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# Women, Politics and Decision-Making in Sierra Leone

**Maseray Ngadie Rogers**

*Institute of International Studies.*

*Jilin University,*

*Youyi Hui Guan, Changchun, China.*

*Email: [serayrogers@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:serayrogers@yahoo.co.uk)*

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## **Abstract**

*The political and decision-making systems and processes of Sierra Leone are fraught with grave gender inequalities that disadvantage women. While women have not been formally barred from standing for political office or even partaking in decision-making in the history of the nation, systemic and structural factors and forces continue to restrict women's access resulting in wide gaps in the participation of women and men. This paper examines such systemic and structural factors with an emphasis on the socio-cultural forces and factors that limit women's political participation. The analysis is informed by the equality strategy and quota movement, which have been posited in gender analysis as fundamental to democratic development. The analysis shows that although women have historically played key political roles in national development they continue to be marginalized in formal politics and decision-making processes. Drawing from various quota and equality strategies from Africa and beyond, it argues that Sierra Leone in its post-conflict reconstruction should be guided by such positive examples. It notes that the continued marginalizations of women constitute an infringement on their human rights and contravene various conventions such as the CEDAW. Hence, recommendations are made for the elimination of moribund cultural practices that limit women's access and the institution of policies and practices that actively promote women's right and gender equality.*

**Key Descriptors:** Women's Empowerment, Socio-cultural Factors, Politics Participation, Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Gender Equality

## Introduction

The role of women in politics and decision making is not a new phenomenon in the socio-political development of Sierra Leone. Constitutionally, women have the legal right to be involved in politics; vote in elections, and to be members of parliament or even become ministers or cabinet ministers (Act No. 6 of 1991, Chapter/111, sections 15 and 27). In practice, however, the women of Sierra Leone have been restricted by many factors and forces, cultural, structural and material, which circumscribe their access to and participation in politics and decision-making at various levels of society. Yet, equitable access to politics and decision making are critical for the post conflict reconstruction of Sierra Leone. In particular, the re-emerging democracy, which embraces good governance, requires that the men and women who form that society not just represented in government but also equitably included in the systems and structures of governance.

According to Sanders (1999) decision-making involves making wise choices within a particular context and understanding the consequences of such actions, or determining alternative solutions to problems. It deals with critical thinking skills in cases such as resisting peer group influence, rape or any form of violence. These are some of the realities of particularly women who have to live with the horrors and abuses of war time and have to reclaim and rebuild their lives in a post-war era. If post-war and post-conflict reconstruction in going to benefit all, conscious efforts need to be made to address the particular needs of women who often are marginalized in decision-making processes. Women's views have to be sought and their voices must be heard. It is therefore imperative to consult with and solicit the views of women who, like men, are affected by decisions at all levels. It is even necessary to gather information from many sources in the process of decision-making so as to cater to the multiplicity of perspectives on the issue. Indeed, women like men should be active participants in the decisions of the community and state if the post war reconstruction efforts are to transcend the traditional inequalities and parochial patriarchies to promote gender equality and social justice.

Consequently, the promotion of gender equality and especially empowering women has been the focus of the governments of Sierra Leone, especially after the eleven-year civil wars (1991-2002). In the past, the condition of women in the male-dominated society of Sierra Leone was appalling. However, war austerity and survivalism as well as post-war reconstruction appeared to have inspired and renewed some agencies for women. Under war conditions and circumstances, where there was the collapse of not just law and order but also the social systems and structures that held women back, it was probably survivalism that demystified male superiority and provided the agencies that the women of Sierra Leonean society exhibit today. Austere war conditions have however been reinforced by the increasingly democratizing state where respect for human rights and social justice have become important ingredients in governance.

At the level of the state, post-conflict reconstruction has entailed infrastructural and institutional rebuilding alongside efforts at reconciliation, retribution and peace-

building. At the institutional level the building of democratic systems that promote the rule of law, respect for life and equality before the law have been important pillars in the reconstruction efforts. This has also entailed the formulation of policies and initiation of programs and projects that foster social justice, including those that support women in politics and decision-making (Tickner, 2001). These however remain inadequate as the participation of women compared to men in all spheres of the Sierra Leonean society is still very low. Although the national constitution provides for rights of women like men, access to formal politics and decision-making still remains largely closed off to women. This situation is in spite of the long history of women's involvement in politics and decision-making areas in the country including traditional societies.

With ongoing reforms and progress in the re-emerging nation state, which values democratic participation, it is expected that this would translate strategically into gender equality in politics and decision-making. While the existing democratic structures offer opportunities for the exercise of electoral rights they have not been sufficient in assuring equity. Yet as a member of the African Union (AU) and party to its treaties and conventions, Sierra Leone like other countries of Africa, has a commitment to foster gender equality in not just politics and decision-making but also in all spheres of national life. The AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality and the Protocol on the Rights of Women are important reference points. Besides, Sierra Leone's national constitution provides for equality of rights of citizens and gender equality, where women's rights to politics and decision-making are subsumed. However, the slow pace of mitigating change and achieving tangible results has led to the search for options such as the use of affirmative action in the form of quotas. The examples from Eastern and Southern Africa have been important referents.

This paper investigates the use of the quota system as a tool for gender equality and its place in fostering equitable democratic governance and above any other democratic values. It reveals that cultural identities affect political values, as support for women's equality in the political realm is not the same across all social cleavages. It draws examples from countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa to show how they have engendered electoral processes and systems and used the quota system to increase the percentage of women in elected offices. It shows the extent to which such institutional mechanism, when utilized in Sierra Leone, can make tangible contributions to the achievement of gender equality in national politics and decision making. The work also looks at factors inhibiting women's political participation such as traditional laws, attitude of the society, socialization and gender role expectations in Sierra Leone in order to argue for change that recognizes women's histories of advantage and addresses the issue of women's poor participation from a radical perspective in the form of quotas.

## **Women In Politics And Decision-Making**

The political history of Sierra Leone cannot be told without mention of the role of women. Yet these are individual women who have been able to attain very high positions and performed creditably, indicative of women's ability to perform as well as men. Sierra Leonean women's involvement in politics and decision-making dates back to the pre-colonial period and varies from one region and/or ethnicity to another. The history of the nation shows that even the leader of the Mende was a woman – Queen Masarico (Alie, 2005). It is the case that woman rulers have predominantly hailed from the south and eastern part of the country, home to the Mendes. Thus during pre-colonial era when inter-tribal wars and bush disputes were the norms, women in the south and east of the country played leading roles in the protection of their territories against other antagonizing warring ethnic groups such as the Temne and Limba.

Women like Paramount Chief Madam Yoko, from Moyamba District in the South and Paramount Chief Madam Humornya, from Kenema District in the East, were among early female decision-makers in the colonial era in the 1960s. Among the early female members of parliament were Nancy Tucker, from Bonthe District in the South, Ella Kobolo Gulama, from Moyamba District in the South and Madam Wokie from Kenema District in the East, in the 1960s and early 1970s. There has been an increase in this number in all spheres of life. Today Sierra Leone can boast of many prominent female rulers in politics, civil service, business enterprises and Christian organizations. The largest Christian Church in Freetown, Jesus Is Lord Ministries (Mammy Dumbuya), is headed by a woman, Dora Dumbuya. This is quite a unique achievement for a woman in the increasingly patriarchal Sierra Leone under colonialism.

Women like Dr. Kadi Sesay from Bombali District in the North, a former Minister of Development, Mrs. Zainab H. Bangura from Tonkolili District in the North, the current Foreign Minister, Dr. Christiana Thorpe from the Western Area, the current Chief Electoral Commissioner, Hajia Hafsatu Kabba from the Western Area, current Minister of Energy and Power and Mrs. Elizabeth Alpha-Lavallie, Deputy Speaker of Parliament have made marks in the political arena of Sierra Leone. In the Police Force, a woman like Mrs. Kadi Fakondor, Assistant Inspector General of Police from Moyamba District in the South, is one of the most senior officers. In business enterprise, Dr. Sylvia Blyden, from Western Area and Presidential Candidate in the 2002 General Elections, has been a very successful journalist, as her Awareness Times Newspaper is one of the most read. Presently, the country's Chief Justice is a woman, Her Excellency Justice Umu Hawa Tejan-Jalloh. There are many more female senior administrative officers who have performed their duties remarkably well in the civil service of Sierra Leone. This shows that Sierra Leone's women who have assumed political office or in public life have played active roles in the nation's development. Yet, women in their generality remain excluded en mass in representative politics as well as in decision-making systems at community, district, regional and national levels. Hence, the role of women in politics and decision-making is a typical

and popular gender debate that figures in national development discourses, democratic processes and especially in matters of good governance.

However, there is nowhere, not even in developed countries, where women are equal to men in legal, social and economic rights although there are laws that provide for the equality of all. There are gender gaps in access to and control over resources as well as economic, social and political opportunities. Yet, it is widely believed that women are less likely, compared to men, to support women candidates when it comes to national politics, or even offer themselves for high level decision-making offices. When it comes to competing with men, many women are not willing to bulge. This is observable during socio-cultural and political gatherings, particularly so among Muslim and traditional communities, where doctrinal tenants blatantly discriminate against women. The cause of this is that in such spaces women's voices are not heard and their issues are marginalized. It must therefore be of national responsibility to sensitize and raise awareness of women's issues and gender equality.

While religion and culture could be a hindrance to the role of women in politics and decision-making, some women have been able to break the barriers and have rightly inserted themselves in the society. Such women have been able to provide for their basic needs, and in some case their families. However there are other barriers that women have to overcome. The likelihood for women to participate in politics depends on resources such as income, education and occupation; usually those women of good socioeconomic standing and strategic positions are able to make it that far. In this case, education matters as much as socio-economic wellbeing and might. In particular, education creates awareness of the political world to women. Providing women with work careers may enhance their confidence and independence, thereby helping them to get involved in politics and higher decision-making bodies. After the 11 years civil wars (1991-2002), most women decided to be trained in vocational skills. This has helped them live independent lives. Women who are professionals and well-educated have recognized gender inequality, and through social networks are able to improve their positions relative to their male counterparts. However, the majority of women are still waiting to be involved in politics and decision-making as their cultural beliefs states that the status for a woman is to be a wife and mother.

### **Factors Inhibiting Women's Participation in Politics and Decision-Making**

As a member of the UN, Sierra Leone falls under the category of countries that must uphold the UN Charter and Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It has also been a signatory to the Beijing Platform of Action, which advocates for women to enjoy their rights. Apusigah (2006: n.d.) has noted that "As people, we relish in making excuses for actions. We fail to take actions to remove the barriers; economic, cultural and even politics, that impede women's progress."

Unfortunately, these forms of discrimination have socio-economic impacts on not just women but also the larger society. Sierra Leone is a poor nation and its situation has been compounded by eleven years civil wars and the massive destruction that attended it. Post-conflict or war reconstruction has not done much to change the situation.

According to Jusu-Sheriff (2003: n.a), "Sierra Leone is a poor country that has stubbornly refused to give up its last place in the UNDP Human Development Index." Apart from the war effects and resources limitations, socio-economic factors also play a role to keep the nation in its unenviable bottom position on the Index. In the context of this paper, I argue that the inability of the state to harness all of its human capital and especially capacitate women is a major factor. Discriminatory socio-economic and socio-cultural factors continue to deny or limit women from accessing the necessary resources for effective participation in national development. Women who form the majority of the population at 51% are mostly engaged in either subsistence farming or are petty traders. Most of them are housewives or not engaged in anything that can help them live independent lives.

### **Education and Training**

There is a great disparity between men and women in education. The overall adult literacy rate for women in Sierra Leone as of now is 22% - 23% for female and 36% for male. Although access to education is open to both sexes, the reality is that primary school enrolment is only 43% for girls compared to 57% for boys. Women and children enjoy a lower social status and face a number of disadvantages, the most significant being that the majority live under customary laws which deny them basic rights in a number of key areas. Rogers (2001:114) explains:

In Sierra Leone women account for about 51% of the total population and contribute to most of the household food requirements, including carrying out domestic chores and caring for the aged and children. This notwithstanding, they are marginalized in society and lack adequate access to production assets, including land, credit, training and technology.

Generally, belonging to formal and informal groups are crucial as they provide avenues to women's political participation. They also help to provide political experience and leadership skills that could be transferred to other organizations. Some researchers have even argued that political awareness such as following and having interest in political and public events are preconditions for political participation (Rizzo, 2005; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). This therefore indicates that belonging to social organizations and having an interest in discussing politics and current events is an indication of greater political participation among women. Also, political participation requires resources such as finance, education and status. Hence, only those few women who are able to meet the criteria such as having higher socioeconomic status and requisite educational

qualifications and political training have been able to gain access to national and even traditional politics.

The reality is that most women are lowly educated and hardly have the requisite higher qualifications that will make them competitive. The education of women is therefore particularly important as it provides cognitive skills and civic awareness that will help women to mobilize and compete in politics. They also are better informed about politics and their rights to political participation. Most women also do not have the high paying jobs or businesses that give them the finances for running costly political campaigns. A profession or career for women does not only boost confidence but also provides much needed resources. Women who have entered professional occupations are more likely to go into politics. "Professionals are more likely to be well educated, practiced in public speaking, and familiar with the political system and the laws of the state" (Kenworthy & Malami 1999: 240). These challenges have been compounded by the subjugated social positions that invariably make them second rate citizens.

### **Traditional Gendered Ideologies**

Culturally informed and defined ideological factors have been extremely important in determining women's opportunities to participate politically. For example, in the rural areas, women are expected to be members of the male societies such as *Poru*, *Gbangbani* and *Wonday* before they can be considered for political or leadership offices. For a democratic nation which accepts equality for both men and women, making such male exclusive spaces as silent criterion for political qualification does not only deny women their rights but also infringe on their fundamental human rights. The use of traditional practices has especially made women to shy away from politics and/or decision-making in the rural areas. Besides some of the people including women belong to either the Islamic or Christian faiths and their religions forbid them from traditional practices. Yet, these traditional practices are still enforced to get the women out of the political arena. Again, in especially the rural areas where culture dictates that a woman's role is that of a wife and mother, most women are reluctant to become politically active as such considerations would be viewed as defying cultural norms about appropriate feminine behaviour.

Moreover gendered ideologies not only affect women's willingness to be involved in politics, but also the willingness of the largely male political elites and the broader Sierra Leonean's society acceptance of a woman as a capable political leader (Norris & Inglehart, 2001). Ideologies such as women are emotional, weak, bossy, indecisive work to put women out of competition. No matter how misinformed they may be, it would appear that such prevalent ideologies are taken seriously by many voters and tend to be more important than actual political factors in predicting differences between women and men in elections and representation in national politics (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). It is this difference that explains why there is the low representation of women in politics and decision making in the northern and some parts of the eastern parts of the country. Thus, it could be said that with the help of a government that promotes social equality, women

with more progressive ideologies will be more politically involved than those who hold on to traditional view points about gender roles.

### **Religious Beliefs**

Religion has its setbacks in women's political participation in Sierra Leone. While Christianity, especially the Protestant, has encouraged women's political participation, some Islamists still do not allow women into leadership. Their excuse is that the women will become proud and even look low on the male folks. Some gender analysts have observed recently that the core clash between Islamic states and the West is not only over the issue of democracy but also over issues concerning gender equality and sexual liberation (Norris & Inglehart, 2003). In Sierra Leone, even women from conservative religious communities are less supportive of equal rights and opportunities for women. Part of this stems from the varying interpretation (or even misinterpretation) of religious doctrines, Islamic or Christian, which often result in the viewing of women as weaker, irrational and irresponsible sex who needs to be obedient, taken care of and under the control and protection of men. Generally, Muslims argue that Islam forbids women from governance and leadership. However, in places like Kuwait, Egypt and Iran, women activists are using orthodox Islamic beliefs of the early teachings of Muhammad and the Quran to seek for equality for both sexes. Such activists argue that under the eyes of God both sexes are equal and needed to be treated with justice and respect (Kusha, 1990). Other researchers have also observed that Mohammed (SAW) had greater love and respect for women, listened and gave weight to their expressed opinions and ideas (Mernissi, 1996; Afshar, 1996)).

### **Gender Role Socialization**

Gender role socialization starts at birth and is likely to occur through adolescence to even adulthood. At early childhood, boys and girls are taught different sets of expectations, responsibilities, and personal attributes to which they should aspire. Such perspectives may continue up to adulthood and marriage, which are tied to the notion of masculinity. Often girls are socialized into domesticity and to aspire for less in families and society while boys are socialized into publicity and higher places. In Sierra Leone, marriage is considered important to society and social organizations. Every male and female is seen as incomplete if they do not enter into marriage. In marriage, families pass on gender roles and attitudes to their children. Within families, children are socialized into roles as mothers, fathers or spouses directly and vicariously. While it has been argued that education and financial independence give women, especially wives, more negotiating power in the home, the roles of women and girls compared to men and boys are gendered to foster subjugation (Oppong, 1987). For example, household chores are considered a woman's work irrespective of education, career or economic leverage.

Also, many traditionalists believe that the educated girl is a less desirable marriage partner (Salm & Falola, 2002). Women in traditional families and societies are also more

likely to be forced to have many children even when they are not economically strong to look after them. Most traditional husbands are against the use of contraceptives. They tend to have more children than they can financially support. This results in the proneness to child mortality and maternal mortality due to the inability to pay for and access modern and costly medical facilities. Traditional practices and gender roles also function to promote early dating, which in most cases leads to early or even forced marriage through betrothal. The lack of maturity of such girls who are likely to be coupled with much older men keeps them out of decision-making. As well, they are denied the opportunity to pursue and obtain higher education which will likely qualify them for political office or enhance their political chances.

Historically, especially in the rural areas, masculinity is defined in three ways. Manhood could be achieved by becoming an elder, establishing oneself economically and marrying many women with many children. Also, being an elder is not necessarily achieved by age or wealth but also by how well the man can articulate himself in the community, his skills at offering advice or resolving conflicts. Community chiefs often are rich business men and successful farmers who grow cocoa, coffee and palm trees. Because the first two qualifications are harder to attain, many men have tended to take the easier route of marrying many women who bear many children.

While marriage in Sierra Leone is considered an essential requirement and part of life for both men and women, traditionally it is not the union that is more important but the children that accompany the relationship. Children are usually the main reason for marrying. The husband has unlimited rights, and the two partners have rights to keep individual accounts. But the men are very happy with this setup since they will have chance to support their concubines unknown to their wives. However the wife still expects financial assistance from the husband, especially for food and housekeeping. It is through this food and housekeeping money that the husband exercises control over the wife, with threats to withdraw the financial assistance.

The payment of bride fees does not only give husbands and their families, limitless rights over wives but also determine their chances for political aspirations and extent of participation in household or family decision-making. It has been viewed that bride fee is a means to subordinate women in marriage (Boni, 2001). It obliges women to bear children and to take subordinate roles. The man will constantly remind the woman that the bride payment was done so she can bear children, warm his bed on demand and care for the home and family. Fortes have observed that this payment gives the husbands sexual domination, reproductive rights, women's labour control and lineage citizenship over wives (Fortes, 1962; in Tanbih 1989).

### **The Civil War and Gendered Violence**

The eleven-year civil war did not help the situation of women and girls of Sierra Leone. The war dealt a blow to Sierra Leonean society but especially so to women. There was a

high death toll, destruction of property and resources, gross violation of human rights, including mass murders, worse forms of child labour and violence against women in the form of torture, rape, forced marriage and sex slavery. In war time, not only did social systems that were supposed to support women and girls broken, leaving them to fend for themselves under conditions that they dire, they also became breadwinners for their families. Girls in particular were forced to engage in transactional sex, where they traded sex for money, food and security. Sex and its trade became an important resource for such women to support themselves and whatever family was left. Others were forced into sex slavery in rebel camps where they serviced war lords and other combatants. Women and girls who survived the war have to live through the losses and pain but also the after effects of loss of bodily integrity. That women were suffered so severely under men manufactured war and that women's were targeted in particular ways make gender issues a critical arena for redress in the post-war reconstruction. Specifically, women like men should be effectively included in the politics and decisions of reconstruction. It is only when women's experiences of the horrors of the war, the abuses and violations of womanhood and their indelible scars and wounds have become important areas for targeting interventions in the post-war reconstruction can justice be served although partially.

Taken together, women's low status in politics has been attributed to poverty, low level of education, socio-cultural inhibitions and state-sponsored violence. It is in view of such the gendered violations that the post-conflict reconstruction effort, in addition to dealing with the broad issues, should of necessity also isolate and threat women and girls needs for special attention. More importantly, the development of Sierra Leone can only yield desired results when women, who form the majority, are equitably included in the political and decision-making process that shape policies and programmes of development.

## **Women's Empowerment and the Politics Of Reconstruction**

Since 2001, the governments of Sierra Leone have actively encouraged women to take part in the decision-making of the nation. Due to the socio-cultural factors and forces discussed above, majority of women remain at the background allowing largely men to take decisions. However, with education, women might come to know their rights and what contributions and developments they will bring to the nation if they take active part in decision-making. In the past, the Ministry of Education had stated that "The need for equity in educational opportunities must be met by multiple interventions to ensure that women's enrolment, retention and achievement are significantly increased to enable them serve the nation at the highest levels of decision-making." (Department of Education, 1975: 13). This statement had been reaffirmed by subsequent governments in 1996 and 2007. However, enough efforts have not been adequately applied by the governments to make sure that tradition the inhibitors are curtailed and eventually eliminated.

Women, if independent and empowered, can develop good sense of belonging and consequently find themselves in social clubs or religious organizations that have supportive social aims and prepare them for decision-making and political participation. The empowerment of women can therefore not be separated from agitating for their human rights. This means women should achieve equal status as men. Such aims can only be achieved when women have equal status with men in both labour and education forces; women's access to employment and economic resources, and to remove all legal impediments to better access of political power.

During the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the primary focus of the gathering was to advocate for women's empowerment. Some men who are gender biased and have refused to go with the world for development and modernization, have looked upon such gatherings as being held by a bunch of frustrated women. In the Sierra Leone society however, although the governments are making efforts to empower women, there are still many hindrances. It is therefore advisable that government embarks on drastic reforms to stem the tide. Sometimes passing a law is one issue, and to monitor and implement such laws effectively could be another issue. Any of these laws passed must be put into effect if development should take place in the country. This is important in the sense that Sierra Leonean women like other women in other parts of the world particularly Africa, have gone through series of discrimination in a gender-biased male-dominant society. The state and gender activists are still finding ways through international bodies to grapple with the unjust conditions.

There is also the international clamour for gender equality that has made other women in other countries seize the bull by the horn. Countries like Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have achieved a combination of approximate gender equality in secondary school enrolment, at least 30% of seats in parliament or legislature are held by women, and women represent approximately 50% of paid employment in non-agricultural activities (Lovenduski, 2005). Chandra (1999: 20) has stated that women and life are synonymous terms. A woman gives life and she is the most apt in preserving it. However, only 4% of decisions taken in the world are by women. She also believes that women are the best messengers for peace. This simply refers to the women's primordial and divine obligation of motherhood. The natural role of women to give birth to children accords them the right and obligation to treat them with endearment. To teach them how to speak goes a long way to influence their character and thus their contribution to national development. A popular adage by a Ghanaian educationist, Dr. J. E. Kwegyir Aggrey, which says 'to educate a man is to educate an individual; but to educate a woman is to educate a nation.' This is what Chandra (1999: 15) means when she said that "women do not seek power for power's sake, but to improve the human condition."

During the civil war, the role of women could not be overemphasized. Women stood firmly by the men to bring the war to an end. They sat with them at round table conferences during conflict resolution periods, played active role in the democratization and election process, and still continue to participate in post-war reconstruction processes in poverty

alleviation drive. All these have helped to promote peace and national development. Yet, women are yet to enjoy the full benefits of the now stable and peaceful Sierra Leonean society. This is not to deny some efforts that are being made to target and address women's and girls' special needs.

Other conventions and efforts to promote good governance and equitable or sustainable development have included gender equality as an important indicator of success or failure. The Millennium Declaration, signed in September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Summit, required member states to commit themselves to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable. Thus the MDGs recognise that the only way of achieving sustainable development is to map out strategies that would eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary school education and increase literacy rates, the share of women working in non-agricultural jobs and the proportion of seats women hold in national parliaments. Sierra Leone is not only a signatory to the declaration but also has been committed to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women through the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs.

In order to show its commitment to the cause of the poor and deprived and promote gender equity, the government of Sierra Leone established the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs in 2002. This Ministry is working in line with United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC) on creating safe childhoods and 'child friendly' environments while empowering women through various strategies in view of global and national commitments. The Ministry does this in collaboration with various stakeholders in education but also other equally important sectors such as health and agriculture toward enhancing gender equality and promoting sustainable development. These stakeholders include parents, teachers, policy makers and the larger community.

Earlier on, in 1995, it was revealed by the Ministry of Education that about 66% of children of school going age were not in school; and out of this percentage, 65% of them were girls. When it came into being later, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs has suggested that particular attention should be paid to girls whose academic output lags behind that of the boys. The Ministry argues that it is imperative that government takes actions to increase the participation of all school age children but especially so for girls. The emphasis here is on education as a vital element of women's empowerment. Educating girls to grow up into useful adulthood and take active part in planning, monitoring and executing development programs can be an important step forward. Through education, girls can acquire job skills that will empower them economically and intellectually as well as enhance their status in society. Education is the main gateway to alleviating the poverty and suffering of girls and women in particular and the poor of Sierra Leone in general.

Additionally, the CEDAW has become an important instrument for women's rights mobilization and advocacy. Such mobilizations have focused on addressing socio-

cultural inhibitors, strengthening women's agencies, supporting recovery from the war experiences, protecting women's interests and promoting their development needs. Hence, as part of post-conflict reconstruction not only is the CEDAW gaining a place in gender discussions, but also national development efforts are including gender discussions.

More importantly, women activists are mobilizing and lobbying community leaders, government and donors for socio-economic resources for women, social protection policies and programmes as well as human rights protection for deprived women, children and even men. One line of activism has been on the promotion of affirmative action. They have advocated for the establishment of quota and equity strategies that target women's deprivations and history of discrimination. Government is also responding in many ways, although not at an appreciably pace.

### **Quota and Equity Strategies**

The dire situation of many poor women and girls as well as the post-conflict development needs of the country require that vigorous efforts but also strategic steps are taken toward the improvement of women's conditions and status as well as the creation of a gender balanced society. While some such efforts are ongoing, it has been argued that they are too slow in addressing the dire situations of a post –conflict country. Hence, affirmation action in the form of quotas should be instituted as has been done in countries such as Rwanda and South Africa which have undergone similar situations. These but others such as Uganda and Tanzania have had to take strategic decisions and make strategic amendments in order to uplift the political participation of women but also other disadvantaged groups.

The quota movement, as a strategy for gender equality has been identified as capable of bringing the change in the dire situation of post-conflict Sierra Leone. The quota system is expected to go a long way to improve not only gender balance, but also the development of the society (Lovenduski, 2005). Lovenduski (2005: 83) has stated that “The creation of a gender-balanced institution elected on the basis of party list proportional representation system of election, combined with arrangements that public appointed offices are filled according to non-sexist criteria of qualifications, would be central to such systems.”

By extension, a quota system is important for bridging gender gaps in politics and decision-making in the formal and traditional system of Sierra Leone. Within the traditional setting, where for example Paramount Chiefs constitute largely male rulers, women should have equal rights of succession as men; not only equality but the succession must be alternated between the sexes. Yet, in its short life, the engendering of and gender equality in such established political processes and institutions has proved to be a frustrating process in some parts of the country, especially the North and Eastern parts. For example, in the Eastern Kono District, no woman has been able to rise to the position of a District Officer yet even when the country's Civil Service laws do not bar

women. Yet, some barriers, socio-cultural and even structural hold women back and keep them out of such systems.

In the last two decades, large numbers of women in many Eastern and Southern African countries have entered parliament. As of 2007, the national legislatures of countries like Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania had women ranging from 25% to 50% which placed them among the top 30 countries in the world that have increased the representation of women in politics (Bauer & Britton, 2006). Such developments are far above what is happening in other parts of Sub Sahara, where on the average women's representation hovers around 17%. In response to the situation, countries such as South Africa, Tanzania and Namibia have used the proportional representation electoral and voluntary based quotas to increase the percentage of women in their parliament.

Women of southern African countries have used strategies such as support from transnational feminist networks and pressure from women's group to effect transformations. Women leaders meet other gender activists at international conferences, where they are able to share experiences and lessons which shape national structures for women's right, and what strategies they can use to gain access to formal political offices. Namibia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique are all countries that have had a past of nationalist struggles, and some even have gone through civil wars. After those struggles, women of these countries were determined that women's issue must be paramount in decision-making and politics in their countries. Sierra Leone compares with them due to its shared history of civil war (1991-2002), although not of the same proportions. Women's activists can put pressure on the government to increase women's representation in the government. Shortly after the civil wars in Uganda (1986), leaders of women's movement met President Yoweri Museveni and demanded an increase in women's representation in the government (Tripp, 2006). With such opening, their representations have grown over the years (Tripp, 2006).

In Rwanda, women's group were instrumental in grassroots economic development, and overtime pushed for democratic reform and political representation. With the help of NGOs and other women's group, such strategies could be used to push for women's representation in Sierra Leone. Also, women's groups in Uganda have focused on common interests and minimized differences in order to rebuild their nation (Tripp 2000: 649). With such mobilizations, Ugandan women were heard immediately. Sierra Leone can implement such strategies. Political leaders will be forced to recognize the power and influence of women's movement, thereby yielding to their demands (Tripp 200: 233). Uganda was able to return a woman vice president in the national politics by 1996 (Tripp 2000: 67-71). The movement was able to secure a rapid appointment of women ministers. All these achievements were based on the success of a unified women's movement, as they were able to reduce women's marginalization and to build a strong unified movement to influence their constitutional frameworks.

Reynolds (1999) has also observed that the rules guiding elections are very instrumental in determining women's access to political offices. The quota system is therefore an important tool to address gender imbalance in national legislatures and parliaments (Caul, 2001). The implementation of a quota system is far less difficult than to transform the level of political and socio-economic structures of a state (Norris 1996; Jones 1998). Sierra Leone's electoral process can adopt the voluntary or mandatory quota systems. Countries which have adopted such systems often refer to the CEDAW and the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing and the Platform for Action, which has laid down guidelines to increase women's representation in politics. The quota system is a worldwide trend used by nations to fast track equal legislative representation (Bauer & Britton, 2006). Such systems could be applied in the Sierra Leonean case as it will transform the institution of parliament and change the legislative priorities in favour of the needs and interests of women in the nation.

In southern Africa, the leaders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have signed the Declaration on Gender and Development (1997) which requested for 30% women in decision-making as a target against 2005, consistent with Millennium Development Goal Three (MDG 3). Such agreements could be signed between the government of Sierra Leone and women activist groups, which will be a binding tool with which women activists can agitate and hold the government accountable. But the most effective quota system is the mandatory one implemented in Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda.

In 2005, Burundi had only 18.4% women in its national assembly ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)). With the implementation of the mandatory quota system, it is now ranked 18<sup>th</sup> among states that have internationally increased women representation in their parliaments ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)). In voluntary quota systems, political parties reserve seats for women in parliament on their pre-election party lists.

Also, women in South Africa have been able to pressure political parties to put women on every third seat on the party list, popularly called the Zebra List. While they have not been able to gain the 50% women's representation, this move has helped to increase women's representation (Tripp, 2004). When leading parties implement the quota system, the impact is that the other parties are forced to follow the same method to gain support from the citizens. This is another method activists in Sierra Leone could use to increase women's representation in parliament. In Mozambique, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) adopted a 30% quota in their pre-election party list for Congress in 1992 (Disney, 2006). The party also made a balanced distribution of women throughout the list instead of placing them at the bottom of unwinnable seats. Disney has observed that FRELIMO has been able to return at least 43% women as Deputies in the National Assembly (Disney, 1996). Applying such systems in Sierra Leone cannot only increase women's representation in parliament, but can also increase the popularity of the party. Thus, the normalization of gender equality in the East and Southern African countries has

changed the cultural and societal perception about the nature of political leadership and governance.

Another institution established by state governments to ensure that the basic need of women are met is the creation of Gender Ministries, with the idea of a centralized model which serves as the focal point for gender legislation and policy implementation for the government. Namibia has a Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare which oversees national gender policy, and a Women and Law Committee which helps to draft new laws for women. Uganda has the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development which is responsible for Legal Aid Services and Legal Education, National Women's Day, Capacity Building for each of the other government departments, Monitoring and Evaluation of Gender Mainstreaming and Entandikwa Credit Scheme which provides lending and credit services for impoverished Ugandans, as well as gender sensitization for the Legal Profession. These are areas the Sierra Leone society could adopt.

South Africa has the National Gender Machinery (NGM) which helps to mainstream gender issues in all spheres of the government. Such machineries could make sure that gender issues are not sidelined (Seidman, 1999). Sierra Leone already has a Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs. They have also introduced the Family Support Unit in the National Police Force to check domestic crimes and violence. However they can do better if they can use most of the strategies other states have used to attain gender balance in their politics. In South Africa, women MPs have been involved in legislation dealings on abortion, employment equity, skills development, domestic violence, and basic income grants and maintenance (Britton, 2006). Women in Namibia were able to mobilize to fight against the apartheid regime and its racist laws which doubly discriminated against women. Now Namibia has legislations which work to strengthen the economic and social development of women and the girl child; equality in marriage, land rights, gender violence, domestic violence, and child maintenance (Bauer, 2006). All such moves cater for a gender balanced and developed state.

Sierra Leone has responded to this by setting up similar machinery, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Women and Children's Affairs. The Ministry works with other ministry to foster gender equality. It also leads in policy and programming development on women and children. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs in collaboration with the Family Support Unit of the National Police Force has helped to seek the welfare of street children, sexually abused girl children, and even restored the rights of women who had been abused by their spouses. This Ministry has committed itself to activities that would ensure effective partnership that would eradicate gender-based violence in the nation.

Most times women have aspired to be included in decision-making in the nation, but they are just pushed aside like rags. Equity strategies such as the quota movement, call for a society that caters for an equal number of both sexes in national elections, job appointments and promotions in jobs. There must even be a principle of rotation that

would guarantee that even positions like president and vice president would alternate between men and women. Culture and traditions have made the society fail to realize that women are equal citizens in the nation. Politics in general has been viewed as something treacherous and dangerous. As such integrating women into politics and decision-making both in number and ideas is unappealing. The idea that politics is male dominated has long been established. But with modernization, the presence of women in politics and public institutions has increased all over the world. It is unfair for men to monopolize representation especially when that country is moving towards modernity and democracy (Philips, 1995).

The Quota and Equity paradigm therefore favours that political parties increase the number of their women representatives. At this time when public distaste for corruption and distrust of politicians are high in especially Africa, supporters of Quota and Equity system have argued that increased women's representation in public offices could have an extremely significant beneficial impact on a nation (Randall, 1982). Women in countries such as Sweden have come closer to politics than any other country. While women of some of these states have been lucky to have been integrated in political and decision making, some others have been effectively challenged in others.

Equity advocates in most democracies have therefore generated and engaged in debates and mobilized in local, national and international social movements, wherein they were able to effect changes in processes, treaties, constitutions, formal and informal rules and daily practices. In places like Scotland, feminists are involved at every stage of the constitution making process (Lovenduski, 2005). For the past 25 years feminists in Scotland sought a "legislature in which women held 50% of the places and were well represented in its cabinet and executive" (Lovenduski, 2005). They were able to draw attention to the kind of electoral system that would most benefit women; and not only that but secured agreements from Labour and Liberal Democratic Party leaders to elect women candidates. As this was achieved, the advocates became involved in discussions about institutional designs. With this Quota system, the Labour Party was able to return 28 women and 28 men to the new Parliament in the first election in 1999. By 2003, through the Quota system women made up 40% of members of the Scottish Parliament and 50 % of members of the Welsh National Assembly (Lovenduski, 2005). Such system could apply in the case of Sierra Leone, and with an assertive leadership it can work. Women do not need to be men to bring changes in their nations. What they need to do is to disrupt old alliances, challenge prevailing problems in the society, and offer practical feminized solutions to real obstacles to their integration in higher offices of decision making and politics.

To increase women's political and decision-making representation in Sierra Leone and other modern democracies the idea of justice must be invoked in the society. The key actors to such advocacy organizations are religious houses and bodies, political parties, and the media – news papers. Equity strategy advocates for special training and financial assistance, setting targets for women's presence in the government. The government of

Sierra Leone should therefore fund women's advocacy organizations, fund research on women's representation, include women's advocacy organizations in consultations at all level, sign international treaties and protocols that call for equality of women's and men's representation, make provisions for women to be appointed to public offices, remove legal obstacles to women's representation, remove local traditions which are obstacles to special measures, to promote women's equality; and even reserve seats for women in legislatures, encourage and facilitate women to compete in various ways. Parties and governments must secure places for women representatives by making their sex a necessary qualification for offices.

## **Conclusion/ Recommendations**

The role of women in politics and decision-making in Sierra Leone started even before colonialism, especially among the Mendes. While women from each and every ethnic group are represented in decision-making bodies in the nation, the proportion on which this is based is very small. It will do the government of Sierra Leone and the society as a whole good, in its post-conflict reconstruction efforts in particular, to apply the quota and equity strategies as critical tools from enhancing women participation in politics and decision-making. Women in Sierra Leone have played no mean role in the transformation from a military rule to democracy; and were in the forefront in the recent national elections that resulted in the peaceful handing over of power from one civilian government to another.

Undoubtedly, the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women is the key to empower women in Sierra Leone to participate effectively in politics and decision-making. It must be noted also that Sierra Leone has been trying to fulfil the aim of CEDAW in the areas of bodily integrity and health rights for women, family and marriage rights, literacy and education rights, economic rights, civil and political rights. But among all these, the most important is the equal right to education and political participation, which the government should revisit and put together effective policies and programmes as well as legislations and regulations that will ensure that all women and girls enjoy their human rights especially the right to self determination and political participation. They should also be granted the opportunities and access to the much-needed socioeconomic and socio-cultural resources that enhance their competition and success in competitive and representative politics. Above all, affirmative action is needed to expedite progress. The numerous success stories from African and beyond, discussed above should guide the government and people of Sierra Leone in making the right choices.

Specifically, the following areas of interventions are needed:

Effective educational policies with counselling and information campaigns should be put in place, to enable women so as to regain control over their own lives and bodies,

There should be zero tolerance of violence against women, with support programs that may change laws.

Young people including both men and women must be consulted and integrated into the development of their communities.

The National Electoral Commission should make it mandatory for political parties to integrate gender into all areas of their electoral manifestos, setting targets for a 50-50 representation.

Government in collaboration with civil societies should undertake a public sensitization program on the electoral process, to assert women's right to equal political participation, ensure transparency and equity.

Make legislations for the adoption of quotas in electoral and other politics and decision making sphere.

Traditional beliefs and practices that are gender discriminatory should be identified, and laws must be enacted to eliminate them.

Government must strengthen the capacity of the national gender machinery, to ensure equity in response to the needs of women and men in the society.

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