



Case Study: Women and Politics in Sierra Leone

Summary

Despite the engagement of Sierra Leonean women in the peace process, and efforts to increase women's participation in public life, they face difficulties today in entering parliamentary politics. Since the end of the country's brutal civil war in 2002, Sierra Leone has had two national and two local elections, with preparations for a third round of national and local elections underway in 2012. Despite some positive changes, especially at the local level, women continue to be underrepresented in Sierra Leone's political institutions.

Sierra Leonean women have a distinguished history of involvement in pre-independence politics. Unfortunately, the country's chequered political history of coups and counter-coups and one-party authoritarianism in the post-independence era, put an end to women's political activism. Despite their lack of involvement in politics prior to the civil war, women and women's organisations have played a vital role in promoting peace and leading high profile campaigns to increase women's representation in public life. Yet still Sierra Leonean women are poorly represented in parliament and local governance.

Specific frameworks for women's increased political representation in post-war situations such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and a promise in 2010 by the head of state and reiterated again during the celebration of International Women's Day 2011

"The coalition of women parliamentarians, women NGOs and women activists in sustaining concerted efforts to support women's access to political office has provided opportunities for political empowerment, where conventional pathways such as political parties have been inhibitive" Hussainatu Abdullah (2010: 69)



Kono Dialogue Forum on the 30% quota for women's political participation in Sierra Leone, March 2010. Photo: Kind permission of Women's Solidarity Support Group

"...to adhere to women's demands for a 30 per cent quota in parliament..." are in place. But are laws and policies enough to bring about more equitable political representation? **What would it take to get more women into politics in Sierra Leone?**

Research Process

Researchers collected both primary and secondary data. The primary data collection involved in-depth interviews with 13 female councillors, a mayor and deputy mayor, as well as 6 key women activists and governmental officials and 2 female independent political candidates (one successful and one unsuccessful). Secondary data was gathered through a desk review of policy and programme documents of both government and non-government actors and published and non-published academic writings.

Policy Recommendations

- Policy makers need to be aware that the electoral system adopted by a country plays just as decisive a role in enhancing representation as affirmative action measures.
- Money is crucial for winning elections. A special electoral financing system should be developed and adopted to assist female candidates and they should have support in learning how to put together campaigns.
- Women's activist groups need continual support to enable them to provide vital training, legislative support and advocacy for female political aspirants.
- Women need continued support once they get into parliament so training provided by NGOs and aid organisations needs to go beyond campaign training. In order to be effective, women need to learn how best to use their government position and how to engage in public spaces to promote change.
- Government needs to support women's organisations and civil society organisations' efforts in strengthening the accountability of elected women representatives to women as a constituency.

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Key Findings

Three key elements have enabled greater political representation for women in Sierra Leone:

1. The end of the war represented a political moment laden with opportunities for change and reform of existing political representation.
2. Sustained and concerted efforts by women's groups campaigning to increase women's participation in politics and creating a gender balance in all levels of public life – a particularly significant influence has come from the 50:50 Group, a non-partisan women's campaigning organisation formed in 2000.
3. Change in the electoral system from first-past-the-post system to proportional representation. The 1996 and 2002 elections were based on proportional representation. In 1996 there were 5 elected women (6.5 per cent); in 2002 there were 18 (14.5 per cent). Female representation dropped to 16 women (13.5 per cent) in the 2007 election with the reintroduction of the first-past-the-post system. At the local level, 58 women (13.7 per cent) were elected councillors in 2004, one (5.3 per cent) as Mayor/Chairperson and 2 (10.5 per cent) as Deputy Chairs/Mayors. In 2008, through the concerted efforts of women activists, 86 women (17 per cent) of all councillors were elected.

Women's organisations are challenging existing barriers to their political participation through nationwide activism.

Parliament has yet to respond to the demand for a 30 per cent quota of women. The reason they have not done so are due to complexities around the best way to implement a quota system, and a rejection by the Constitutional Review Committee stating that quotas are elitist and would not have support outside Freetown. Women's organisations have contested the 'elitist' allegations by carrying out a nationwide sensitisation campaign holding dialogues and forums between women and different stakeholders at all levels of society.

References

Hussaina J. Abdullah (2010) 'Forging Ahead without an Affirmative Action Policy: Female Politicians in Sierra Leone's Post-War Electoral Process', *IDS Bulletin* 41.5: 62-71