

FROM CONFLICT TO STABILITY IN SIERRA LEONE

The Role of Women in Governance

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OVERVIEW

Women are heavily underrepresented in Sierra Leone's government, holding only 15 out of 124 seats, or 12 percent, in the latest Parliament from 2013 to 2018.¹ This proportion is well below the Sub-Saharan African average of 22 percent² and also contradicts the trend of large female representation gains seen in many other post-conflict states in the region.³ Sierra Leone's pronounced lack of gender parity not only violates human rights principles,⁴ but could also damage the nation's quality of governance,⁵ development potential,⁶ and sustainability of peace.⁷ The barriers to gender parity in Sierra Leonean politics are in many ways comparable to the barriers to political representation confronted by women globally, including entrenched gender norms, lack of access to financial resources and political networks, low self-confidence, and lack of direct experience or skills.⁸ In Sierra Leone's context, vehement opposition from conservative women's groups and unchecked violent harassment of female candidates are significant additional obstacles.⁹ To confront

these barriers, the most critical policy intervention is likely to be the introduction of a reserved seats quota for parliamentary and local council elections, which was first proposed by former President Koroma in 2010 but has yet to be implemented.¹⁰ This should be introduced alongside pipeline programs that increase the supply of trained female candidates,¹¹ as well as sensitization programs to change public perception about gender norms.

Section I of this paper will introduce the problem of female underrepresentation in Sierra Leone's government, first outlining the current level of underrepresentation, and then discussing the moral and practical reasons why such gender imbalance is of concern. Section II will explore the literature to date on this topic, looking at Sierra Leonean women's political status before the war, in the transition from war to peace, and in the present day. Section III will assess major policy interventions that have been used to try to address the problem. Based on this analysis, Section IV will outline my policy recommendations for the Government of Sierra Leone, civil society

organizations, and international donor agencies. I close with some brief concluding remarks about the lessons from Sierra Leone for other post-conflict contexts.

SECTION I: THE POLICY PROBLEM

Background on Sierra Leone

A West African nation of approximately seven million people, Sierra Leone's economic, social, and political progress has suffered extensively in recent decades due to a long-running civil war from 1991 to 2002, and more recently from the destructive impact of the Ebola virus disease outbreak from 2014 to 2016, which killed 4,000 people¹² and caused wide-ranging damage to the country's economy, healthcare system, and other public services.¹³ Sierra Leone currently ranks 179th out of 188 countries on UNDP's Human Development Index.¹⁴ Although the country has made progress in establishing peaceful, democratic governance since the end of the war, it still faces major governance challenges, ranking in the bottom 10th percentile globally for government effectiveness.¹⁵ At the time of writing, Sierra Leone was preparing to conduct its fourth round of democratic elections since the end of the civil war, which will determine the president, national parliament, and local council representatives.¹⁶

Gender inequality in Sierra Leone is stark, with UNDP ranking the country 151st out of 159 countries for gender equality.¹⁷ Women in Sierra Leone achieve only 81 percent of the levels of men in health, education, and command over economic resources, which is significantly below the Sub-Saharan African average.¹⁸ This paper will focus specifically on one aspect of gender inequality in Sierra Leone: the underrepresentation of women in government.

Underrepresentation of Women in Sierra Leone's Government

Women are currently severely underrepresented in Sierra Leone's government. From 2013 to 2018, women held only 12 percent of all seats in Parliament, leaving Sierra Leone 114th in the world for female representation in the national government¹⁹ and well below the Sub-Saharan African average of 22 percent.²⁰ Sierra Leone's current level of representation was actually a decrease from the 15 percent of parliamentary seats won by women in the 2002 elections immediately after the conflict, in which a proportional representation system was temporarily used to accommodate the high number of people displaced by the war.²¹ Gender inequality is also evident in traditional governance systems, with women often excluded or confined to play a limited role, although this does vary by region and in some cases the paramount chief is a woman.²²

What is at stake?

The underrepresentation of women in Sierra Leone's government is important for both moral and practical reasons:

Reason 1: Moral Violation of Human Rights and the Principle of Equality

Women make up 51 percent of Sierra Leone's population,²³ and they should be represented accordingly in the country's main decision-making bodies. Attaining equality of rights and opportunities for women and men is a fundamental human right as well as a commitment made by the Government of Sierra Leone in signing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, and other agreements.²⁴ Even if there were no evidence of social, economic, or political benefits of increasing women's representation in government, the political marginalization of half of the population is clearly a violation of human rights

and of the principle of equality, and should be addressed accordingly.

Reason 2: Practical Threat to Sierra Leone's Future as a Peaceful and Prosperous Democracy

Besides the moral imperative, there are also important practical reasons why Sierra Leone could benefit from increasing the proportion of women in government. These include: (a) improved quality of governance, (b) better development outcomes, and (c) reduced risk of a relapse into conflict. The sections below discuss each of these areas in further detail.

A) QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE

Increasing female representation in politics can have a tangible impact on the quality and effectiveness of governance. In both politics²⁵ and business,²⁶ women's leadership and conflict resolution styles have been considered to embody democratic ideals, with women generally working in a "less hierarchical, more participatory and more collaborative way" than men.²⁷ Women often bring a different perspective on societal problems, meaning they may be more likely to offer new solutions.²⁸ They are also more likely to view politics as a tool to help serve minorities,²⁹ thus improving governance for underrepresented groups. Female lawmakers also appear to be more responsive to their community overall, proving more persistent in acting on constituents' requests³⁰ and decreasing government corruption.³¹

B) DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

Greater female representation in politics is also associated with improved development outcomes.³² While this correlation could partly be explained by causation in the reverse direction (i.e. women are granted more representation as societies develop), there is also evidence that increasing women's political representation actively fosters social and economic development.³³ According to studies from both developing and developed countries across multiple regions, more gender-equal legislative bodies have proven

more likely to pass legislation promoting development, social welfare, and social justice,³⁴ as well as to increase spending on social services such as public health and education.³⁵ Women in politics have also been found to be more likely to directly and indirectly promote broader gender equality in society,³⁶ which itself is recognized as a lever for increasing economic development.³⁷

C) SUSTAINABILITY OF PEACE

The link between women's political participation and peace is well recognized by the international community as a foundational element within the UN's Security Council Resolution 1325.³⁸ Women's participation in a country's government has been associated in numerous studies with a reduced likelihood of conflict.³⁹ Potential reasons behind this link include the gender gap in support for war,⁴⁰ women's more conciliatory style of leadership,⁴¹ women's tendency to "invest" in peace rather than war, prioritizing social over military spending,⁴² or the public perception of gender-inclusive governments as more legitimate, trustworthy, and neutral.⁴³ Other research has argued that gender equality more broadly is a key determinant of a country's propensity to conflict,⁴⁴ suggesting that female political representation is also important in sustaining peace insofar as it helps to promote women's empowerment in wider society.

Given Sierra Leone's weak governance, poor development and recent conflict history, the above benefits of increased female representation hold clear relevance for the country.

SECTION II: WHAT HAVE RESEARCHERS WRITTEN ABOUT THE PROBLEM?

This section provides an overview of some of the literature written to date about female political representation in Sierra Leone. It looks first at women's political status before the conflict, then at the transition from war to

peace (where many countries—but not Sierra Leone—have seen notable shifts in women’s political status), and then finally at the contemporary situation, exploring the barriers to female political participation identified in Sierra Leone and around the globe.

Before the War: Women’s Political Participation Pre-1991

Dating back to the 1970s, a number of scholars have written biographies about female leaders in Sierra Leone, highlighting the perhaps surprising political prominence that individual women have risen to in the country’s political history.⁴⁵ Noting this “distinguished history of participation,” Abdullah et al. argue that these “promising beginnings for women’s political participation at the birth of the new independent nation of Sierra Leone were to falter with the imposition of a one-party state by the All People’s Congress Party (APC) in 1978 and, with it, an end to women’s embryonic independent political activism and mobilization.”⁴⁶ Rather than attributing individual women’s political successes to the triumph of a women’s political movement, Abdullah et al. claim that women’s access to political office in past decades has been “based on tokenism and the benevolence of male leaders.”⁴⁷

From War to Peace: The Missed Opportunity to Convert Wartime Gains into Permanent Political Empowerment

Women’s role in governance and politics during and emerging out of the war is a heavy focus of the literature. Many researchers highlight the critical role that women in Sierra Leone (and various other African nations) played as “torchbearers of peace”⁴⁸ and “pioneers . . . of the return to democratic rule.”⁴⁹ In other contexts, these wartime shifts in gender roles translated into lasting changes in gender norms, including large post-conflict increases in female political representation.⁵⁰ Famous cases include Rwanda, which

leads the world in proportion of women in parliament,⁵¹ and Liberia, which brought Africa’s first democratically elected female head of state to power in 2006.⁵²

MANY RESEARCHERS HIGHLIGHT THE CRITICAL ROLE THAT WOMEN IN SIERRA LEONE (AND VARIOUS OTHER AFRICAN NATIONS) PLAYED AS “TORCHBEARERS OF PEACE” AND “PIONEERS . . . OF THE RETURN TO DEMOCRATIC RULE.”

This post-conflict boost to women’s political status does not seem to have occurred to the same extent in the Sierra Leonean context. Castillejo does propose that since the war, Sierra Leone has seen “some shift in social attitudes on women’s role . . . and a growing awareness that women have rights and should be able to participate—at least to some extent—in governance.”⁵³ Nevertheless, most of the literature categorizes Sierra Leone’s situation as one of disappointing missed opportunities for women after the war. Abdullah et al. note that “despite their activism during the conflict phase, women were once again marginalized . . . in the post-conflict political space.”⁵⁴ Rubio-Marin maintains that in the post-conflict period, “the government of Sierra Leone and the ongoing transitional processes have yet to convince the public that they are willing to effectively address the issues affecting women . . . as well as to adequately recognize their contribution to establishing peace.”⁵⁵

Numerous explanations have been suggested for Sierra Leone’s failure to achieve the gains in female political representation that were achieved in many other post-conflict states. Filomina Steady’s 2006 research with women’s movement activists presents that view that Sierra Leonean women were so focused on achieving democracy and peace that they simply failed to prioritize women’s

participation in politics in their high-level discussions.⁵⁶ A women's activist, Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, concludes that the women's movement failed to capitalize on the new opportunities generated by the conflict in part because it lacked an ideological framework to confront those who discouraged women's participation, who were determined to avoid "destabilizing traditional politics."⁵⁷ Assessing these traditional structures in a more complex manner, Rebecca Nielsen argues that Sierra Leonean women have failed to see notable political gains because of the maintenance through the war of conservative women's organizations and social networks.⁵⁸ According to Nielsen, leaders of widely-respected traditional women's organizations in Sierra Leone (namely the "Sande" network of "secret societies") generally support the maintenance of restrictive gender norms due to entrenched cultural beliefs and vested interests in maintaining their own positions of influence. In Liberia, a similar secret society network was heavily disrupted by the conflict and came to be replaced by a new network of progressive women's associations.⁵⁹ But since the Sande network was able to maintain its authority in Sierra Leone throughout the conflict, the opportunity for more progressive female leaders to take power in the post-conflict period was reduced.

While many of the authors above focus on local dynamics to explain the missed opportunity for Sierra Leonean women in post-conflict politics, Mackenzie looks further afield, attributing at least partial blame to the international community. She argues that internationally-led post-conflict rehabilitation and reintegration programs reversed the wartime empowerment and quasi-liberation of female combatants by overwhelmingly ignoring the fact that women had participated as combatants during the war. Even when women were granted access to rehabilitation, the programs offered to them "carried explicit messages about appropriate gender role," with options

being limited to tie-dyeing, soap-making, tailoring, catering, hairdressing, and weaving. Post-conflict programs were thus a "source of social restriction rather than empowerment," promoting "a return to normal" instead of building upon the increased agency and shifting perceptions of women's status that the war had begun to provoke.⁶⁰

Contemporary Challenges: Current Barriers to Political Participation for Sierra Leone's Women

Much of the literature looking at women's failure to capitalize on conflict-related shifts in gender norms also goes on to discuss the barriers limiting women from the political sphere today. Nielsen describes a variety of current barriers to women's political participation including women's financial disadvantage in running for office, backward societal views about women's capabilities and suitability as political candidates, and wide-ranging and often very severe harassment and intimidation of women running for office.⁶¹ Claire Castillejo similarly highlights the obstacle of getting social acceptance to participate in public office due to cultural norms and hostility from male opponents, as well as the inability to finance campaigns, lack of connection to patron networks, and lack of support from chiefs who either oppose women's participation in politics or who already patronize locally powerful male competitors.⁶² Castillejo also notes that many women lack capacity due to educational discrimination, or even if they have equal capacity to men, they often lack self-confidence or support from parties or party leadership.

In many ways, this latter discussion of barriers to female political participation in Sierra Leone mirrors global research on women's underrepresentation in politics. For example, in "Women and Leadership: The State of Play and Strategies for Change," Kellerman and Rhode attribute low female representation to

the lack of leadership opportunities offered to women, the gender bias in mentoring networks, the actual or perceived constraints relating to family obligations, as well as inadequate public policies to support their involvement in new spheres of public life.⁶³ Swanee Hunt concludes that the underrepresentation can be attributed both to women's own unwillingness to stand for political office (due to perceptions of politics as a "dirty game," fears of being considered "unfeminine" if she runs, doubt about her leadership abilities, difficulties reconciling family commitment with politics) and obstacles impeding the success of women who do try to run (male political party gatekeepers determining candidate lists, financial limitations, harassment and threat of physical harm).⁶⁴ Based on analyses such as these, researchers have proposed various policy interventions to try to address the barriers restricting women's participation in political systems around the world. In Section III, I will assess major policy interventions already tested in Sierra Leone, and in Section IV, draw on the literature to make recommendations for the policies and programs most likely to succeed in this context.

SECTION III: POLICY INTERVENTIONS TO DATE

Policy interventions to increase women's representation in politics work to address constraints to female representation on both the supply and the demand side.⁶⁵ Supply-side constraints refer to the factors restricting the pool of women running for political positions, while demand-side constraints relate to the factors hindering women from being selected for candidacy or for office. Here, I assess three of the most commonly-cited interventions, and their success to date in the Sierra Leone context.

I. Increase Demand through Quotas

Electoral quotas are often seen as the most

direct way to address the underrepresentation of women in politics, and are therefore considered by some to be the "most important" policy for achieving gender parity in politics.⁶⁶ Widely promoted by the international community,⁶⁷ electoral quotas have often been introduced in developing countries following international involvement in post-conflict peace operations or democratization processes.⁶⁸ Electoral quotas are now in place in more than 130 countries worldwide, and take a variety of forms,⁶⁹ including: reserved seats (guaranteeing in constitutions or electoral laws a certain share of seats for women); candidate quotas (legally requiring all political parties to field a certain percentage of women candidates, with no guarantee of actual election); and political party quotas (encouraging parties to mandate that a certain share of candidates are women).

The arguments for quotas are that they promote equal opportunities for women, assist qualified women in being elected, enable the articulation of women's concerns and perspectives in public policy, enhance democracy, and affirm the importance of women's political participation.⁷⁰ According to the "critical mass" theory,⁷¹ a certain threshold of minority representation must be surpassed for it to have a tangible impact on an organization's dynamics and on public perceptions. Typically, this minimum threshold has been placed at around 30 percent, which was the basis for the United Nations recommending a minimum reserved seats quota level of 30 percent female representation.⁷² After surpassing this level, societal or organizational behavior may shift such that quotas later become unnecessary. But even if viewed only as a temporary measure, quotas are widely considered an important first step to enable female representation to reach meaningful and culture-shifting levels.

The arguments against quotas are that they promote unqualified candidates, undermine

women's own agency, are undemocratic in contradicting the principle of equality, and do not actually succeed in advancing women's interests due to limitations on quota-selected representatives.⁷³ There is also concern that quotas can result in "a gendered enclave for women's political participation," with electorates "assuming that the reserved seats are the only legitimate spaces for women candidates"⁷⁴ or female representatives being treated as "token" and inferior.⁷⁵ In addition, quotas are often loosely enforced and thus are "regularly circumvented or ignored by political party executives" or female candidates are selected based only on their affiliation with male colleagues (e.g. relatives of men in prominent positions) rather than their own capabilities.⁷⁶ However, the policy design can greatly address these issues of effectiveness, with Kellerman and Rhode identifying voluntary political party quotas as the "most widespread but typically least effective strategies" and reserved seats laws as the "most effective but least common approach."⁷⁷

In Sierra Leone, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission⁷⁸ recommended a quota policy immediately after the conflict but the policy did not gain sufficient traction to be implemented. Since the end of the conflict, a national, non-partisan women's organization known as the 50/50 group⁷⁹ has been spearheading efforts to get a quota introduced into the national constitution for all levels of decision making. In the Local Government Act 2004, a 50/50 quota was introduced for Ward Committee elections. However, these committees cover very small areas, have little power in practice, and are often not even functional,⁸⁰ so it has not been given much weight in the women's empowerment movement. At the national level, former President Koroma committed multiple times to introduce a minimum 30 percent quota of reserved seats for women in parliamentary and local council elections.⁸¹ Nevertheless,

the policy has still not been enacted, having faced "strong resistance from the political elite and political parties," who viewed it as a "threat to their power" and thus labelled it "discriminatory."⁸²

2. Increase Supply through Pipeline Programs

Another popular policy for increasing female representation in politics globally is to try to increase prospective female candidates' skills, experience, and will to run for and serve in office. In Sierra Leone, this is a key policy promoted by donors like USAID, who have supported parties to identify women candidates for the local council and parliamentary elections in 2018, and are subsequently providing training and facilitating fundraising for these candidates, as well as strengthening protections against candidate harassment and intimidation.⁸³

At a local level, the 50/50 Group has been the key organization leading capacity-building programs for prospective women candidates, as well as disseminating information to women about governance mechanisms and building a network of women involved in politics.⁸⁴ Due partly to the 50/50 group's work, all competing parties in the 2002 national elections included women in their electoral lists, and 18 women were elected.⁸⁵ This was triple the number elected in the previous national election in 1996, but still an overall low proportion at less than 15 percent. Thus, while candidate training and advocacy programs have clearly helped "make inroads into politics in a highly patriarchal society,"⁸⁶ improving the quality of supply of female candidates on its own appears insufficient to achieve substantial representation of women in politics. However, pipeline programs are an important complement to demand-side policies aimed at addressing discriminatory attitudes and practices, and creating space for women through quotas or other affirmative action policies.

3. Increase Demand and Supply through Shifting Gender Norms

Although a much more long-term and indirect route, another strategy to work toward gender parity in politics is to focus on shifting gender norms more widely in society. Women's advocates note that without changing traditional beliefs held by women and men about gender roles and capabilities, it will be impossible to sustainably address either the demand or supply barriers limiting the number of women in politics. Investing in girls' education, supporting women's economic prospects, changing public perception about the rights and capabilities of women and girls, and supporting the growth of women's empowerment groups are all seen as inputs that can help gender-equal political representation be achieved.

While this holistic approach to gender equality appears entirely logical, there are two concerns of note to policymakers concerned primarily with the state of women in politics. Firstly, as numerous advanced democracies have shown us, having a more gender-equal society does not automatically lead to much larger numbers of women in politics.⁸⁷ Thus, while initiatives to promote better treatment and perceptions of women and girls are important in their own right, they should not be presumed to generate equal political representation as a natural outcome. Secondly, as Nielsen cautions, in embracing this holistic approach in Sierra Leone, international actors and donors have often presumed that all women's groups support progressive goals and have funded them somewhat indiscriminately.⁸⁸ In doing so, they may have unintentionally provided funding to traditional women's groups invested in restrictive rather than empowering practices.

SECTION IV: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above analysis, I propose the following policy recommendations:

For the Government of Sierra Leone:

An Affirmative Action Bill has been proposed but is yet to be enacted by Parliament. Given the vast benefits that could be realized through greater female political representation, the Government of Sierra Leone should push to ensure the passage of this Bill, with a provision for a minimum 30 percent quota of parliamentary and local council seats to be reserved for women. While this electoral quota could not be enacted in time for the most recent elections, the new government should commit to pass this legislation by the end of 2018, to ensure that subsequent elections benefit from this affirmative measure. The new president can demonstrate his personal support for the goal of women's political empowerment through the appointment of at least 30 percent women in the next round of Cabinet members' appointments.

Alongside these direct measures to promote political representation, the government should also continue to promote wider female empowerment. Proper investment is needed for the policies and programs created to address historic inequalities faced by Sierra Leonean girls and women. Among other measures, these include: promoting good quality education for girls (rather than focusing narrowly on enrollment); enforcing the three "Gender Acts"—the Domestic Violence Act, the Devolution of Estates Act, and the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act; and increasing the budget of the "chronically underfunded"⁸⁹ Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children Affairs.

For Civil Society Organizations in Sierra Leone:

As commentators within and outside of Sierra Leone reflect on the results of the March 2018 elections, civil society organizations have a window of opportunity to draw public and political attention to the sizeable gender gap that remains in political representation.

This momentum should be used to call for a renewed commitment to getting women into politics over the next parliamentary cycle, starting with an invigorated campaign for the passage of the aforementioned Affirmative Action Bill. While the diverse practical benefits of increasing female representation are well proven in academia, these advantages are often unknown to the wider public. Civil society organizations therefore have an important role to play in raising support for the Affirmative Action Bill, through social media, TV, and radio campaigns that highlight the rationale for increased female representation and showcase quota success stories such as Rwanda.

At the same time, civil society organizations have a vital part to play in supporting local women to put themselves forwards for political races. Pipeline programs of organizations such as the 50/50 Group were instrumental in preparing women candidates to run for the 2018 elections. These programs should reflect on their successes and lessons learned. With this new insight, they—and their funders—can strengthen their offer to further increase the ambitions, skills, and resources of the next round of prospective female candidates.

For International Donors:

International donors should encourage the government to enact the Affirmative Action Bill, while continuing funding for progressive local women's organizations to sustain advocacy, pipeline programs, and gender equality initiatives at the grassroots level. Like their civil society counterparts, donors have an opportunity to reflect on the Sierra Leonean election results and to consider the lessons learned from female empowerment efforts in the last parliamentary cycle. However, it is equally important for donors to recognize both the gradual nature of shifts in gender norms and the role that cumulative experience plays for female candidates confronting

entrenched cultural stereotypes and powerful patriarchal structures. Patience, consistency, and a long-term vision will therefore be needed to enable gender equality efforts to reach their full fruition.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The recommendations above can help to gradually increase women's political representation. But the Sierra Leone context demonstrates the importance of capitalizing on the immediate post-conflict "windows of opportunity,"⁹⁰ to achieve dramatic reversal of the gender gap. In Sierra Leone, this window was missed and the task of achieving political gender equality now will be a much slower and more contested process. This by no means suggests that efforts to achieve gender parity in Sierra Leone should be neglected, nor that they will not ultimately succeed. But where the international community is directly involved in facilitating a country's transition to peace, every attempt should be made to realize the momentum for permanent social change. In practice, this provides support for the quota adoption policy that the international community now heavily promotes during post-conflict governance discussions. But it also means careful consideration of the gender implications of donor-funded post-conflict rehabilitation programs, to ensure that these programs solidify the political and societal gains that women may have achieved during the war, rather than inadvertently supporting a regression to pre-war gender roles.

NOTES

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