

Examining the Life of  
Women in

# Western Africa



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## **Introduction**

In 1979, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). For nearly three decades, CEDAW and the participating countries have forged new grounds by generating equality through the empowerment of women. All states that ratified CEDAW pledged to uphold and implement the actions set forth by the convention. However, in a culturally and ethnically diverse area, such as West Africa, these changes have proven to be difficult to achieve. To date, twenty-two West African nations have sanctioned CEDAW and sixteen states have submitted country reports on their progress. Without a doubt, this is immense progress for these nations, however gender equality and human rights prove to be illusive throughout the countries.

Due to the region's immense social, political and economic diversity, this paper will focus on the successful and deficient fields as portrayed in the country reports and the shadow reports provided by the International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAW). The obstructions that West African women face are evident from the evaluations of governmental and nongovernmental accounts; through a cross-examination, distinct areas of concern are exposed. This report highlights these regional trends, focusing on governmental policy, women in politics, access to education, health care, and women's role in economics. In addition, sociocultural factors from a *mélange* of cultures contribute to violence against women and a plethora of daily struggles for the women of West Africa. These areas of concern are addressed with special attention to the implementation and practice of women's rights through the lens of CEDAW.

## Daily Life

The daily lives of women in West Africa are very complex due to prevailing religious and traditional beliefs. Typical days are filled with caring for their children, cooking, cleaning, farming, fetching water and practicing their religious traditions. These time consuming tasks often leave women with little time to start up a small business with micro loans or seek a formal education. The development process surrounding African women is hindered by these stereotypical roles, which prevents them from entering the formal sector of society. Thus, CEDAW and West African governments strive to implement laws to move women in a positive direction of future development and empowerment.

Religion plays an influential role in the decision-making process in West Africa. Ethnic and religious traditions perpetuate the systems of patriarchy, which serve as barriers to women, especially in regards to access to education and political rights within a community. Islam, for example, is a prevalent religion in West Africa that has specific fundamental tenants for a woman's role in society (CEDAW, Gambia 2005). Undeniably, religion and tradition have immense weight on a government's ability to improve the conditions and understanding between genders. And as religion and social governance blend, the role of separating these cultural customs clearly becomes more difficult, especially in regards to implement laws that alter the engendered roles of women.

The social construction of numerous West African countries have made it so appear women of less importance than men. From the day of birth, female and male children lead different paths through life since their opportunities and overall treatment are disparate. Women are oppressed and exploited through traditional roles while men are given political and economic opportunities to advance in society. Economically, these traditional roles also devalue women's

work because their work is not associated with cash exchange. Instead, the daily survival of the majority West African women is dependant subsistence farming and reciprocity exchange. However, in a world that only values cash exchange, the participation of women is further marginalized due to their role in the informal sector (Beneria, 136).

Marriage is regarded as the initial step into womanhood and will determine the rest of a woman's life and her opportunities outside of the home. Marriage comes at a very young age and is accompanied by the full responsibility of their household and family. According to the civil code of many African states, mutual consent is a requirement for any marriage to be considered valid, however many customary or traditional laws do not recognize these new laws. For example, in Equatorial Guinea, discriminatory practices such as the dowry system, polygamy and early marriage are prohibited by law but habitually preformed (CEDAW 2004). The lack of regulation and enforcement has established a trend of contradiction in West African governments.

A common source of difficulty for numerous West African governments is the discrepancies between marriage in urban and rural areas. Reports from states and IWRAW both confirm that there are laws that pertain to civil unions, however, rural communities are unaware or unaffected by these laws. In regards to marriage, this trend is problematic because customary unions are the norm in rural areas. An example of this is a law in Equatorial Guinea that states that the minimum age for marriage is 18, but the law is primarily implemented in urban communities (CEDAW 2004). This leaves little or no regulation of customary marriages, including practices such as pre-arranged marriages, early marriages, and the dowry system, despite their discriminatory nature towards women.

Polygamy is another gender-biased practice that is prevalent across the multi-ethnic region of West Africa. According to the CEDAW convention, polygamy is a mechanism of discrimination because the practice increases the abandonment of women, reduces their access to resources within the family, and perpetuates systems of patriarchy within the realm of marriage (CEDAW Senegal 1994). This creates tension between the West African states who have ratified the convention and CEDAW itself because many West Africans regard “polygamy as an integral and valid part of the customary system” (CEDAW Equatorial Guinea 2004). Thus, in lieu of creating legislation against polygamy, many states simply report that, “While polygamy was not encouraged and entailed many legal complications it was difficult to abolish simply by enacting a law” (CEDAW Senegal 1994).

Due to the prevailing customs across West Africa, women are widely regarded as inferior to men. Generally, women are valued for their reproductive roles, but their everyday contributions of women are largely overlooked. In West Africa, women spend their time in the domestic sphere tending to the children, taking care of the home, as well as cultivating food for their daily consumption. While some men work in agriculture as cash-crop farmers, “nearly all tasks connected with food production for the family continue to be left to the women” (Boserup, 16). This results in a widespread lack of recognition of women’s work, making the everyday contributions of women invisible. In all, the identity of West African women is influenced by traditional and cultural practices continue to constrain women despite current efforts to ameliorate discrimination against women.

## **Political Trends & Difficulties in West Africa**

This analysis of the political trends throughout West Africa investigates the governmental achievements of the countries based upon their compliance to the CEDAW articles, with particular attention to:

- Article 1: Definition of Discrimination against Women
- Article 3: Equality in Political, Social, Economic, and Cultural Fields
- Article 7: Equality in Political and Public Life
- Article 8: International Representation and Participation
- Article 15: Equality Before the Law and in Civil Matters

Noticeably, Article 1 stands out as the sole article without explicit language of governance or political participation. This is because Article 1 sets the tone for a country's report as to how discrimination against women is defined in their Constitution. As Gambia's report accurately proclaims, "Article 1 of the convention is of paramount importance as it gives the definition of what constitutes 'discrimination against women'" (CEDAW Article 1). This represents how a country stipulates "discrimination against women" sets the tone for the distinctions, exclusions, or restrictions based upon sex is interpreted by the country's legal system. Thus, Article 1 is the catalyst for the success of the other CEDAW articles due to how it illuminates all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field should be perceived.

The other four articles identify accompanying concepts that are crucial for the global empowerment of women. These combined five articles advocate for political refinement that support and ensure laws that grant protection from gender discrimination, such as provisions for

adoption, marriage, divorce, burial, devolution of property on death or other matters of personal law (CEDAW Gambia 2005). However, the scale of West Africa's progress towards enacting the CEDAW articles in practice is limited due to the number of countries that have not ratified CEDAW or submitted a country report. In the region of West Africa, only sixteen of the twenty-two assigned countries have ratified CEDAW and produced country reports.

Across West Africa, there is a prevalence of constitutional amendments that support the political participation of women. These textual improvements pledge to advance policies and enable the political involvement of their female population. Broadly speaking, these Constitutional revisions say, "Women, regardless of their marital status, have equal rights and opportunities with men, before the law, in all spheres of public, private and family life, in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural fields" (CEDAW Equatorial Guinea, 2004). Reassuringly, all countries that have ratified CEDAW have made these constitutional amendments known in their country reports. While these declarations of gender equality are an immense step towards progress, it is important to note that these are words set into motion from an international force external to West African countries.

In numerous shadow reports, NGOs and participating organizations have shared these governments' concerns over the foreign nature of CEDAW articles. They acknowledge the difficulties in translating global governance and constitutional legislation into social change, however they maintain that, "mere adjustments to the language of the law is not sufficient, thus making the exclusion of women from the decision-making process an area of Critical Concern" (IWRAW Sierra Leon, 2007). Even though many West African countries are commended for their statistics that show a positive trend of women's participation in the political arena, most still receive criticism in shadow reports. By the CEDAW standards, these countries are held to the



standard of equality stated in Article 3 and 7, which declares the government must strive for equality in the percentage of women holding governmental seats, not just a mere increase in numbers.

As the ideals of CEDAW are evolving into change throughout West Africa, governments are openly acknowledging the cultural and social obstructions that serve as hindrances to progress. Namibia, Mauritania, Niger, Gambia, Sierra Leon, Equatorial Guinea, Benin, and Angola are the countries that have discussed such barriers in their country. Some of their country reports only provide vague information as to how cultural traditions or social stereotypes affect anti-discriminatory laws, while others divulge detailed lists as a testimony to their efforts. Angola, for example simply states, “Although it is not openly admitted, sex discrimination is certainly felt in practice” (CEDAW, 2004). In contrast, Benin asserts that the small proportion of women in the main decision-making bodies is due to several factors, which include the following:

- Inadequate awareness among women of the need to fight for their participation in the political running of the country;
- Women’s lack of self-confidence;
- The weight of tradition;
- Resistance or suspicion on the part of men in face of their wives’ political activities; and
- Participation in politics today calls for financial means that are generally not available to women.

Due to the range of elaboration between country reports, the shadow reports of these countries also reflect a range of suggestions as to how a country with sociocultural barriers can achieve gender equality in the political field. A popular proposition is integrating rural women into the

campaign for political participation. This effort must be combined with education projects and local organizations to consolidate efforts into a specific direction.

An undesirable side effect that follows a government's confirmation of sociocultural issues is the tendency to rely on non-governmental groups. It is without doubt that developing national programs and projects is a daunting task, however it remains the obligation of a government to ensure such adjustments are being put into practice. Cameroon's country report reflects this position, saying, "The question of the advancement of women is not the responsibility of the Government alone. Thus, alongside the public institutions, there exist numerous private organizations established as a result of the liberalization of political, cultural and economic life" (CEDAW, 2000). Such statements seem to embrace public and private organizations for collaborative efforts, however this position also has the potential to reallocate responsibility when results prove to fall short. This should be addressed as an area of concern because the duty to implement change is accepted by the government when they ratified CEDAW as a nation seeking gender equality.

Perhaps the most alarming shared attribute is the blatant acknowledgment of legislation that undermines women's ability to become equal members of their society. Niger and the Gambia are two West African countries that are active participants of CEDAW and yet they still preserve legislation that hinders the rights and respect of their female citizens. For example, in Niger's legal and political section, the government reports, "Under the country's legal system, there are three categories of norms including norms on individual human rights: being the Napoleonic Civil Code; the stipulation that the jurisdiction of customary law shall apply provided that they are not contrary to public policy and to the free exercise of the rights of the individual and family; and Islamic law" (CEDAW, 2007). Initially, it appears as if Niger's

political code still aligns with the articles of CEDAW, however the statement is quickly followed by the disclaimer, “to these three categories of norms, issues concerning women and the family are surrounded by uncertainty because of the inherently negotiable nature of custom” (CEDAW, 2007). The legislation of the Gambia includes a policy allowance for Islamic law through their Cadi Courts, which has separate jurisdiction over matters relating to the personal law of Muslims. In a question and answer dialogue between CEDAW committee members and representatives of the Gambian government, the prevalence of patriarchal values, traditional norms, and cultural practices were addressed because despite numerous bureaus and councils established for women, they “continue to constrain women’s roles in the decision-making processes, both within the household and their limited public spheres” (CEDAW, 2005). This further illustrates how Muslim personal status law, Sharia and tribal customary laws sustain discrimination according to sex, property ownership, or social status (CEDAW Question & Answer Gambia, 2005). By permitting these separate areas of jurisdiction over societal laws, Niger and the Gambia disclose their political and social reservations against the full implementation of CEDAW. In addition to negating their agreement of Articles 1, 3, 7, and 15, these policies have resulted in the condemnation from NGOs who bear witness to the “few efforts to adhere to CEDAW concerning legislative measures due to their lack of adoption of laws against all forms of violence and discrimination toward women” (IWRAW Niger, 2007). Thus, Niger and the Gambia stand as faulty models of CEDAW parties due to their contradictory policy of constitutionally upholding discriminatory practices.

In summary, the sixteen of the West African states who have ratified CEDAW and submitted country reports have demonstrated, at minimum, the desire for gender inequality by adjusting the language and laws within their constitutions. Countries like Sierra Leon, Cameroon, and Mauritania, have created separate ministries, taskforces, and government

sponsored projects aimed at the mobilization of women for participation in politics and empowerment. However, shadow reports illuminate the remaining engendered issues such as, disproportionate percentage of governmental seats, lack of political programs in rural areas, and prevailing cultural stereotypes. The consensus from country reports and shadow reports is the need for mechanisms that will allow a government who values the articles of CEDAW to accommodate change in regions with wide spread cultural and religions traditions. Thus, West Africa remains an area entrenched with disparities between policy, implementation, and practice.

## **Education**

Article 10 of the CEDAW convention addresses education of the states in hope of bringing equality through education and literacy to the forefront of importance. There are several types of education within these countries: formal, non-formal, and informal. Formal education is organized into four levels: basic education, secondary education, higher education and professional training. Basic education includes primary school and preschool, age's three to six. These first years of school focus on stimulating the child at the psycho-affective, sensory-motor and cognitive levels and on preparing him/her to cope well with future schooling. Children typically attend primary school from age's seven to twelve, although schooling is now normally compulsory up to age sixteen. Secondary education is for students thirteen to nineteen and includes general, technical, professional, and liberal arts education. Higher education is done at the college level throughout Western Africa where facilities exist; graduation is rewarded with a diploma and hope. Lastly, professional training involves acquiring specialized knowledge of a trade such as woodworking, sculpting, or dancing.

Non-formal education involves all educational and training activities that are structured and organized outside of a school setting. It aids youth who seek training if they have not been successful in the formal education system or if they have had to leave school early due to

pregnancy or family duties. In Burkina Faso there are a few organizations that provide professional and managerial training; operation ZANU is a large scale community program that seeks to strengthen literacy, socioeconomic advancement and development at the village level (CEDAW 2005).

Informal education is loosely acquired through family, social groups, the media, associations, community, and daily life. This type of education can also include learning trades such as: basket weaving, batik, and sewing. Most states in Western Africa struggle with sociocultural norms that put limitations on girls and push them into sects of education that focus on handiwork. High value is placed on the male child based on stereotypical perceptions of males as decision makers, head of the home and to critical links in the patrilineal system for sustaining continuity in the family lineage. In Cameroon this idea is entrenched in the Islamized regions where sending girls to school is regarded as undermining traditional and moral values. This has had negative effects on the desire for investment in the overall development of girls. As a result, girls are often denied education, proper nutrition and health care as they are expected to marry off. This may not be fertile grounds for investments, because of this preference boys have a higher enrollment rate than girls at all levels of education in all 16 West African nations that have ratified CEDAW.

**Primary School Enrollment Rates (according to CEDAW reports):**

Niger: 20.63%	Namibia: 47.2%
Gambia: 28.6%	Ghana: 50%
Burkina Faso:36.2%	Angola: 56.5%
Senegal: 42%	Nigeria: 60%
Mali: 44.5%	Benin: 64.69%
Cameroon: 46%	Gabon: 100%

The lack of resources for supplies and teachers fees, lack of birth certificates that allow girls to sign up for school, curricula that fail to meet the basic educational needs of the girls in terms of cultural values, and socio-cultural norms (exploitation) that require girls to help their mothers with housework and farming also keep many girls from continuing past or completing primary school. According to CEDAW there are many challenges to keeping girls enrolled in school. Primary school is compulsory up to the age of sixteen in most countries, Burkina Faso, Gabon and Namibia included. Unfortunately, girls often drop out much earlier than that. The right to access education applies equally to boys and to girls, however more barriers keep girls away from continuing school, including teenage pregnancy, lack of access to school for rural families, and prostitution.

Girls must be kept in school past primary level. The higher the education level the lower female enrollment levels are in all of West Africa. Practices that have sought to keep girls in school include scholarships, prizes for best results, like bikes to get them to class. There are also programs that encourage girls to return after giving birth, such as Gambia's "Scholarship Trust Fund for Girls". Projects initiated in Benin include: "The Children's Learning and Equity Foundation", "Women's and Girls' Rights", and "Let's Send Our Daughters to School" which is in collaboration with the Peace Corps(CEDAW Benin, 2005). Programs like these hope to convince the national community of the need to educate girls in West Africa, lower drop out and under-enrollment rates associated with socioeconomic and socio-cultural factors, eliminate all forms of prejudice, and to encourage a change in mentality and stereotypes. They hope to make families aware of the advantage of education, to keep pregnant girls in school, and to extend the age of admission for girls in areas where enrollment is low. The states of West Africa must

introduce education into family life in order to reduce early pregnancies, and to minimize wastage by improving attendance among girls.

In order to compensate for lack of resources in poor households many states are implementing laws that provide necessities in order to raise enrollment levels for girls in primary school. The Constitution of Benin states in Article 13 that “The state provides for the education of youth in public schools. Primary education is compulsory. The State progressively introduces non-fee-paying public education” (CEDAW, 2005). The government of Benin decided to adopt compensatory measures by supplying free equipment including chalk, school furniture, uniforms, shoes and books to rural schools. Guinea has failed to provide statistics about their enrollment rates under the precursor that they are making many improvements, renovations, and are currently starting up many new projects that will aid in the advancement of women in school. These advances are necessary to raise awareness of the importance for girls to attend school. Too often girls are not taking advantage of the aid that is provided in rural areas.

The topic of ‘family education’ must be addressed because it is often the lack thereof that explains why parents do not embrace or enforce attendance to formal schooling for their children. At the socio-cultural level, parents instill in their daughters attitudes and standards intended to prepare them for the role of wife and mother. These ideals cause girls to deflect from their school careers and expose to early pregnancy and/or undesired marriage. Family life education is incorporated into formal and non-formal education so stereotypes must be broken down within the family realm in order to make advancement within the educational sphere.

Illiteracy is the scourge of socioeconomic development and it runs rampant in Western Africa. Many programs have been developed for adults who never attended school, but despite efforts, women only account for 11% of the people who attend courses offered by literacy

centers (CEDAW Mali, 2006). Many women do not participate because of an excess burden of chores that fill their day, a husbands' reluctance to allow them to attend, cultural restrictions, or extreme poverty. Among women living in rural areas, the illiteracy rate runs as high as 92% (CEDAW Niger, 2007).

Low literacy rates are explained by course curriculum that is often not tailored to women's needs, excessive workloads in rural areas, unequal divisions of labor, a lack of teaching materials, and a woman's inability to afford them. Women often have many closely spaced pregnancies so they are not free to take classes because of obligation. Low literacy rates are linked to the neglect of education for girls according to Gambia's CEDAW report. The Government of Cameroon is making efforts to provide access to basic education for all, but illiteracy rates are still high with serious disparities between regions, urban and rural areas, and between age groups. In Ghana, "The School for Life" is contributing to reducing the number of potentially illiterate women and is preparing girls to join mainstream schools at appropriate times (CEDAW, 2006). States are now beginning to see that in order for women's rights and needs to be met, they must first recognize that knowledge comes from literacy and education which will then lead to jobs and agency where women will have the opportunity to change their lives and the lives of their families for the better. In Equatorial Guinea, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Status of Women lacked the will to challenge the practices and customs that had existed since colonial times, and because the women were not sufficiently educated about their rights they were not in a position to exercise them (CEDAW, 2004). Awareness is the first step to changing position in society. To bring equality to women in West Africa gaining literacy is the greatest goal and the next step in creating a positive future.

With regard to youth, boys and girls are increasingly participating in the same activities; both genders take the same subjects and play the same sports in school. West Africa is far from



providing equal forms of education to its youth without the interference of stereotypes and gendered issues but as a whole, it is trying to ratify its problems as quickly as developing nations can. Women's education is a vital tool for national development and nations such as Mali are aware that low school enrollment ratios for girls, illiteracy among women and a lack of technical and vocational training for women give cause for concern in both economic and social terms and have turned the government's focus towards action. In Sierra Leone, there is a jingle popularized by the Sierra Leone Chapter of the Forum for African Women Educationalists in partnership with UNICEF, that goes "Sen you girl pikin na school" which is translated to 'send your girl child to school' (CEDAW, 2007). If a jingle can contribute towards changing the mindset of a nation, certainly government action can do much more to help reach the second Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education.

### **Employment and Economics**

Numerous countries throughout Western Africa promise that both men and women have equal opportunities within the workforce. This may be the law but in reality most countries do not abide by these guidelines. Some major difficulties that women face with employment are their rights to education, becoming fixed within the informal sector and seeking out prostitution to support their families. Women are also burdened with frequent pregnancies and many children, which puts them at a greater disadvantage for acquiring and maintaining a job. In the CEDAW and shadow reports for West Africa, it is apparent that discrimination is prevalent in the unequal government and patriarchal systems that have been established over the years. Equality must be a priority for these countries that push women aside when dealing with the economy or employment. NGOs can only provide so much to a country's efforts, therefore, communities need to come together to build up awareness and push for change.

A major issue for women in West Africa is their access to education. Due to the lack of schooling that is available, countless women are illiterate and unable to search out jobs that men typically fill. This limits women to the informal sector where they must perform strenuous work in and outside the home to provide for their families. There are various opportunities in the formal sector for men, which can ultimately deter women away, pushing them into the informal sector. Discrimination within the workforce allows men to hold higher positions than women. Without a fair education, women are inadequately prepared for jobs in the formal sector. In Ghana, CEDAW states that women currently form 50% of the workforce due to their low or non-existent professional qualifications and limited job-openings. Thus, many women are self-employed and restricted to partake in the informal sector (CEDAW, 2005). Country reports have demonstrated that there are only a few specialized schools for women in West Africa. Women have little time to learn with the high demands that come from families, marriages, and daily responsibilities. Specialized schools present girls with an opportunity to acquire the same level of schooling that men receive at a pace that is more realistic. Countries in West Africa must take a different approach, such as adding more specialized schools, to keep girls in school. A proper education is the first step in getting these women better forms of employment.

According to the Cameroon report, about 75% of the population is employed through some form of agriculture (CEDAW 2007), this dependence on subsistence farming is can be seen in many of the countries throughout the Western area. Women's involvement in the family and in the informal sector leave them with such responsibilities as subsistence farming, production for exchange, caring for children, and performing daily duties around the house. This means that women typically work fifteen to seventeen hour days. Namibia's CEDAW report states that women are generally engaged in the production of food crops mostly for consumption, such as rice, vegetables, sorghum, millet and maize (CEDAW, 2005). This isn't an uncommon practice

within the region as women struggle to support their families, unfortunately, most of the aggregation work is done by women and is unpaid.

It is imperative to include rural women of West Africa as a specific group because they are more disadvantaged than the men and women who live in urban areas. According to the Gambia's CEDAW report, rural women are half the productive population, yet they do more than half the country's agricultural work (CEDAW 2003). They are the soul producers of rice for family consumption, which is the staple food source of the country. Rural women cultivate and prepare food, fetch water and firewood, and experience frequent pregnancies and care for their children. Overall they are overworked due to their high demands as food producers, mothers, and housewives.

One law that is especially important to women concerning employment is the Labor code, allowing workers to have paid holidays, sick leave, and maternity leave. In Niger, labor legislation states that, "The rest period for a women and children must last at least eleven consecutive hours" (CEDAW, 2005). In most West African countries, codes mandate that women and children are to be examined by qualified doctors to ensure that their work is not harmful. Also, labor that may impair the procreative capacity of women is forbidden. In West Africa, a women's pregnancy is not a justified reason for termination (she must be medically certified from a doctor to avoid penalty at her place of employment). When a woman does have a child, she needs to be seen by a doctor before getting the standard fourteen consecutive weeks off of work. If a woman is not willing to follow these rules, the government has her pay a fine. Because of these rules, institutions prefer to hire men over women because of the high cost of prenatal and post-natal leave, adding to the many reasons why women rarely occupy higher management positions.

Because of the various forms of discrimination towards women, some are forced into prostitution and other forms of human trafficking. In the CEDAW report on Guinea, Article 6 explains that, “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women” (CEDAW, 2005). However, there has been a rise in prostitution over the last few decades because of economic and social crises. Prostitution was once kept private from public view, but it is now seen all over West Africa in public places such as streets, hotels, airports, bars and dance halls. Prostitution has also become prevalent because there is very little regulation or punishment for it. According to the Guinea CEDAW report, neither prostitutes nor their clients are prosecuted or fined (CEDAW, 2005).

The lack of opportunity found in education and in the formal sector is complicated problems for women in West Africa today. In many cases women find themselves involved with prostitution in order to make a living. Even though this region has explicit laws that outline the importance of equality, most countries in this region have continued to see patterns of discrimination. Without proper enforcement, women are stuck in an ongoing pattern, which allows for little advancement.

### **Violence Against Women**

Throughout Western Africa there are several violent acts committed against women, and for the most part, the abuse that they experience is similar in all areas of the region. Examples of this mistreatment include domestic violence, female genital mutilation, trafficking, frequent divorce, forced marriage, and slavery. These are only a few of the problems that exist in Western Africa and organizations, such as CEDAW, have addressed them in attempt to improve the lives of women. A reoccurring pattern seen throughout the countries is the lack of power women have in protecting their rights and safety. Although some attempts are being made to

improve their conditions, the male-dominated governments have not put enough emphasis on listening to what women need. There are three common acts of violence that should be examined more closely to better understand what life is like for women in West Africa.

Trafficking/prostitution, female genital mutilation, and spousal abuse are extremely prevalent in CEDAW reports and various shadow reports thus these acts of violence should be brought to the attention of governments and the people throughout West Africa.

As noted above, acts of trafficking and prostitution are extremely common and continue to be an issue that CEDAW examines. According to the United Nations Information Service, “Poverty is a major driving force in the rise of trafficking... women and children are easily lured into trafficking networks by recruiters who promise lucrative jobs abroad”(United Nations). The country of Benin is known for its trafficking and were asked if they, “intend to introduce legislation and to implement a comprehensive strategy to identify, prevent and combat trafficking” (CEDAW, 2002). The Country responded by stating that they would push to have better training for public officials to ensure that they would handle these issues correctly. Under the Penal code several countries have specific laws on trafficking and rape. As the reports have shown, countries such as Niger have had awareness campaigns put on by NGOs and have created morality squads in the National Police Service to try and lower the number of women involved (CEDAW, 2005). Although countries are making an effort to enforce legislation on the matter, shadow reports tend to show a lack of effort. Few of these incidences are reported and therefore trafficking goes under the radar and is ignored to a large degree in West Africa. The major issue here is that governments are not enforcing laws that protect women in their country. This further shows the lack of power women have in fighting for their safety.

Another extreme problem that women face in West Africa is female genital mutilation (FGM). This is a common practice amongst Muslim societies and is a controversial issue when

it comes to tradition and abuse. Those who practice FGM find CEDAW or new government laws threatening to Islam law and tribal traditions. Many countries, such as Gambia, have no rules against circumcision but health hazards are of great concern (CEDAW, 2003). According to IWRAWs shadow reports, Guinea *does* in fact have laws against circumcision and they are attempting, “to adopt... legislation prohibiting female genital mutilation, and to ensure that offenders are adequately prosecuted and punished” (IWRAW, Guinea). Surprisingly, 65 to 90 percent of the women still go through with the procedure, which shows that the government has not made a large effort to stop the violence. In effort to stop the practice of FGM many western countries have attempted to change by joining such movements as the National Action Plan Against FGM, there have also been protests to find a different mark that could symbolize “womanhood”. When it comes down to it, the Constitution and laws of the governments are not enough, its one thing to have rules but they need to be enforced. Women need to be protected against FGM.

Spousal abuse is another act of violence seen in Western Africa. This is another case of cruelty that is not prevented through law. In Angola’s CEDAW report, the government states that, “domestic crimes are rarely punished, and when complaints are filed and reach the courts, a great deal of leniency is always shown in sentencing the men” (CEDAW, 2002). This is a common case for almost all of the countries. It is also uncommon for enforcement agencies to file reports on spousal abuse because they advise women to make up with their husbands without involving the law (IWRAW Cameroon, 1999). Spousal abuse is seen as a private matter which should be dealt with by families, not the government. IWRAW explains that wife beating and rape within a marriage is justified under customs in Cameroon. Governments such as this have failed to even acknowledge or make change to tradition and train their enforcement to understand the severity of domestic violence (IWRAW, 1999). Women keep quiet in order to ensure their

own safety, to protect their property and their families. Often, these abusive relationships lead to divorce leaving the woman to fend for herself and her children. Fortunately, there has been a movement to point out negative stereotypes that present women doing their “expected roles” in text books for children. This may help future generations to see women and men in a new light, as equals. Overall there is a lot of work to do and with few laws being enforced; abused women of West Africa continue to go unnoticed.

Women throughout West Africa experience violence on a day to day basis. In many instances, follow up questions in the CEDAW reports ask countries to provide statistical data on violence against women and numerous countries, such as Niger and Mauritania, could not provide any. In order to fix the problem, the government and the citizens need to be aware of it. In these male dominated governments there are few who have a voice in changing the lives of women. Many countries in West Africa strictly prohibit discrimination but their actions for equality are not being pushed to make a change. However, there has been more media coverage on the issue of violence against women. As a positive affect more citizens are becoming aware of the problem throughout the region. This may be the answer in bringing women together, and showing the government and men the true reality of the pain that women endure. Nevertheless, issues such as trafficking, FGM, and spousal abuse can go on no longer in countries that have ratified CEDAW or in countries that wish to seek gender equality.

## **Healthcare**

In West Africa, gender inequality and discrimination negatively affects all parts of a woman’s existence. Family life, the economy and a patriarchal system overlap to create a healthcare system that unstable. Healthcare services across West Africa are in poor condition, largely affecting the rural and poor women. The CEDAW reports highlight several key areas in

which this system is failing, specifically AIDS/HIV/STIs, female genital mutilation, and reproductive health.

The most pressing problem West Africa faces is an AIDS/HIV epidemic. Infection rates are high across the western part of the continent, and in some areas, like Cameroon and Namibia, the rates are growing exponentially. According to The CEDAW report on Namibia, as of 2002, an estimated 22% (250,000) of all adults are HIV positive (CEDAW, 2002). In 1999, 2,823 people died of diseases associated with AIDS, which represents 26% of all reported deaths and 47% of all deaths in the age group 15 – 49 (CEDAW 2002). As of 2001, it is estimated that 50% of all orphans in Namibia are AIDS orphans. This number has risen to just over 75% with no sign of slowing down.

Although though these statistics are staggering, some countries still lack an effective national policy to deal with this pandemic. The main constraint on the creation and implementation of policy is the poor condition of health care services and facilities. Physicians, midwives, nurses, laboratory workers, pharmacists, and other health workers are nearly nonexistent. Namibia's shadow report from the IWRAW (International Women's Rights Action Watch) says that there are approximately 0.3 doctors for every 1000 Namibian citizens. Healthcare facilities are also struggling, with a Namibian population of 2 million, for every 1 000 citizens, there were only 0.2 clinics, 0.02 health centers, 0.01 district hospitals and 0.5 outreach points (IWRAW, 2006). Across West Africa healthcare facilities face financial problems, unable to provide an adequate salary for its workers, to carry necessary medical supplies and drugs, and to keep the lights on.

These are just a few of the many problems associated with the AIDS/HIV pandemic, general wellbeing of healthcare services, and the implementation of CEDAW's guidelines.



Effective national policy needs to be put into place, awareness and prevention strategies must be implemented, and an increase in financial support is required.

Another key problem associated with the wellbeing of West African nations is reproductive health; this area includes family planning, childbirth and FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). CEDAW reports that Sierra Leone has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world at 2,000 per 100,000 live births (CEDAW, 2006). The chances of a woman in Sierra Leone suffering a maternal death over her lifetime are 1 in 6, 600 times more likely to die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth than a woman in the United Kingdom. Access to maternal healthcare is one of the largest limiting factors in West Africa. In general, rural women are the most affected because the only person with medical knowledge in the area is a TBA (Traditional Birth Attendant). CEDAW reports that Sierra Leone has implemented a “Safe Motherhood Program” aimed to reduce mortality rates among women and children (CEDAW, 2006). The program stipulates training for the TBA and MCHA (Maternal Child Health Aides), who are the first responders when a pregnancy problem arises, but unfortunately has proven ineffective towards any kind of mortality reduction. Attendants are not trained to deal with hemorrhage, obstructed labor, eclampsia, malaria and abortion. Shadow reports from the IWRAW state that in Sierra Leone, only 20% of births take place in suitably staffed and properly equipped health care centers (IWRAW, 2006).

Female Genital Mutilation is a rampant practice in West Africa. Girls as young as 5 years old are subject to various forms of FGM in cultural and religious ceremonies. According to CEDAW’s report in Sierra Leone, 94% of women between the ages of 15 to 49 reported to have undergone some form of FGM; these girls face serious physical and mental health risks. Excessive bleeding and death are common in this practice; tools are used mutually and not properly sterilized, exposing girls to HIV and other infections.

Abortion is illegal and culturally frowned upon in most areas, it often also carries a prison sentence for any accomplices. But, there are few exceptions to this law, according to the CEDAW reports in Equatorial Guinea and Benin, a mother to be can abort the pregnancy if her own life is in danger. This strict law tempts women to use unorthodox ‘back ally’ methods, putting her life in even more danger.

Family planning needs, such as access to and information about contraceptives, are not being met. In many areas, such as Gabon, a woman is required to have permission from her husband before receiving family planning services. IWRAW shadow reports show that in Ghana, even though adolescents engage in sexual activity at very early ages, women do not have information or understanding of contraception and are shy about using health facilities. Awareness teams hand out free condoms around the country, but they need to focus on educating the public. This quote from a government official in Equatorial Guinea sums it up, “Truckloads of condoms had been sent into the countryside; it was not the government’s fault if they did not use them” (CEDAW, 2004). The state of healthcare services in West Africa is far from flourishing. Many of the areas in which women struggle overlap, creating a vicious downward cycle. Access to healthcare services often is nonexistent while the AIDS/HIV epidemic is growing exponentially.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that change is difficult to implement in a multi-ethnic region such as West Africa. Although this report focuses on the failures of numerous sectors, there are untold stories of success and empowered women. However, since CEDAW was put into action in 1979, the victories of West African women are overshadowed by the continuous prevalence of discrimination. One cannot deny that efforts are being made, but many of the West African

governments are not completely aligned with the principles of the CEDAW convention. To commit to the betterment of women's conditions throughout West Africa, states must stand firm and clear. The quality of life for women will continue to be eroded until the governments of West Africa provide unwavering support. Education, health care, violence against women, and a presence in the decision-making process are areas where anti-discriminatory principles cannot be vague. The lack of commitment and follow-through undermines all efforts and erodes progress. West Africa is represented as a region that is riddled with corruption and suffering, thus many believe that waging a 'feminist battle' is preemptive. However a collaborative fight for human rights cannot occur if women cannot stand equally beside men.

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