging the status quo in pursuit of meaningful change. During this time, the author met with members of FemWise-West Africa and acknowledge some of their complaints which spurred the interest to undertake this study.

4.1 ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture

The 1999 Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security, remains "the most important legal and normative instrument for ECOWAS in all matters relating to peace and security" (ECOWAS, 2018). It introduced a regional peace and security framework consisting of newly formed institutions, granting new authority to existing ones, and having substantial impact on the organisation's efforts in preventive diplomacy and mediation. According to Article 4 of the Protocol, the institutions of the Mechanism include the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the Mediation and Security Council (MSC), the Executive Secretariat (now the Commission), and any other organisation that the Authority may establish. Article 6(2) further designated the Authority as the supreme governing body with the power to take action on any peace and security considerations addressed in the Protocol. The Authority can transfer its powers to the MSC (Article 7).

Additionally, the Protocol established the Council of Elders (now Council of the Wise (CoW)) as a supporting organ. The Council comprises prominent personalities from

various segments of the society ideally including women, selected by the President of the Commission who can use their professional experience to become mediators, conciliators and facilitators. In accordance with the Protocol, they can be requested and deployed from a list the President maintains whenever the need arises to deal with a conflict situation. By their updated statute, the CoW now has a fixed one-year term with a minimum of two statutory meetings annually (ECOWAS, 2018). Importantly, Article 2 (5) of the CoW's 2016 Statute states that at least 30 percent of the CoW membership must be composed of women.

The 2018 ECOWAS Mediation Guideline outlines the process for addressing conflict situations in the region. In such instances, the Chairperson of the Authority evaluates preventive diplomacy and mediation strategies and typically decides with other Heads of State on appointing a mediator or facilitator, keeping the President informed, and with the expert guidance of the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS). The PAPS department conducts an analysis of the situation and supports the mediator's efforts while in the field. When making this appointment, it is important to consider gender equality and ensure the active participation of previous Heads of State and the CoW (as stated in Articles 49 and 82 of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework).

However, the gaps between these stated principles and practice are very wide as mediators are drawn mainly from sitting or past heads of state, leaving little room for the CoW and for women from West Africa since this region has had only one female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who has been a mediator for ECOWAS. The justification for the appointment of past heads of states as mediators is that they have undisputable political influence in the region and extensive political expertise to resolve conflicts (Afolabi, 2020). Despite widespread community opposition, appointments such as former President Compaore of Burkina Faso to the position of special Mediator-Facilitator in the peace processes in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Togo demonstrate the contentious nature of this practice. In recent times, former President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria has been designated as the official mediator between ECOWAS and the present junta-led government in Mali. There is ambiguity in determining whether this pertains to his position as a former head of state or as the Chair of the CoW because with the exception of him, the Council has not been fully

utilised, particularly in situations of ongoing conflict. Their deployment has been limited to fact-finding missions conducted exclusively during elections and post-election activities (Afolabi, 2020). FemWise-West Africa was established as a subsidiary mechanism of the CoW.

To remedy the exclusion of women within the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture, attempts at gender mainstreaming are being made in line with the global WPS agenda. This is being instituted through PAPS and the Department of Human Development and Social Affairs (HDSA). The first example of this was the establishment of the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre (EGDC) as a technical commission on gender and to adopt the ECOWAS Gender Policy (2005) to provide the legal, institutional and policy frameworks to gender mainstream the regional integration agenda (ECOWAS, 2020). It now stands as a special agency under DHDS, with its secretariat in Dakar. Additionally, there is a WPS Unit under the same department tasked to further strengthen the Commission's bid to gender mainstream all its work. There have also been efforts to implement WPS within PAPS with the most comprehensive of them being the development of the Guideline for WPS in PAPS in 2020.

This decision was advocated by the WPS Advisory Committee, an informal Gender Focal Point system created at PAPS in 2017 to assist coworkers in the PAPS and Early Warning Divisions to adopt the WPS Agenda in their professional activities. The aim of the guideline is "to enhance equal prevention, protection, participation, and post-conflict relief for men and women, ensuring gender mainstreaming in all PAPS Divisions, Directorates, and Units"(ECOWAS, 2020). A core strategy for implementing this guideline is to strategically coordinate and collaborate with gender mainstreaming specialists from DHDS, specifically EGDC (ECOWAS, 2020).

4.2 Introducing the Network of West African Women in Mediation and Conflict Prevention (Femwise-West Africa)

The ECOWAS Commission formally launched FemWise-West Africa under the theme: Promoting the Role of Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation in West Africa in November 2019 in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire (ECOWAS, 2022a). Its members are African female

community leaders accredited as members of FemWise-West Africa for having experience in conflict prevention and mediation and working in an organisation or as an individual expert at local, national, regional or international level. The Network's design is a deliberate attempt to bridge the gap between women mediators and peace actors across all tracks, to consolidate their efforts, and to build their capacity for deployment. Thus, Article 2 of the Statute provides that the overall objective of the Network is "to provide a platform for strategic advocacy, capacity building and networking with a view to implementing ECOWAS commitments of women's inclusion in conflict prevention and peacemaking process in West Africa".

FemWise-West Africa's operational mandate depends on whether it operates as a subsidiary mechanism of the CoW or operates independently under the guidance of the Directorate of Political Affairs (DPA) in PAPS. In the former, it is to support the council's efforts in implementing EPSA and WPS commitments, participate in fact-finding missions, embark on missions at the request of the President of the Commission and facilitate women's participation in conflict prevention and peace processes (Article 6.1 of the Statute). As an independent Network, it is to initiate partnerships with relevant actors to implement activities that promote women's participation in conflict prevention and mediation in West Africa. From the wordings of the Statute, it can be deduced that its mandate as a subsidiary organ of the CoW is intended to be more comprehensive than its independent activities. Since the Network is embedded within DPA, any administrative, technical, and logistical support from the Commission goes through DPA (ECOWAS, 2022a).

The governing structure of FemWise-West Africa comprises of a Steering Committee, General Assembly, and Secretariat. Selected for a non-renewable three-year term, the Steering Committee comprises seven accredited members who represent all linguistic groups in ECOWAS (Article 3 of the Statute). Their responsibilities include providing strategic guidance to the Secretariat, reflecting on the activities of the Network, reviewing membership accreditation applications, and contributing to annual work plans. They should convene biannually in normal circumstances to explore and deliberate on potential collaborations and financial prospects with external partners, with technical assistance from the Secretariat (ECOWAS, 2022a). The General Assembly, composed of all accredited

members is to meet at least once a year to approve annual work plans, discuss the Network activities, and address topics on women's conflict prevention and peace processes. It is essentially a forum for decision-making, thematic discussions, sharing ideas and best practices.

The Secretariat of FemWise-West Africa is the administrative and implementation powerhouse of the Network, responsible for coordinating initiatives, monitoring activities, and providing support to member state-level secretariats. As an organ within the ECOWAS Commission, it manages relationships with other departments, the CoW, FemWise chapters, and external partners. The Secretariat implements the Network's communication and outreach strategy and seeks potential partners interested in conflict prevention, mediation, and other topics. It is led by a regional coordinator, supported by various technical officers and sub-committees (ECOWAS, 2022b).

The first phase for operationalising the Network was set for 2022 to 2024. This shows that this research is well on time to evaluate the Network's activities. For this first phase, nine action plans were set out and accompanied with eighty-eight indicators as stated in the introduction. The first, and arguably most crucial, step towards operationalisation is the physical establishment of the Secretariat in the ECOWAS Commission and the recruitment of required personnel as the key implementation body. This has not been accomplished to date as confirmed by interview participants. In the same vein, no deployment has occurred, no expansion beyond the steering committee, and neither has any independent activity been initiated yet. The status quo is attributed to some of the challenges discussed below.

4.3 Formal and Informal Institutional Barriers

“Gender has no power to deploy and till today we have found no place within mediation”

- Interview 001, (2024)

An observed recurring theme in the engagement with participants of this study is the challenge of effectively incorporating the provisions of UNSCR 1325 into formal structures and institutions at both the state and regional levels. Concerning FemWise-West Africa specifically, one interviewee remarked that the primary obstacle encountered by the

Network is "institutional bottlenecks" that existed from its inception. The idea of the Network was conceived from HDSA as a gender mainstreaming mechanism for peace and security and was launched from the same department in 2019 (Interview 001, 2024). Nevertheless, implementing the "mediation mandate" of the Network and deploying it to the field from HDSA posed a challenge because "their role is to say, ""Hey, this work of ECOWAS, we need to incorporate more gender elements." They don't have the power to send mediators on a field mission" (Interview 001, 2024). Indeed, the Gender Development Centre was established to only be a gender technical commission (ECOWAS, 2020). Consequently, this was a major factor that contributed to the Network's inactivity from 2019 to 2021 as it could not be operationalised within HDSA based on ECOWAS "rules of the game". Indeed, the Guideline on WPS in PAPS prepared in 2020 did not include any reference to the Network. Following the transfer of the Network from HDSA to PAPS, it was officially confirmed that DPA assumed control of the Network in 2022. This transition was notably marked by a regional stakeholders' workshop in 2022, during which documents for the operationalisation of the Network, including its Statute, Standard Operating Procedure, and Monitoring and Evaluation plan, were created and verified. Upon validation, the frameworks confirmed that FemWise-West Africa is now exclusively under the jurisdiction of DPA (Articles 4 and 5). The new arrangement only referenced HDSA in the composition of the network sub-committee (Articles 17a — 20a).

However, when FemWise-West Africa reached PAPS, it encountered another impasse and no deployment occurred, because "they were lost in what it is meant to do...They were really like there was a lack of understanding of how to integrate it into their work" (Interview 001, 2024). This speaks to the tension between gender and mediation highlighted by Turner and Fellin (2018) as one of the conceptual questions to the effectiveness of WMNs. They argue that WPS proponents recognise mediation as a source of marginalisation for women, similar to HDSA, and call for normative obligations to involve women in the processes. Conversely, the mediation field still has not entirely accepted this practice as gender is not regarded as an essential norm, but rather as a non-essential norm that can be overridden by other core norms. There is a fundamental divergence of opinion between the WPS and mediation communities on the objective of women's involvement

and the suitability of mediation for promoting gender equality through and after conflict (Standfield, 2020). Thus, even when structures like FemWise are developed, it becomes almost impossible to integrate them into the existing institutions. This is the phenomenon that FI scholars describe in path dependency and nested newness which will be discussed in the next sub-section. Furthermore, the strategy of effective coordination for gender mainstreaming between PAPS and HDSA as provided in the guideline for WPS did not take place such that HDSA could have salvaged the situation when the DPA “lacked no understanding of how to integrate us into their work” (Interview 1, 2024). Rather, the situation was described as “a bit of tug of war” between the departments.

Thus, this formed a major institutional barrier upon which other barriers rest partially. The Secretariat responsible for implementing the majority of the provisions outlined in legal documents has not been established to date. Thus, there has been a complete absence of implementation. It has been verified that the Network has not had the opportunity to grow beyond the original members represented on the Steering Committee. No national chapters have been established and no new members have been accepted. Indeed, the existing Steering Committee has completed its three-year term, but, no new election has been held due to the absence of members to vote (Interview 001, 2024). In the absence of the Secretariat to assist with translation, there is also a linguistic barrier among the three language groups comprising the Steering committee, making communication among them a herculean task — a barrier which the author experienced firsthand in the process of conducting this study.

Furthermore, there is no allocated budget for the Network, which means they lack the necessary funds to conduct any of their independent mandate. The situation becomes even more precarious when considering that the Network’s design requires that it seeks external partners to co-finance its operations in order to carry out independent activities. This model is identical to that of FemWise-Africa, which has been identified as problematic and unsustainable. As Engel (2023) indicates, if international partners initially pledge to provide funding but do not observe satisfactory outcomes, they choose to retain their investments. This is the problem that FemWise-Africa is now encountering. This assertion holds true to a significant degree in the context of FemWise-West Africa as well. The author

observed this on occasion when a proposal to jointly organise capacity building trainings with FemWise-West Africa was presented to an international partner. However, they explicitly responded that it was not a priority for them due to certain issues they identified.

Some formal and informal barriers at the member state-level were also identified. According to another interviewee, “[t]he states do not support the implementation of the commitments made in the UNSCR 1325 action plans, even in terms of institutional recognition which makes it difficult to mobilise funds to finance our activities” (Interview 002, 2024). This is said to be due to the prevailing outlook of the Network as an informal structure that is not really recognised since they would rather stick to the formal male-dominated mediation channels. This links to some of the general cultural barriers to women’s representation in mediation and peace processes and some that are specific to the ECOWAS context as there is still an issue of underestimation of women’s participation in leading peace processes. Women are considered informal structures to be included on the margins, if at all (Turner, 2018). The complexity of this issue is further heightened in the highly-politicised ECOWAS context. Although the mediation guideline outlines a formal framework for deployment, the actual management of deployment for peace processes and missions is mostly informal and controlled by the state. “When there's a call for missions, it is usually the states that determine who goes to those missions. They appoint their members, for example, to go and resolve crises in Guinea or in Niger. So for us FemWise, we are more of an informal structure, and I think there is a concern. How do they deal with us? On whose mandate will we go?” (Interview 001, 2024) As a result, these Networks are hindered in their pursuit of legitimacy which they seek to achieve their underlying objectives.

4.4 Path Dependency, Nested Newness

Another recurring theme that has been found in this research is some form of “rejecting the idea of FemWise” by the member-states and the Commission. From the inception of ECOWAS, it has been like a “boys club” which poses a significant threat to democratic consolidation and regional security to date (Iwilade & Agbo, 2012). According to Momodu (2018), the governing body is shaped by influential national leaders, particularly former

Presidents and Foreign Affairs ministers from Member States. In fact, the establishment of ECOWAS was largely shaped by the personal beliefs of Dr. Yakubu Gowon, the former military Head of State of Nigeria, and Gnassingbé Eyadema, the former President of Togo. An analysis of the foreign policy history of Member States shows how the idiosyncrasies of regional Heads of State influence the different levels of willingness to engage in regional policy (Momodu, 2018). This is a phenomenon that earned the organisation the label of “an ECOWAS of States” over the years alluding to the hyper-statism of the organisation by its male leaders, although they now seek to change this to an “ECOWAS of citizens” with the vision 2050 (Musah et al., 2013).

This history is one that potentially has deterministic effects on the activities and workings of the organisation to date. That is, this behaviour of strong and undemocratic leaders dictating the direction of the organisation and selective compliance with ECOWAS policies are “historical sequences that set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties”, that is path dependency (Mahoney, 2000). Thus, when a new structure like FemWise-West Africa is introduced, “institutional actors experience a combination of ‘lock in’ and ‘innovation’, where already existing institutional structures to some extent ‘lock’ actors onto certain paths”: the path of shuttle diplomacy manned by Heads of State or their chosen representative to reach agreements such as the consensus that birthed the organization in the first place (Mackay, 2011; Ejime, 2024).

FemWise-West Africa, on the other hand, seeks to set out a new path where women at all levels are brought together, trained, and deployed to bridge the gap of female participation in decision-making, conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding processes in West Africa. It is a reform effort, motivated by a desire to challenge the gendered status quo and “change the rules of the game”. However, employing these methods carries inherent risks, particularly when they contradict the broader context, because once institutions have chosen a course, it becomes extremely hard to reverse it (Chappell, 2011; Mackay, 2014). Consequently, it is improbable that even new establishments will provide a fresh start for gender equality to thrive (Chappell, 2011).

This is evidently the situation for FemWise and is a great barrier to the fulfilment of their mediation mandate because “as usual, if they are sending a delegation, it is each member state that are mandated to go on mission that will send their delegates that will represent them and their interests. So getting us on board is a concern...” (Interview 001, 2024). Moreover, in the historical pattern of selective compliance and implementation of policies, states have not implemented their WPS commitments enough to nominate women for these missions (Interview 002, 2024). Thus, these gendered norms and relations are particularly “sticky” institutional legacies working to limit change and are a primary mechanism through which institutional reform and innovation can be resisted (Mackay, 2009).

In terms of resistance, an interview participant attested that it appears that the idea of the Network has been rejected by Member States and the Commission. This points to the concepts of “forgetting the new” and “remembering the old” such that institutional innovation is actively resisted or passively neglected as posited by Mackay (2014). The author asserts that the establishment of new institutions, like FemWise-West Africa, is frequently accompanied by an extended phase of institutionalisation and uncertainty. This is because the newly established structures and regulations, as outlined in comprehensive agreements, are either integrated and strengthened, or modified, disregarded and abandoned during the conversion into daily norms and practices. Indeed, it seems that the latter is true in this particular situation. In general, institutional actors tend to disregard newly established formal regulations and commonly accepted norms, particularly those that aim to transfer power across genders and challenge traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, until they are held responsible, typically by players in the women's movement (Mackay, 2014). Furthermore, any alteration must be consistently observed and rigorously enforced, lest it be swiftly disregarded (Chappell, 2011)

Undoubtedly, the old way has been often recalled throughout the democratic crises that have struck in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Niger lately. Former Presidents Issoufou, Boni, and Jonathan have been designated as ECOWAS official mediators for these nations. In Niger, numerous Presidents and former Presidents made unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with the military regime, which outright rejected diplomatic proposals in 2023.

Presidents Bassirou Faye of Senegal and Faure Gnassingbe of Togo have now been designated by the Authority to convince the separatist confederation to retract their decision. In all these instances, FemWise-West Africa has been neglected and disregarded. Given the lack of successful transition to democratic governance in the above countries, it is indeed worthwhile to experiment with the "new" strategy of mediation that FemWise presents, as the "old" one has proven ineffective in recent years. But then, the presence of path dependency complicates the process of altering the pattern or selecting potentially lucrative alternatives (Mahoney, 2000). Additional studies could assess the feasibility and viability of mediation missions headed by Presidents compared to those led by Women in this dynamic landscape.

4.5 Institutional Change: The Way Forward?

One might ask, so what now? Is there any way forward? Fortunately, although research indicates that old informal norms are resistant to gendered change, it is possible to positively re-gender institutions by mobilising informal rules (Beyeler & Annesley, 2011). Although still in its early stages, FI scholars are making strides by offering enhanced interpretations of institutional change that consider agency and enhance understanding of both internal and external factors influencing change. (Mackay, 2011; Thelen et al, 1992). This can play out when gradual changes in institutional power dynamics, such as political alliances and the aggregate impact of small decisions result in major changes over time. One participant also alluded to the view that the status quo can be changed by establishing partnerships with male actors to give them access to the mediation "boys club". Changes could also happen through strategies such as institutional layering, displacement, conversion, and layering (Schickler 2001; Streeck & Thelen 2005; Mahoney & Thelen 2010). Similarly, Mackay (2014) argues that "reforms have also survived where political institutions and actors have been prompted and reprompted to remember their promises by organized women's movement groups" (Mackay, 2014).

The agency of women is considered to be a powerful driver for institutional change as they can drive transformation from within or outside governmental and political institutions albeit the known limitations. Regarding agency, a participant recounted how,

despite the difficulties encountered in executing FemWise-West Africa's mandate and the strained relationship between the Niger junta and ECOWAS, as well as the citizens' anti-ECOWAS demonstrations, they have engaged with Nigeriens from their independent offices to bridge the gap and facilitate pre-talks and dialogue. Notwithstanding their efforts and optimism, they continued to seek assistance, particularly financial help, from the Commission, but they received no assistance, therefore limiting their reach. Nevertheless, it is important to exercise prudence when highlighting women's agency as an excessive focus on it may conceal the institutional context (Waylen, 2011).

The interview participants provided some recommendations on what they think can change to make the Network more effective. These include: a change in mentality as stereotypes are still very much evident and they hamper the full participation of women; support and provision of resources for the country offices for implementing the WPS agenda so the sum of these interventions will have an impact on the regional level; male partners to buy into their vision and help them accomplish it; effective horizontal and vertical connection and coordination across departments in ECOWAS; political will and commitment; and support for the Network and WPS in general by politically appointed women in management level within the organisation.

Consistent with the recommendation of "changing mentality", FI scholars, especially those of discursive institutionalism (DI) propose that ideas and discourses have the capacity to bring about institutional change. They have consistently contended that definitions and the struggle for ideas and meaning are cornerstones of playing politics (Frye 1983, Fraser 1989). This understanding has been utilised in cases where feminist demands were situated within prevailing institutional and political discourses, such as effectively framing the implementation of gender candidate quotas in relation to fairness to overcome resistance to the idea (Freidenvall & Krook, 2011). This demonstrates how institutional contexts influence discourses and how discourses modify certain aspects of the overall institutional environment, albeit not all. DI posits that changes in institutions are primarily driven by changes in ideas and conflicts over the dissemination and acceptance of ideas through discourse (Schmidt 2008). Theoretical analysis suggests that shifts in perspectives

on gender relations might function as active agents for institutional transformation (Mackay, 2011).

5. Conclusion

WMNs are novel initiatives aimed at addressing the gaps in the implementation of UNSCR 1325. Consequently, there is limited literature on them, and no studies have addressed the specific situation in West Africa. The objective of this study was to address the existing gap by presenting FemWise-West Africa and investigating the factors that preclude its ineffectiveness, as guided by FI theory. One core challenge identified is the non-operationalisation of the Network and its Secretariat which has not yet been constituted. This phenomenon is largely attributed to the tension between gender and mediation that is evident in the formal institutions of ECOWAS in which the Network is trapped and continues to challenge for its survival. This phenomenon is coupled with the statist and gendered history of the organisation, which has locked the region onto a path controlled by influential male figures who either adopt or reject policies like the WPS. Therefore, the existence of FemWise-West Africa is bound and nested within this existing gendered institutional history and context that neglects it and thus constraining it from fulfilling its mandates. Consequently, this creates the flawed foundation on which other obstacles such as non-institutionalisation, absence of funding, and language barrier are built.

These findings have been mainly informed by theory and a limited number of interviews, so this research is only a starting point within the broader discourse. Further research including a wider range of viewpoints, especially from within the organisation in order to capture the fine details of the institutional workings and context within which FemWise-West Africa is situated. Ultimately, this paper identifies specific features of institutional structures that can be more easily changed than others which should be taken into account during the design and creation of new structures that support gender equality. Additionally, it is important to keep "prompting" and "reprompting" the new gender structures even after their establishment until they stick.

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Annex 1: MONITORING AND EVALUATION PLAN OF FEMWISE ACTIVITIES (2022 -2024)

| FEMWISE WEST AFRICA GOALS | INDICATORS | MEANS OF VERIFICATION | ASSUMPTIONS |
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| A fully functional network of West African female mediators with professionalized skills and knowledge, operating under the Council of the Wise within the framework of the ECOWAS Peace and Security architecture and APSA | Number of successful activities undertaken with ECOWAS, FemWise-Africa or other partners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission reports • Activity reports | Political will and commitments from ECOWAS, AU and other partners |
| OUTCOMES | INDICATORS | MEANS OF VERIFICATION | ASSUMPTIONS |
| A critical mass of West African women, equipped with professional skills and knowledge, involved in conflict prevention and mediation missions of ECOWAS, AU or undertaking activities with other partners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of missions undertaken with the Council of the Wise • Number of missions undertaken under FemWise Africa • Number of activities undertaken with other departments of ECOWAS or external partners • Number of peace agreements incorporating women's perspectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission reports • Activity reports • Release • Communiqué | <p>Political will and commitments from ECOWAS, FemWise - Africa and other partners;</p> <p>Funding made available to FemWise West Africa</p> |

| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant Representation of women in ECOWAS or AU missions | | |
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| KEY STRATEGIC ACTIONS | INDICATORS | MEANS OF VERIFICATION | ASSUMPTIONS |
| 1. Operationalization of the Network | | | |
| 1.1 Establishment of the Secretariat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work space available • Necessary staff are recruited: coordinator of the secretariat; Administrative and finance Officer; Membership and Accreditation Officer, Training and Capacity building Officer; Deployment and Quick Impact project Officer; Knowledge management and communication Officer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment process is launched and completed by ECOWAS • Staff have signed their contracts • Staff are given the necessary equipment and guidance to work | Financial resources and technical expertise are available |
| 1.2 Develop Terms of Reference for the Steering Committee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The secretariat finalizes the terms of reference and submit them to the DPA and ECOWAS Commission | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FemWise West Africa Records | DPA and ECOWAS Commission commit to the process |
| 1.3 Develop Terms of Reference for the Sub-Committees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The secretariat finalizes the terms of reference, submit them to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FemWise West Africa Records | The Steering Committee, DPA and ECOWAS |

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| | Steering Committee, the DPA and ECOWAS Commission | | Commission commit to the process |
| 1.4 The General Assembly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The secretariat finalizes the terms of reference submit them to Steering Committee, the DPA and ECOWAS Commission | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FemWise West Africa Records | The Steering Committee, DPA and ECOWAS Commission commit to the process |
| 1.5 Membership Drive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> key institutional documents are circulated to FemWise West Africa Members: Code of Conduct, Standard Operating Procedures, Communication and Visibility/Roadmap for implementation; Knowledge management Plan; and Monitoring and Communication Plan Build the roster: collect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members take cognizance of the documents Questionnaires sent to Members and feedback collected Technicalities of the roster are discussed with relevant stakeholders Roster is functional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FemWise West Africa Records | Collaboration from Members Funding is available for the technical aspects of the roster |

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| data and information on technical capacities and expertise of members | | | |
| 2. Support in the establishment of national FemWise Chapters | | | |
| 2.1 Identification of key ministries/authorities in charge of the FemWise national chapters (15) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team for the coordination of the national chapters identified and engaged • Meetings and exchange between FemWise West Africa Secretariat and coordination team | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records • Reports • communication | <p>National authorities in each country show political will and commit to the process</p> <p>Collaboration from members and women's networks</p> |
| 2.2 Compile background information peace and stability for each country | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background information on each country is available | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background reports | <p>Collaboration from national authorities, members and women's networks</p> |
| 2.3 Mapping of sources of potential financial and technical support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X of Donors identified and successfully engaged • Meetings and exchanges | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records • MoUs | <p>Donors have interest in conflict prevention and mediation</p> |
| 2.4 Engagement with local and national partners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National stakeholders engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records | <p>Commitment from national</p> |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings and exchanges | | stakeholders |
| 3. Strategic involvement in relevant meetings of ECOWAS and other networks and partners | | | |
| 3.1 Engage ECOWAS Commission and the DPA on attendance to key meetings relevant to the FemWise West Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Steering Committee engage ECOWAS and express interest • Dates of relevant meetings are spotted and included on the annual agenda of FemWise West Africa • Invitation to attend is received | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records • Release • Communiqué • Reports • Interviews | Commitment from the ECOWAS Commission |
| 3.2 Engage other identified Networks and Partners for involvement in key international conferences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steering committee and secretariat spot the relevant events and engage relevant organizations • X Number of Network or partners successfully engaged • X Number of Joint activities • X number of invitations received | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records • Reports • Press release • Interview • Documentary | Commitment from the Steering Committee and the Secretariat |
| 4. Deployment of West Africa Members in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECOWAS conflict prevention and mediation missions with the Council of the Wise • AU conflict prevention and mediation missions with FemWise Africa | | | |
| 4.1 Deployment in missions of the with the Council of the Wise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitations to attend missions • Women's specific | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report of the mission • Release • Communiqué | Political will from ECOWAS and financial support is |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> concerns and contributions are taken in consideration Representation of women Number of missions undertaken | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge management platform updated with documentation | made available to FemWise West Africa |
| 4.2 Deployment in AU missions under the banner of FemWise Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invitation to attend missions Women's specific concerns and contributions Representation of women Number of missions undertaken | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report of the mission Release Communiqué Knowledge management platform updated with documentation | Political will from AU and financial support is made available to FemWise West Africa |
| 5. Initiatives of FemWise West Africa (Activities independent from the Council of the Wise) | | | |
| .1 Organize regional events for grassroots women's organizations in West Africa working on conflict prevention and | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners and sponsors identified Number of Events organized | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reports Press Release Communications of participants Knowledge | <p>Availability of funding</p> <p>Collaboration from grassroots women's organization</p> |

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| mediation at grassroots levels | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of the attendance | management platform updated with documentation | Support from ECOWAS Commission |
| 5.2. Organize regional West Africa fora on women's involvement and contributions in conflict prevention and mediation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners and sponsors identified • Number of Events organized • Quality of the attendance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports • Press Release • Communications of participants • Knowledge management platform updated with documentation | Availability of funding Support from ECOWAS Commission |
| .2 Organized regional lessons learned and experience sharing workshop | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners and sponsors identified • Number of Events organized • Quality of the attendance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports • Press Release • Communications of participants • Knowledge management platform updated with documentation | Availability of funding Support from ECOWAS Commission |
| .3 Undertake annual publications on women in conflict prevention and mediation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for papers and selection of contributors • Methodological workshop organized • Draft papers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme records • Knowledge products are published • Knowledge management platform updated with documentation | Availability of funding Collaboration from members and external |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Editorial committee • Publications released | • | contributors |
| 6. Training and Capacity building activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake training needs assessments • Training on ECOWAS peace and Security Architecture • Trainings on other relevant topics | | | |
| 6.1 Undertake Training needs assessments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires designed and sent to members • Feedback on questionnaires is available and compiled • Training needs and gaps are identified | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports | Commitment from the secretariat Collaboration from national chapters of FemWise |
| 6.2 organize trainings on ECOWAS peace and security architecture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training manual and resources are available • Members successfully complete trainings • Number of trainings successfully organized | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report • Press release | Commitment from ECOWAS Commission and the secretariat Collaboration from national chapters of FemWise Funding available |
| 6.3 Organize regional Training and capacity building workshops on conflict prevention, mediation and | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners and sponsors identified • Number of Events successfully organized | Reports Press release | Commitment from ECOWAS Commission and the secretariat |

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| cross-cutting topics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of the attendance • Availability of Training manual and other resources | | Collaboration from national chapters of FemWise Funding available |
| 7. Strategic Engagement with partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership building • Resources mobilization | | | |
| 7.1 Partnership building | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners are identified and engaged • Communication and exchange with the partners • Signed agreements or MoUs • Number of partners engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports • Records • MoUs | Commitment from the Steering Committee and the Secretariat Support from ECOWAS |
| 7.2 Resource mobilization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donors identified and engaged • Communication and exchange with donors • X amount of funding raised • Other resources mobilized • X number of activities organized • X number of Signed agreements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records • Reports • Release • MoUs | Commitment from the Steering Committee and the Secretariat Support from ECOWAS |
| 8. Knowledge management system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The knowledge management strategy is disseminated to members • Documentation on conflict prevention and mediation is generated from the member states through the national chapters of FemWise • A culture of learning and sharing is promoted | | | |

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| 8.1 The knowledge management strategy is disseminated to members of the Network | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document is shared • Training on knowledge management is provided to members • Members attend training and provide feedback on the document, the tools and platforms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and exchanges • Report of trainings • Release • Presentations | <p>Funding is available</p> <p>Commitment from members</p> |
| 8.2 Documentation on conflict prevention and mediation is generated from the member states through the national chapters of FemWise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X number of documents shared • X number of papers/Brief/reports produced by members | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records • Reports • Papers, briefs | <p>Commitments from members and from FemWise National chapters</p> |
| 8.3 Tools and platforms are in place for exchange, sharing of experiences and learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online platform exists and is functional • Online tool exists and is functional • X number of information shared • X of members who share experience • X of opportunities for learning • Quality and relevance of information shared | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring report on the use of the tools and platforms • Assessment on the efficiency of the tools and platforms | <p>Commitments from the Secretariat</p> <p>Collaboration from Members</p> |
| 8.4 A culture of learning and | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of awards to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports • Awarding events | |

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| sharing is promoted | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> motivate members An enabling environment exists with tools and opportunities available Members are motivated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awards | |
| 9.Communication and visibility plan | | | |
| 9.1 Ensure visibility of the activities of the Network | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Network has a logo on all its documents and supports The Network has advocacy materials such as leaflets, flyers, etc. A permanent presence on social media An updated website fed with relevant information Knowledge products and information are disseminated on the knowledge management tools and platforms and are used Presence on broadcast and print media The Network get partnerships and sponsors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Documents and supports Number of advocacy materials created and disseminated Frequency of usage of the social media Number topics discussed on social media Frequency of traffic on the website Number of visitors on the website Number of documentations disseminated and used Number of articles and press release Number of MoU signed Amount of funding raised Number of sponsors Number of media houses writing on | <p>Necessary joint partnership s are established</p> <p>Necessary funding is available</p> <p>Commitme nt from the Secretariat</p> <p>Donors, partners and other networks involve FemWise in their activities;</p> <p>Commitme nt from national chapters</p> |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attendance of media houses to the media forum• Network activities features well on print and broadcast media | FemWise West Africa | |
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