THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING IN THE GOVERNANACE SYSTEM OF SIERRA LEONE

(CASE STUDY OF MAKENI CITY IN BOMBALI DISTRICT)

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Abstract: The study investigated the role women played in decision-making in the governance system in Sierra Leone highlighting their challenges and recommendations made based on the findings of this study.

A mixed research method of both descriptive qualitative and quantitative approach was used.
The study revealed that women are still outnumbered by men in positions of responsibility although women's qualifications have provided access to aspire for jobs previously held by men. The results further showed the role of women in governance contributes to the growth of institutions and promotion of gender equity to some level.
Furthermore, the findings revealed that women are underrepresented in politics at both the national and local levels and that women are not enjoying their involvement in governance due to men dominance and institutional structures that mostly favor men's leadership.
The study further showed that women who hold political positions are faced with many challenges such as cultural acceptance, presumed political experience and skills of leadership, economic barriers family burden and men do not seriously consider women's contributions and suggestions in the decision-making meetings because traditionally women were not allowed to attend meetings with men.
The study concluded that Sierra Leone government, NGOs and other funding agencies should collaborate and encourage women's participation, at both national and community's level, in order to promote women political empowerment in decision making in their governance system. This will ultimately increase their confidence to demand equal participation and representation in governance.

Keywords: Governance structure, decision making, women's empowerment, under representation, gender equality, female participation, GEWE Act of 2022.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The under-representation of women at any level of governance and decision-making results in a democratic deficit. It has been proven time and again that diverse groups make better decisions. This is particularly true when it comes to a task as challenging as representing the interests of citizens at the local level. Thus, gender equality and good governance are part of a virtuous cycle. A necessary condition linking gender equality and good governance is female political leadership.

A recent UNDP and McKinsey study found that female participation in public administration and in decision-making roles is positively correlated with economic development as well as gender equality in society. Increasing the proportion of women in public institutions makes them more representative, increases innovation, improves decision-making and benefits whole societies" - António Guterres (2017),

It has been widely experienced that governance structures which do not provide for adequate participation of women, often suffer from state interventions which are neither inclusive nor democratic. Including women, especially in local governments is an essential step towards creating gender equal opportunities and gender sensitive policies . Women are actively involved in household and community work and hence well aware of real issues faced by common people. This gives them insight and perspective which can be instrumental in sustainable overall development

Governance is a contextual term; from different schools of thought, Ihemeje (2013) postulate that governance is based on goals to be achieved and approaches to be followed. World Bank (1991) in its report defines the term governance as "the exercise of political authority and use of institutional resources to manage societal problems and affairs". From a feminist standpoint, governance shares the principles of being inclusive, accountable, gender-responsive, and representative of the diversity of interests of those governed. Responsive and accountable governance thus demands equitable gender Involvement, representation and contribution in all decision-making processes. History reveals that women have battled to be part of all decision-making processes in governance since early 1880s. Women researchers like Harriet Martineau have done quite a number of research and theories on women, gender and governance (Sydie, 2002).

The Beijing Platform for Action considered the inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision - making at all levels as one of the critical areas of concern for the empowerment of women. It stated "Women's equal Involvement in decision - making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active Involvement of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision - making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved".

Wollack (2019) affirms that during the early 1990s, women in governance worldwide accounted for only 10% before the launch of the UN's Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) in 1995. This BPA is widely known in the fight for "equal access and increased capacity by both men and women to involve in power structures and decision making". After the launch of the BPA, the rate of women in governance actually rose from an average of 13% in 1999 to 19% by the year 2009 in most countries within Europe.

In Sierra Leone, the role of women in politics and decision making is not a new phenomenon in the socio-political development of the country. 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 Involvement 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.

Additionally, 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 governance and decision-making dates back to the pre-colonial period and varies from one region and/or ethnicity to another.

These however remain inadequate as the involvement of women compared to men in all spheres of the Sierra Leonean society is still very low. With ongoing reforms and progress in the re-emerging nation state, which values democratic involvement, it is expected that this would translate strategically into gender equality in politics and decision-making.

In January 2023, the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Rtd Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, publicly signed into law the gender equality and women empowerment bill, now known as the GEWE Act of 2022, guaranteeing at least 30% of all positions in local councils, all jobs in the civil service, all jobs in private institutions with 25 or more employees, extending maternal leave from 12 to 14 weeks, as well as financial inclusion for women.

The purpose of this study is to provide vital information on the importance of women in decision making in the governance system of Sierra Leone which could help policy makers in developing gender equality policies that achieve peace, stability and development in the country.

1.1 Problem Analysis

Like in any other developing nations, women face acute challenges which hinder their participation in governance. Some of these challenges include socio-cultural and religious resistances, poor civic education, lack of women-centred public policies, poor family support, and patriarchal dominance in the operations of governments (Hauwa et al Jul 2023). Even women already in governance face the challenges of rising stress levels and multiple responsibilities at work and at home, as well as the continual need to prove herself (Women and Leadership, n.d.). Women's political engagement is hampered or facilitated by a variety of circumstances, including socioeconomic status, geographical, cultural, and political system form (Shvedova, 2007).

Women's involvement in Sierra Leone governance system at all levels is an issue of great concern because women have been relegated to the political background for far too long, which of course made them lose their rightful place in governance. According to the 2015 census in Sierra Leone, women account for about 60% of the population, but they are underdeveloped and underrepresented in governance.

The poor economic status and low educational levels of majority of women in Sierra Leone coupled with their low self-esteem regarding political positions, and discriminatory traditional beliefs regarding their ability to head decision-making bodies are all barriers preventing women from running effective campaigns and winning.

According to Sierra Leone report on Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome of the Twenty-third Special Session of the General Assembly (2000), only 8.5 percent of women are top managers in the public sector and 20 percent in the diplomatic service and boards of parastatals. The National Gender Strategic Plan, 2010-2013, attributes this to the structural discrimination that women face in law and in practice, as well as the pervasive beliefs surrounding women's roles in decision-making, coupled with their multiple roles as wives' mothers, family caregivers, and employees.

It is against this background that this paper attempts to explore the role of women in decision-making in the governance system in Makeni Township, Bombali Sebora Chiefdom, Bombali District, Sierra Leone.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to provide vital information on the importance of women in decision making in the governance system of Sierra Leone which could help policy makers in developing gender equality policies that achieve peace, stability and development in the country.

The following objectives are pertinent to this study (a) Examine the involvement of women in the governance system (b) Determine the barriers and challenges women faced in decision making in the governance system (c) Make recommendations based on findings

2.0 METHODOLGY

2.1 Research Design

This research follows a mixed method of descriptive qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative and Qualitative data collection was done through the admission of close-ended and open ended questionnaire for respondents to give additional information relevant to the study. The data collected was statistically analyzed using SPSS

2.2 Area of Study

Makeni is the capital city of Bombali District and the largest city and economic center in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone. Makeni is the fifth largest city in Sierra Leone by population with a population of 85,116 in the 2021 census. The city of Makeni occupies a total area of 16.75km^2 and lies approximately 110 miles east of Freetown.

Makeni grew as a trade and collecting centre. Palm oil, rice and other essential food stuff collected in Makeni are transported by road to Freetown. The town is known for Gara tie-dyeing, an important industrial activity of Makeni women.

The population of the district is ethnically diverse, although the large majority of its people are the Temne the prevalent ethnic group in this area – and Muslims – the predominant religion in Sierra Leone. However secret societies such as the Poro-Society play important roles in the people's everyday experiences. The predominant livelihood strategy in the chiefdom is petty traders, bike riding, skilled and unskilled labor occupation and white scholar jobs offered by the Government, private sector, and non-governmental organization.

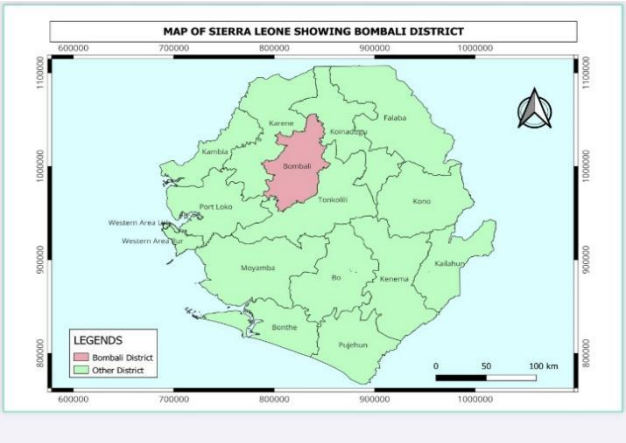

Figure1: Map of Sierra Leone showing study area (Source: Extract on Arc GIS)

2.3 Study Population

In this study the target population was one hundred (100) female working class in Makeni city who were ages 18 years and above.

2.4 Sampling Design and Data collection Procedure

The researcher adopted non-probability purposive sampling in order to understand the respondents profiles, how women are involved in decision-making, and the challenges women face in involving themselves in governance issues in Makeni city.

Data for this study was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected directly from respondents through the use of a developed tools (Semi-structured questionnaire and Key Informants Interview guide). Secondary data was collected from variety of sources like journals, publications, past dissertations, and internet resources. This was done to provide foundation of the work and guide the researchers in conducting the study.

A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to employees of different institutions and a key informant interview with employees occupying managerial positions within the township. Therefore, this data was coded, entered, and analyzed using SPSS 20.0, and the information were presented using graphs, charts, and tables.

Table 1: Institutions sampled in the study

No.	Institution	Sample size
1	Makeni District Council	10
2	Makeni City Council	10
3	Provincial Secretary's Office	10
4	Statistics Sierra Leone	10
5	District Health Monitoring Team (DHMT)	10
6	SLRTA	10
7	Sierra Leone Commercial Bank	10
8	NATCOM	10
9	National Registration Office	10
10	Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corperation	10
Total		100

3.0 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of respondents

3.1.2 Age of respondents

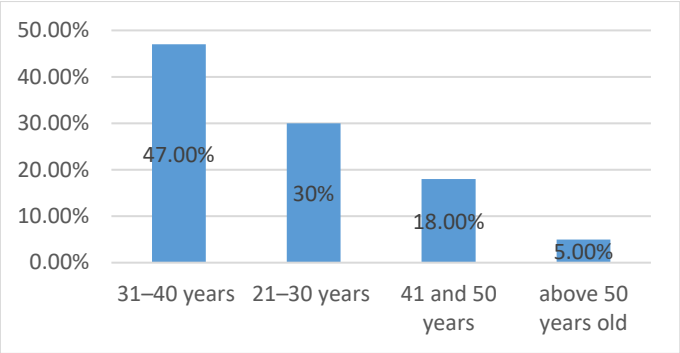

Figure 2: Age of respondents

The research reveals that 77% of females working in public offices fall between the age brackets of 21–40 years and only 23% are within 41years and above 50years as presented in Figure 2. This could be interpreted that Sierra Leone has a very youthful female working force that should be given the opportunity to actively participate in the decision making in the governance system of public institutions. The country should not depend on the ageing population that presently occupies key positions.

3.1.3 Marital status of respondents

An assessment done on the marital status of respondents showed 48% are married, 35% single, 8% divorced, 5% widow and 3% co-habitation. The reasons given for being single or divorced were that most men abandon families because they either could not withstand the family burden, repeated abused, or cheating.

3.1.4 Level of formal education attained

An investigation done on the level of formal education attained by the females interviewed showed that 46.4% master's holders, 40.9% had undergraduate degrees, and 6.4% had a doctoral degrees. 3.6% had vocational qualifications, and 0.91% had graduated from senior secondary school. This impressive findings could justify the need for women to be included in all decision making strategies of public institutions in Sierra Leone as they have the capacity to lead and take actions on their own.

3.1.5 Number of Female employees

With all the educational levels attained by women, 80% of the institutions interviewed had less than 20% women employees as presented in Figure 3. Knowing women to be drivers of development, institutions should be encouraged to reinforce the 30% female employment quota for all public institutions approved by President Bio's government.

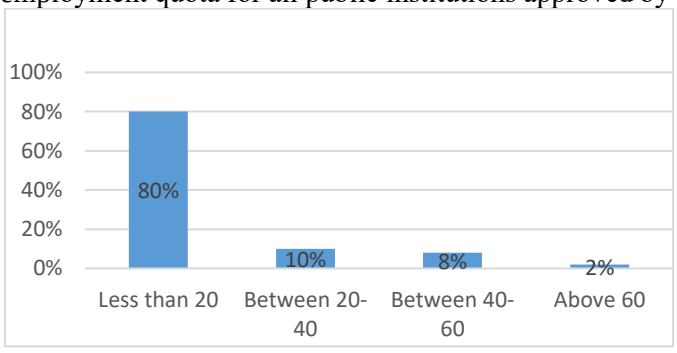

Figure 3: Number of female employees

These findings show institutions still finds it difficult to meet the 30% quota allocated to women through the GEWE bill of 2021.

3.2. Role/status of women in decision making in governance

In this question respondents were asked to agree on the statement on the roles/status of women in decision making in governance using the scale indicated Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A). Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD) and their responses indicated in the table 2.

71.8% strongly agreed to the statements that women are still outnumbered by men in positions of responsibility, while 1.8% disagreed with the statement. 56.4% strongly agreed that their qualification has provided access to aspiring for jobs previously held by men. Only 3.6% disagreed, 50% strongly agreed that their roles played have promoted gender

equality within and outside their institution, 5.5% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, 61.8% strongly agreed with the statement that their roles are contributing to the growth of their institution, and 3.6% disagreed with the statement. Another 61.8% strongly agreed with the statement that females are generally lower in status and power than males, respectively. About 33.6% strongly disagreed that their status affected the work they were doing.

Qualitatively, the key informants during the KII, made the following statements: KII3, who holds a managerial position, said that "since I acquired my bachelor's degree, I have embarked on numerous capacity trainings that have increased my capacity to take up a managerial position, and I have also encouraged most women to take up these adventures in boosting their status in their community and within the institution so they could take up a higher position and be at the forefront of decision-making in their institution". In addition, KII 4 said that "we as women in Africa in general found it very difficult to partake in decision-making because in most institutions men are largely dominated and our voice could not be heard in any decision making. Praise be to God, now there is a GEWE act that will possibly make our voice heard and our status and roles in communities will be known through participating in decision-making and governance issues that boost women's presence in formal politics in Sierra Leone". KII5 said that we men already know the importance of encouraging women to perform their roles in various institutions and communities because it will ease the burden on us. Before now, women's roles were just known to be more of reproductive roles, while few were performing productive and community roles, but over the years, things have changed."

3.3 Women involvement in Governance system and decision making

Table 5 above indicates that the majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the above statements. 63.64% strongly agreed with the statement that women are underrepresented in politics at both the national and local levels; 32.73% agreed with the statement; 2.72% neither agreed nor disagreed; and 0.91% disagreed with the statement. 51.82% strongly agreed to the statement that they have equal involvement in decision-making among women and men in their institution; 43.64% agreed to this; and 4.54 neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. 50% strongly agreed to the statement that women are not enjoying their involvement in governance due to low awareness as well as inefficiency in policy; 41.82% agreed to the statement; 2.73% neither agreed nor disagreed; and 5.45% strongly disagreed with this statement. 48.18% strongly agreed with the statement that their institution is playing a relevant role in the involvement of marginalized women in decision-making and has raised the commitment of women in decision-making processes in any government sector. 41.82% agreed, 7.23% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 2.73% disagreed with the statement. 49.3% strongly agreed to the statement that their involvement cut across all departments within the institution, while 40.09% agreed, 4.55% neither agreed nor disagreed, 1.82% disagreed, and 4.45% strongly disagreed with the statement.

In addition, KII2 in her interview said, "In my institution, the only way we are making women involved in decision-making is that the entire team will engage and a representative will be sent to management for the final meeting. This has helped a lot as well as building synergies amongst institutions. KII 3 said that "if at all awareness raisings are done to promote this recent GEWE bill, it will accommodate more women into governance and will soon surpass the already 30% quote given, and it will entirely promote the abundance of participation of women in politics and governance". KII5 mentioned in her interview that with all the strides made so far, we have seen an improvement in terms of more women being given the opportunity to participate at the highest level of governance in the country, and we are hoping for more."

3.4 Barriers and Challenges women faced in decision making in Governance system.

56.63% strongly agreed that women in decision-making positions feel isolated; for this reason, women can't make their own assessments and lose their self-confidence while 34.55% agreed, 5.43% stayed neutral, and 3.17% disagreed with the statement. 50.91% strongly agreed with the statement that women who hold political positions are faced with many challenges, among them a lack of political experience and skills in leadership; 41.82% agreed; and 7.27% stayed neutral. 49.09% strongly agreed with the statement that women are not accepted as representatives in religious and traditional aspects. 30.91% agreed, 9.09% stayed neutral, 4.55% disagreed, and 10.91% strongly disagreed with the overall statement. Another 49.09% strongly agreed with the statement that women have no power to participate in the decision-making of the institution due to economic barriers. 34.55% agreed, 10% stayed neutral, 27% disagreed, and 3.64 strongly disagreed with the statement. 34.55% strongly agreed with the statement that men do not seriously consider women's contributions and suggestions in decision-making meetings because traditionally women were not allowed to attend meetings with men. 23.64% agreed, 21.82% neither agreed nor disagreed, 10.62% disagreed, and 9.37% strongly disagreed with the statement. Finally. 41.87% strongly agreed with the statement that institutions themselves are not willing to accept women's participation because they believe that women's involvement excludes them from their supremacy in the decision arena. 37.27 agreed, 10.91% neither agreed nor disagreed, 4.55% disagreed, and 5.84% strongly disagreed with the statement.

Additionally, the key informants were asked to explain the challenges women are facing in terms of decision-making in the governance system. KII 4 elaborated that "we have suffered for far too long because of what our community is upholding as well as the religious books that guide our religious beliefs, which prohibit women from playing vital roles in their community and partaking in decision-making in their community," she said. KII2 said in her interview with the researcher that "one key barrier holding women behind to date is the sufficient financial power they lack, because once you have the resources required, you will be able to make decisions and you will be involved in your community". KII 1 mentioned that "men most often don't want to work with us because they feel like they know it all and we are not educated (formal or non-formal) to participate in decision-making.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The study focused on assessing the role of women in decision-making in the governance system: a case study of Makeni City, Bombali Sebora Chiefdom, Bombali District, Sierra Leone. Specifically, the study was based on the role women played in decision-making for their peers in the governance system, women's involvement in the governance system within the study area, the barriers and challenges women faced in decision-making in the governance system, and to make recommendations based on the findings of this study. However, a detailed review was conducted, taking into consideration the stated objectives.

The study used a case study research design to achieve the research objectives. In doing this, employees across institutions in Makeni City participated in the study of which majority were women out of a sample size of 200 that were selected through a purposive sampling method based on their experience and sex. The study employed primary data collection methods to achieve its objectives.

Primary data were collected in the field by administering a semi-structured questionnaire online using the Kobo tool, which was shared after identification of these employees and their institutions. The quantitative data collected was coded and analyzed using descriptive analysis (percentages). The qualitative data was then transcribed and analyzed using words and sentences.

Generally, more females (75%) participated in this study than males (25%); the majority of the participants in the study are between the ages of 21 and 40 (77%) when grouped together; the majority of the participants at least have attained some form of higher level of education; the institutions have employed less than 20 people (80%) and between 20 and 40 (10%); all of the participants have spent more than one year in these institutions; and the majority of these institutions are either NNGO or INGO.

The study revealed that women are still outnumbered by men in positions of responsibility. It was also revealed women's qualifications have provided access to aspire for jobs previously held by men and that the role of women in governance contributes to the growth of their institution and promotion of gender equity to some level.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that women are underrepresented in politics at both the national and local levels and that women are not enjoying their involvement in governance due to men dominance and institutional structures that mostly favor men's leadership. Most of the institutions interviewed claimed to have played a relevant role in the involvement of marginalized women groups in decision-making and has raised the commitment of women in decision-making processes across all departments in their institutions. From the findings, it was revealed that majority of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that women in the decision-making positions feel isolated, for this reason women can't make their self-assertions and lose their self-confidence.

The study further showed that women who hold political positions are faced with many challenges cultural acceptance, presumed political experience and skills of leadership, economic barriers family burden and men do not seriously consider women's contributions and suggestions in the decision-making meetings because traditionally women were not allowed to attend meetings with men.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study, the following recommendations could be made:

1. The government, NGOs and other funding agencies should collaborate and encourage women's participation, at both national and community's level, in order to promote women political empowerment in decision making in their governance system. This will ultimately increase their confidence to demand equal participation and representation in institutions.
2. The New GEWE Act of 2022 should be popularized in all four corners of the country, together with political parties and the electoral commission, to fully understand the new PR system and the importance of the 30% quota allocated for women across all levels within the country.
3. Builds the capacity of women politicians and aspiring politicians through political leadership training, digital marketing, financial inclusion, and mentoring networks to expand their economic status in communities.

4. Engage traditional leaders together with women groups, religious leaders, and government officials to create spaces to discuss and propose solutions to the social and religious norms that impede women's involvement in decision-making and the governance system in their locality.

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