



**WEST AFRICA NETWORK
FOR PEACEBUILDING**
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR PEACE

Gender CONNECT

BUILDING INCLUSIVE
DEMOCRACIES:
TOWARD DIVERSIFIED APPROACHES
TO ENHANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
IN WEST AFRICA.



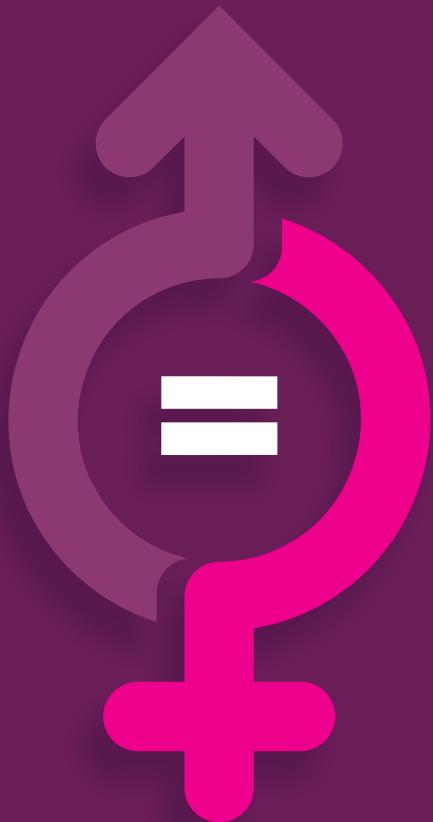


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Building Inclusive Democracies: Toward Diversified Approaches to Enhancing Women's Leadership and Political Participation in West Africa

Introduction

Women's political participation in West Africa has seen slow but gradual progress in recent years.¹ Notably, advancements in legal frameworks, particularly the adoption of quota and parity laws in majority of countries, have contributed to improved representation of women in decision making.² Complementary frameworks, such as National Action Plans (NAPs) on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325), have also supported efforts to promote women's inclusive participation in governance, peace and security.³ Despite this progress, numerous structural and systemic challenges continue to impede the full realization of women's leadership and political participation. From socio-cultural norms and gender-based violence to economic barriers, women across the region face a range of obstacles in accessing political life.

This edition of Gender Connect⁴ explores various approaches to overcoming the challenges faced by women in political life across the West African region. It draws on existing literature and insights from the Gender Talk series⁵ held on June 30, 2025, under the theme "Leadership and Political Participation of Women in West Africa." The article is structured around three main sections: an overview of progress made since the adoption of the UNSCR 1325, the challenges to women's leadership and political engagement, and a concluding section that offers recommendations for diversified strategies to strengthen women's roles and influence in politics.

Progress in Women's Political Participation in West Africa

Most countries in West Africa have demonstrated commitment to promoting gender inclusivity in political spaces. Currently, 11 out of 15 countries in the region have either adopted quota systems or parity laws to boost women's participation and representation in decision-making processes (see table on next page).

¹ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Second Edition 2024). *Women's Political Participation-Africa Barometer*. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-07/womens-political-participation-africa-barometer-2024.pdf>

²UN Women (2021). *Promoting Women's Political Participation: From Quotas To Parity: A Guide to Legal Options for the West and Central Africa Region*.

https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Africa/Attachments/Publications/2021/12/20211220_UN%20WOMEN%20legal%20guide_office.print.pdf

³ECOWAS (2022). *Baseline Assessment Report on the Status of the WPS Agenda In West Africa*. <https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Baseline-Assessment-Report-on-the-Status-of-the-WPS-Agenda-in-West-Africa-English-Version.pdf>

⁴ "Gender Connect" is the electronic publication of WANEP's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. It addresses emerging WPS issues in West Africa by providing in-depth analysis to guide public policies towards gender-responsive peace and governance processes

⁵ Virtual discussion platform created by WANEP in 2022 to discuss peace and security issues from a gender perspective that considers the specific needs of men and women in conflict prevention and management efforts.

Table 1: Women's Representation in National Parliaments

Country	Legislated target for women's representation	Current representation of women in national parliaments
Benin	24/109 (Reserved Seats)	26,6%
Burkina Faso	30%	18,3%
Cape Verde	40%	44,4%
Côte d'Ivoire	30%	13,4%
The Gambia	No legislated target	8,6%
Ghana	30%	14,5%
Guinea	50%	29,6%
Guinea-Bissau	36%	9,8%
Liberia	No legislated target	11,0%
Mali	30%	30,1%
Niger	25%	19,6%
Nigeria	No legislated target	3,9%
Senegal	50%	41,2%
Sierra Leone	30%	29,5%
Togo	No legislated target	15,0%

Data Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union; supplemented by secondary desk research

Among these countries, Senegal and Guinea have taken further steps by setting explicit targets for gender parity in both elected and appointed positions. Benin has adopted a legislated system of reserved seats for women in parliament (24/109). These legal reforms have led to notable gains in women's representation in national parliaments, as evidenced by countries such as: Cape Verde (44.4%), Senegal (42.2%), Guinea (29.6%), Guinea-Bissau (29.5%) and Benin (26.6%, surpassing its target)⁶. In contrast, four countries - The Gambia, Liberia, Nigeria, and Togo still have not adopted any form of affirmative action legislation to promote women's leadership in politics (see table 1).

Other frameworks have also contributed to advancing women's leadership in the region. One key example is the National Action Plans (NAPs) on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 that have been helpful in setting priorities, outlining concrete actions, and coordinating efforts towards inclusive governance, peace and security processes. Fourteen countries in West Africa have developed NAPs on UNSCR 1325 (see figure 1).

⁶ IPU Parline (2025). Global Data on National Parliaments, Benin. <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/BJ/BJ-LC01/data-on-women/>

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Figure 1: 14 Countries in West Africa with National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 with Year of Adoption of the 1st NAP



Data Source: ECOWAS and WANEP Baseline Assessment Report on WPS Status in West Africa, visualised by WANEP

While some countries are in the stage of developing their second NAPs, others, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo have gone ahead with the development of their 3rd NAPs, demonstrating a sustained commitment to prioritizing women's leadership and participation in decision-making.

Despite these developments, women across the region continue to face deep-rooted structural barriers that hinder their full access to political life and decision-making spaces.

Challenges to Women's Leadership and Political Participation

Across the region, several deeply entrenched socio-cultural, institutional, and economic challenges continue to undermine the emergence and effectiveness of women leaders across West Africa. These challenges include among others:

Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender-Based Violence (GBV):

In many communities, persistent stereotypes and traditional norms continue to shape negative perceptions of women's candidacies among both voters and political actors. These attitudes diminish women's self-confidence and perpetuate a political culture that favors men. Moreover, gender-based violence, particularly in its modern forms such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and doxxing⁷, has emerged as a targeted strategy to discredit women in politics and erode their public trust. Despite the growing prevalence of these tactics, few countries have enacted or enforced robust legal frameworks to protect women in political spaces or to hold perpetrators accountable.

Inequitable Access to Public Media:

Women candidates often receive significantly less media exposure than their male counterparts, and when they do, their coverage tends to be superficial, or gender biased. Frequently sidelined in political debates and media discourse, women struggle to establish visibility, credibility, and a strong leadership image in the public sphere.

Dominant Influence of Political Parties:

Political parties often serve as gatekeepers to political power, and many women who attain office through party support may feel compelled to prioritize party loyalty over advancing broader gender equality agendas. This allegiance can dilute their commitment to transformative platforms such as the Women, Peace, and Security agenda or national gender equity frameworks, particularly when these objectives conflict with party interests.

⁷ Doxing, or doxxing, is an abbreviation derived from the English term "dropping docs," which means "to drop documents" or "to release information." In the 1990s, the term originated at a time when hackers (always operating under pseudonyms) would reveal documents and information about their rivals as a form of personal attack.

*Building Inclusive Democracies: Toward Diversified Approaches to Enhancing Women's Leadership and Political Participation in West Africa***Lack of Institutional and Social Support Systems:**

Many women leaders face isolation once elected or appointed, often operating without access to mentoring, training, or strategic support systems that would enable them to exercise effective leadership. The absence of solidarity from civil society, particularly women's organizations, further compounds their vulnerability to political marginalization and weakens their capacity to drive gender-responsive governance.

Financial Barriers:

Economic constraints remain one of the main obstacles to women's political participation. The high costs associated with campaigning, such as mobilization, media outreach, and constituency engagement, often exceed the financial means of many women, discouraging them from running for office altogether. Those who do enter the race may struggle to compete on equal footing, limiting their outreach and diminishing their electoral viability.

Advancing Women's Leadership and Political Participation: Leveraging Complimentary Strategies

While quota and parity systems and National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325 represent significant strides toward women's representation in decision making, they alone are not sufficient to dismantle the structural barriers that continue to restrict women's access to decision-making and political life. To effectively address these challenges, it is essential to adopt a range of complementary strategies that do not only promote access but also ensures that women are empowered to exercise meaningful influence in decision-making processes. Key intervention strategies could focus on:

Capacity Building and Mentoring:

- Establishing structured mentoring mechanisms for women and young women aspiring to political office, drawing inspiration from the career paths of experienced women leaders;
- Creating sustained dialogue platforms for elected women, to clarify the expectations of their roles, assess their capacity needs, and provide ongoing technical support;

Advocacy and Policy Engagements:

- Engaging in targeted advocacy to promote the adoption and enforcement of legal frameworks that protect and support women in political spaces;
- Conducting awareness and educational campaigns to deconstruct gender stereotypes and challenge discriminatory social norms that shape perceptions of women in leadership;
- Advocate for an improved access of women candidates to influential media platforms, enabling greater visibility, credibility, and public engagement;
- Introducing public funding mechanisms for women candidates, particularly those running as independents. A promising example can be seen in Ghana, where during the 2024 elections, filing fees were reduced by 25% for women and persons with disabilities, encouraging broader participation in the electoral process.⁸
- Promote data driven advocacy by identifying gender gaps in the electoral cycle and producing gender-sensitive analytical reports to foster political reforms.

Leveraging Local Level Elections:

Frequently overshadowed by legislative and presidential elections, local elections nevertheless present a critical and underexploited opportunity to accelerate women's political participation. They offer a practical entry point for women into the political arena and serve as a powerful platform for leadership development. Several factors make local elections particularly strategic in this regard:

- Greater number of positions available: Local elections typically involve a larger pool of seats compared to national elections, increasing the likelihood of women being elected;
- Lower financial barriers: The costs associated with running for local elections are generally lower than those of national contests, making it more accessible for women, who often face financial constraints;
- Closer proximity to constituents: Local governance allows women to engage directly with communities, understand their everyday concerns, and demonstrate their leadership capacity in a tangible way. This connection with the local communities is key to building trust, visibility, and acquire experience in political life.

These steps are crucial in the process of developing female political leadership and preparing them to run for higher positions. A bottom-up, pyramidal approach, starting with local offices and gradually progressing toward higher levels of authority, can serve as a pivotal stepping-stone in the political careers of women.

⁸ Nii Ayikwei Okine (2024). EC announces 25% filing fee waiver for women, persons with disabilities. <https://citnewsroom.com/2024/07/ec-announces-25-filing-fee-waiver-for-women-persons-with-disabilities/>

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Conclusion

Despite progress in advancing women's political participation in West Africa, significant structural and systemic barriers continue to hinder the full realization of women's leadership in politics. Deeply rooted socio-cultural norms, gender-based violence, and persistent economic inequalities are challenges that women across the region navigate in accessing political arena.

Effectively addressing these multifaceted barriers requires diversified strategies that extend beyond legal instruments to confront the barriers that restrict leadership and political participation for women. This includes investing in women's political capacity and economic empowerment, strengthening protections against gender-based violence, and reshaping social norms through sustained advocacy and public education.

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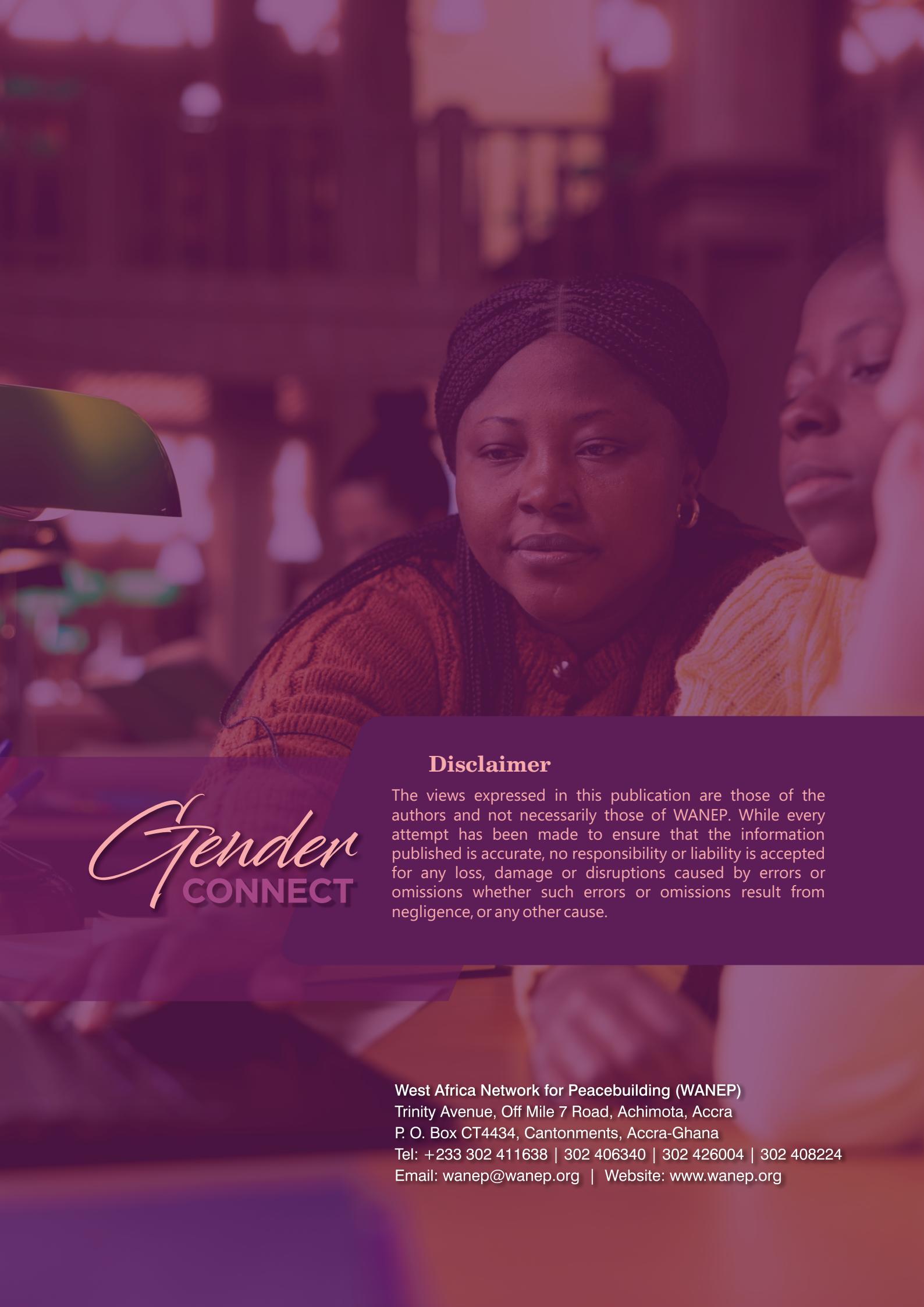
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