Women's Political Participation and Influence in Sierra Leone

Clare Castillejo

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This Working Paper is part of a study of citizenship in Sierra Leone that was conducted by FRIDE and Campaign for Good Governance. It also forms part of a broader FRIDE research project on women's citizenship in contexts of state-building.

The research for this Working Paper was conducted by researchers from FRIDE and Campaign for Good Governance in February 2009.

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Introduction

The establishment of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on gender equality[1] and the development of the "good governance" agenda have increased the interest of the international development community in the role of women within governance and the need to strengthen women's political participation. It is now widely recognised that women's exclusion from decision making results in state institutions and policies that do not address gender inequalities and are not accountable or responsive to women citizens, thereby perpetuating women's political, social and economic marginalisation. Women's participation in politics is therefore recognised to be both a right and a requirement for effective development, and it is generally agreed that a critical mass of women in politics are needed in order to have policy impact (usually estimated at 30 percent of parliamentarians being women).[2] This increased focus on women's political participation has led to specific programming by donors to support women's participation in political processes, as well as broader efforts to integrate gender into the good governance agenda. This has included developing gender indicators in governance analysis[3] and integrating gender into governance models and programming. For example, UNIFEM has developed a gender-sensitive definition of good governance and models of how state accountability functions for women.[4]

The post conflict state-building process is an important opportunity to strengthen women's political participation, enshrining this in constitution and law,

developing governance institutions and processes that are inclusive of women, and supporting women to engage in political processes. There is significant evidence that gender roles can be transformed by conflict and that post conflict state-building is an opportunity to build on and embed that transformation, giving women a stronger role in all aspects of public life. As Lyytikainen argues, "the roles of men and women can change considerably during armed conflict as women take up new roles to maintain livelihoods, protect their families, take part in the conflict or campaign for peace. It is crucial that the opportunities that changing gender roles present are not lost in post-conflict peace processes and reforms".[5] However, as Maley points out, in post-conflict settings the political stakes are usually very high and politics is often characterised by insecurity and patronage, all of which can be obstacles to women's participation.[6]

Sierra Leone presents an interesting case of both the opportunities and challenges in strengthening women's political participation in contexts of post-conflict state building. While the country has made significant progress in recovering from a devastating conflict and re-building the state, it remains at the bottom of the Human Development Index. Moreover, Sierra Leone has extremely high levels of gender inequality and comes last in the 2007/2008 UNDP's Gender Development Related Index and third from last in the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index, which measures gender equality. In this context, this Working Paper will explore the extent to which women in Sierra Leone are able to participate in and influence both formal and informal politics, the barriers that they face in doing this, and the outcomes of women's political participation. It will examine the policy framework and support provided for women's participation and make recommendations for donors and national policy makers on how they can support more women to participate in and influence politics.

[1] In particular indicator 3.3 "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament" has increased the focus of development actors on women's political participation.

[2] For a summary of the arguments why women's political participation is important for development see "Women's Leadership and Participation", Oxfam Programme Insights, Oxfam.

[3] For information on efforts to integrate gender into governance assessments see the gender section of the UNDP governance assessments portal: http://www.gaportal.org/areas-of-governance/governance-and-gender

[4] "Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009: Who Answers to Women?", UNIFEM, 2008.

[5] "Building Inclusive Post-Conflict Governance", Lyytikainen, Initiative for Peacebuilding, 2009.

[6] "Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-Conflict Countries", Maley, 2004.

This Working Paper is based on field research conducted by FRIDE and Campaign for Good Governance in February 2009 in the districts of Kambiah and Moyamba, as well as in the capital Freetown.[7] These research sites were chosen because they reveal different pictures in terms of gender relations and women's participation in politics. Kambiah has some of the most unequal gender relations in Sierra Leone, with women traditionally excluded from almost all aspects of public life, while in Moyamba gender relations are relatively more egalitarian and women have a greater role in public life.

This Working Paper is part of a broader FRIDE programme of research on women's citizenship in contexts of state-building.

Background on women's political role in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's political system

Sierra Leone has three layers of government: the formal national government in the form of an elected parliament and president; formal local government made up of district councils located at district headquarters level and ward committees at community level; and customary chiefdom structures which operate at local level and are semi-regulated through national legislation. In each of these layers of government women face distinct sets of challenges and opportunities to participate in politics. Sierra Leone's political system is dominated by two parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC), which is currently in government.

These parties have a strong regional basis, with each generally able to count on the support of the population in its regional strongholds – although not entirely, for example some traditional SLPP supporters backed the APC in the last election.

Sierra Leone emerged from conflict in 2002 and held its first post-conflict national elections the same year, in which 18 women were elected to parliament out of a total of 124 MPs (members of parliament). However, in the national elections in 2007 this figure dropped to just 16 women. One reason for this fall in female representation was that the 2002 election had used a proportional representation system in order to take account of the fact that so many people were displaced because of the conflict, while in 2007 there was a return to Sierra Leone's traditional majoritarian system. This resulted in fewer women being selected as candidates as the political parties were concerned that the electorate would not vote for them.[8] In terms of women in leadership roles there are two women ministers out of a total of 24.

Local government was re-established in 2004 with local elections in which women won 56 out of a total of 456 district council seats across the country. In 2008 local elections resulted in 86 women councillors, a significant increase on the 2004 elections. The representation of women in district councils varies significantly across the country: in some councils there are just a couple of women councillors, while in others women form a substantial minority. At Ward Committee level it is mandatory that 50 percent of Ward Committee members are women, making this the only gender balanced level of governance, although these committees cover very small areas and have little power.

Within the customary system every chiefdom is headed by a paramount chief, under whom there are section chiefs, divisional chiefs and then village level

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authorities.[9] The current system of chiefdom governance was established during colonial rules and to a large extent has reified and standardised previously diverse traditions, although there are still significant differences in the nature and rules of customary governance systems between localities. The customary governance system is regulated by the Native Administration Act (1927). Women are largely excluded from participation in customary governance systems, although the extent of this exclusion varies between regions.

In addition to the formal and customary governance structures an important area of women's political action is through civil society. Sierra Leone has a weak but growing civil society which has developed significantly following the war. This includes a wide variety of organisations that work on gender equality issues as part of a broader mandate, as well as a range of women's civil society organisations at national and local level. Civil society organisations play an important role in public life in Sierra Leone and often have more capacity, profile and impact than formal state institutions, especially at local level where state penetration and capacity is limited. Sierra Leone's civil society organisations mostly adopt a human rights and good governance approach, and civil society has undoubtedly provided the greatest space for raising gender equality issues and had the most impact in changing gender norms.

Women's role in Sierra Leone

Gender relations in Sierra Leone are extremely unequal and Sierra Leonean women face high levels of exclusion, violence and poverty. Most respondents agreed that the bases of this inequality are the patriarchal cultural and religious values (that are particularly strong in the north of the country), which dictate that women should not participate in public life or speak in public and "should always be at the back".

However, all respondents agreed that since the end of the war there has been some shift in social attitudes on women's role and that there is now a growing awareness that women have rights and should be able to participate – at least to some extent - in governance. This change appears to be largely due to the "sensitisation" efforts of CSOs at national and local level.[10] The extent of this change was debated, with some respondents arguing that it is just rhetoric and in practice male leaders continue to exclude women, and others claiming that attitudes and practices are changing, including in the most traditional areas of society. All the women interviewed at local level say that they can now speak out in ways that they could not before, although they do often face resistance and harassment for taking on a more public role, particularly from customary authorities who argue that it is against tradition.

Women's experience of conflict and role in peacebuilding mobilised them in political action on an unprecedented scale, opened space for women to have a greater role in public life, and shaped the post-conflict agenda for the women's movement. Women experienced extremely high levels of violence during the conflict, which influenced their demands for greater rights following the conflict. Moreover, the displacement and social upheaval caused by the conflict created new roles for women, many of whom became household heads or became involved in local governance in the absence of men. Rural women who were displaced to Freetown saw the relative autonomy and power of women in the capital and became aware of the possibility of more equal gender relations.

Sierra Leonean women's peace activism was the first time that women had come together as such a large political force and taken such a prominent role in public life, and this experience gave women the empowerment, capacity and influence to carve out more political space for themselves in politics following

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[9] For more information on Sierra Leone's chiefdom system and its interaction with formal governance structures see "Neither Citizens or Subject? 'Lumpen' agency and the legacy of native administration in Sierra Leone", Fanthorpe, 2001, and "Sierra Leone: Reform or Relapse? Conflict and Governance Reform", Thomson, 2007.

[10] In Sierra Leone "sensitisation" is generally used to refer to a range of activities carried out by CSOs in communities which are aimed at changing attitudes and practices, including training, advocacy, information provision, awareness raising and advocating on behalf of individual citizens.

the end of the war.[11] However, a number of commentators express concern that following the immediate post-conflict phase, gender issues have now dropped off the national agenda, women have not gained the political space that they had hoped for, and the momentum of Sierra Leone's women's movement has stalled.[12]

Political will for women's inclusion

It is hard to judge the actual level of political will to include women or address gender equality issues within the political institutions of Sierra Leone. The government has certainly made some positive steps on women's rights, including new legislation[13] and measures to improve women's access to justice.[14] Government policy statements tend to include language on gender equality and women's rights and gender is relatively well integrated into the 2005-2007 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.[15] However, one donor representative reported that government commitment on gender issues varies widely between ministers and departments, while another reported that resistance by junior ministry staff prevents effective implementation of the government's policy commitments on gender equality. There certainly appears to be little political will to provide sufficient resources for gender equality issues. The government agency with responsibility for gender issues, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, was reported by many respondents to seriously lack funding and human capacity and to be largely ineffective. The Ministry has

been in the process of developing a gender strategy with the support of UNDP since June 2008, but this has still not been launched.

Perhaps the greatest indication of lack of political will to include women in politics can be seen in the response to the campaign for a 30 percent quota for women in all levels of political decision making, a measure that was recommended by Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).[16] Post-war state-building processes offer an important opportunity to introduce electoral quotas for women as constitutions are re-written and institutions reformed, as can be seen in countries such as Rwanda, Kosovo and Nepal. However, in Sierra Leone there has been strong resistance from the political elite, and particularly the political parties, to the introduction of a quota. Efforts by women's groups to get a quota into the national constitution have been blocked by political parties who see this as a threat to their power. Likewise, women's groups have lobbied political parties to directly incorporate a commitment to 30 percent female representation in their own constitutions, but the parties have responded that this would be "discriminatory". Women's organisations are now working with the Political Parties Registration Commission to encourage them to require political parties to adopt a quota, but the chances for this do not look promising. While there has been a lot of political debate and rhetoric around the 30 percent quota - and representatives of both main political parties told the researchers that "in principle" they are in favour of it[17] - it is clear that for the moment this is seen as too much of a threat to the power of male leaders.

[11] This is not to say that women had not been politically active before. For example, women were active in advocating for multi-party democracy before the war, but this was on a much smaller scale.

[12] For more on this see comments by Hussainatu and King in "Seminar: Strengthening Women's Citizenship in the context of Statebuilding", Castillejo, FRIDE, 2009.

[13] Three "Gender Bills" brought into law in 2007 have given women important new rights in relation to marriage, divorce inheritance and domestic violence.

[14] Particularly through the establishment of "Family Support Units" in police stations that are dedicated to issues of domestic and gender based violence. For more on the impact of Sierra Leone's justice reform on women's ability to claim their rights through the justice system see "Building Accountable Justice in Sierra Leone", Castillejo, FRIDE, 2009.

[15] Sierra Leone is currently in a transition to its next Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. This has been prepared but implementation has not yet begun.

[16] "Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission", Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone, 2004,

[17] In fact the General Secretary of the APC reported that the party is "lobbying the government" for the introduction of a quota, a strange claim given that an APC government is currently in power.

The 50/50 Group

The 50/50 Group is a women's organisation in Sierra Leone that works for women's equal inclusion in politics. It was established in 2000 by a group of volunteers and has become a national organisation.

The 50/50 Group provides capacity building to women who want to contest for parliament, district council or chiefdom positions. The group disseminates information to women about governance mechanisms and also connects women who are involved in politics. It is the main organisation working on women's political participation in Sierra Leone and is spearheading the campaign for a 30 percent quota for women in parliament.

Women's participation in formal politics

"Getting into" politics

Ellis outlines how women wishing to get into formal politics face gatekeepers at various stages - when they want to be politically active, when they want to get selected as a candidate, and when they are running for election.[18] For women in Sierra Leone the biggest hurdles appear to be the first two – gaining social space and acceptance to play a role in the public sphere, and getting selected and supported to run for office. As the parties have such strong regional support bases, once a woman is selected by the party to stand in its "home" region she has a high chance of getting elected, as gender discrimination is unlikely to override the strong political regionalism.

The vast majority of women involved in formal politics who were interviewed described facing serious barriers

to getting into politics. However, the extent of these challenges vary regionally and according to the level of politics in which women are engaged. In the north, where patriarchal traditions are stronger and Islam is the dominant religion, women face the greatest barriers to political participation and there are currently only three female MPs and few female councillors. In the south, where the Christian and Muslim populations are more balanced and where women have traditionally played a greater role in public life, it is comparatively easier for women to enter formal politics and there are significantly more female MPs and councillors.

In addition to these regional differences the barriers to entering politics seem to vary with the level of politics in which women seek to be involved. At Ward Committee level women reported no problems in getting party nominations, as would be expected given that women's equal participation is mandatory and therefore women Ward Committee members are not seen as "taking men's place". However, women attempting to enter both national parliament and district councils faced significant hostility and obstruction. Women councillors appeared to have faced the most difficulties in getting a party nomination, and were the group that most frequently reported experiencing hostility from local men while campaigning. Beall makes the interesting point that while local government is usually seen as easier for women to enter, as it is closer and more relevant than national politics, in fact, the cultural norms against women's participation are often strongest at local level and therefore women entering local politics can face a big backlash.[19] This may well be true of Sierra Leone, where it is local party leaders and customary institutions that have been the greatest obstacle to women's participation.

One barrier to participation that was cited by all women politicians interviewed is lack of finance and resources, something which seemed to be particularly severe for women running for local council (possibly

18 "Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-Conflict Countries", Ellis, 2004.

19 "Decentralisation, Women's Rights and Development", Beall, 2007.

because only women with significant resources would even seek to run for national office). Those running in national or local elections receive very little financial support from the political parties and must use personal funds for their campaign, for example to develop campaign materials, travel within the constituency, and host campaigning events. Perhaps most challenging is the fact that candidates are effectively expected to "buy" support within their constituency by giving small amounts of money and food to supporters, as well as larger amounts of money or gifts to important people in the community, such as customary leaders. These heavy costs present a particular challenge for women, as they tend to be poorer and have less access to assets than men. The women politicians interviewed reported that male candidates usually use their own and their wives' personal money for their campaign, as well as funds accessed through patronage networks and from male supporters. In contrast, women have little access to patronage networks and their supporters are mostly other women, who cannot provide much financial support. Consequently, women running for office end up taking on a large amount of debt. For example, Jariatu Kamara, a female councillor in Kambiah, reported that she had spent 17 million Leones on her campaign, the majority of which was borrowed from the bank and which she must now repay.

The importance of patronage within political life in Sierra Leone is a major factor that prevents women from entering politics. It is through patronage networks that power and resources are allocated at every level, and the importance of these networks in shaping both formal and customary governance cannot be underestimated. Patronage relationships in Sierra Leone exist primarily between men, with women largely excluded from these networks. All the women politicians interviewed reported that this was a significant challenge for them, as patronage networks are important both to being selected by political parties as a candidate and to getting elected. Some respondents reported that in order to get selected to run for office it is important to be from a "big" local family or a "party" family, although this

seemed to be less important at the Ward Committee level. The support of customary leaders, especially the paramount and section chiefs, was reported as vital for a political campaign, as it is the chiefs that mobilise the community to support a particular candidate. This poses great problems for women, as many chiefs either actively oppose women's political participation, or provide support to locally powerful male candidates with whom they have patronage relationships.

All women MPs and counsellors reported facing harassment and hostility from powerful men in their community who are opposed to women's political participation. In many cases this manifested itself as violence against the female candidate or her supporters, as well as attempts to attack the candidate's character and morality (normally their sexual behaviour). In both Kambiah and Moyamba it was reported that the male secret societies were mobilised against women attempting to run for election, as male customary leaders saw women's participation in politics as threatening to their power base. In Kambiah a number of women activists suggested that the reason why customary male leaders are often so opposed to women's participation in formal governance is that they believe this will eventually lead women to demand a greater role within customary governance structures, threatening men's power within these extremely important institutions. The only women who did not face threats or intimidation when running for election were Ward Committee candidates, presumably because their seats were allocated for women and because these are much less powerful positions.

Harassment of female candidates:

– A female district councillor in Kambiah was prevented from campaigning in public by the male secret society, which would gather in places where she was holding events, meaning that all the women could not be out in public. Her female supporters were beaten in public as a lesson not to support her.

– A female MP in Moyamba district was threatened with forceful initiation into the male secret society if she ran for office. When she went out in public to campaign, the male secret society would gather to prevent her campaigning or her supporters attending.

– A female minister when initially running for parliament was threatened by men from the opposition party who told her that as a woman she would be easy to harm. She was forced to go house to house at night to conduct her campaigning, as it was too dangerous for her to hold public events.

As well as outright intimidation, women candidates face stigma and disapproval from their communities and from families. This often involves judgements about the woman's morality and sexual behaviour, based on beliefs that a "moral" woman would not take on such a public role. For example, the APC general secretary said that it is widely believed that women in politics "become cheap and immoral like prostitutes". For many women the fear of such stigma is enough to stop them participating in politics. Many women politicians felt that more sensitisation needs to be done with communities in order to overcome this prejudice, and particularly to encourage women to stop judging other women for taking a political role and instead realise that female politicians can represent their interests. Most of women politicians said that their families were supportive of them entering politics, although some had faced opposition from families. For example, one Ward Committee member in Moyamba had been asked by her community to run for council but her husband had refused to let her, while another Ward Committee member in Moyamba had been begged by her mother not to run for council because the mother was worried that she would be publicly flogged for daring to stand for office as a woman.

One of the main barriers to women's participation is lack of capacity and confidence. In particular, it was reported that women considering entering politics often feel that their lack of education puts them at a disadvantage and that they do not have the required experience of campaigning or public speaking. Many of the women councillors had received some training from local CSOs, or in some cases international organisations (such as the National Democratic Institute), which had helped boost their confidence. However, all said that much more capacity building was needed for them to be able to compete with men who have been local power holders and public figures for a long time. Male leaders frequently reported that women's lack of political participation was due to their "shyness", although perhaps this could be more accurately understood in the sense that women are worried about lack of capacity or public humiliation.

Of all the women politicians interviewed, only a few had come into power through a history of involvement with a political party. The vast majority had been involved in civil society activity and from this had developed the interest, capacity and support of the community to enter politics. It seems that while the political parties continue to be very male dominated institutions, civil society is offering opportunities for women to develop as local leaders and learn political skills.

Women in political parties

Gender discrimination and entrenched patriarchal structures within Sierra Leone's political parties act as a barrier both to women entering politics, as well as to women influencing the national political agenda. While some female politicians felt they had been supported by their parties, the vast majority – together with civil society commentators – reported that women face extreme discrimination and exclusion within the parties.

Most respondents commented that it is very difficult for women to get given seats to contest by the political parties and that they are frequently given unwinnable seats. In Moyamba a female APC official reported that

local party leaders usually give party nominations to male family members, and on the infrequent occasions when women are nominated these are mostly wives or sisters of party leaders. The lack of party support for women candidates can be seen in the events of the 2008 council elections in Kambiah in which five women were nominated for the APC, of which two were pressured by the party to stand down just days before the election in favour of male candidates. The political party representatives interviewed all reported that the parties do not discriminate against women and that women are welcome to stand, but also that the parties do not have any particular measures to support women candidates as this itself would be "discriminatory". This is apart from the notable exception of the SLPP initiative to charge women only 50 percent of the candidacy fee in the most recent national and local elections.

The role of women within the party seems to be equally problematic. Women's participation within the parties appears to be mostly through the women's wing, which is a relatively powerless branch of the party whose role is to mobilise women for meetings and elections. This structure excludes women from the mainstream party – as one local woman politician put it, "Why should I be in a women's wing? The men do not have to be in a men's wing?" Cornwall and Goetz argue that "women's wings" are not intended to provide women with space to emerge as leaders, but instead harness their support for the existing leadership and structures of the party.[20]

Very few party leadership roles are played by women and civil society organisations point out that key policy setting roles such as chairperson or secretary general are never taken by women, who are mostly made leaders of the women's wing or given administrative positions such as treasurer. According to the 50/50 group, this is the result of a complete lack of political will to include women meaningfully in the party machine and leads to party decisions reflecting only male viewpoints. Ellis argues that within the international discourse on women's political participation there is a lot of focus on how parties choose their candidates but much less on how parties choose their leadership, even though the latter is critical as where women are excluded from party leadership, they are unable to influence party policies and political debate.[21] This is certainly the case in Sierra Leone, where the efforts to involve women in politics have all focused on getting women into elected seats and not on promoting women leaders and gender issues within the parties.

The relation of the parties to their supporters is also problematic and serves to reinforce the exclusion of women from influence over party policy. It was reported that at local level the main expectation of party members is that the party will give them "microcredit"[22] and that women members attend the women's wing meetings with this expectation. Local Ward Committee members also expressed the expectation that the party would give them "microcredit". This relationship of patronage between party and supporters is not conducive to genuine dialogue between the party leadership and its members, or to members influencing party policies or holding party leadership to account for these policies - including policies on gender equality. Cornwall and Goetz point out that where the resources of a political party are allocated on the basis of patronage and there is no internal accountability, there is no reason to expect that leaders will emerge who will champion gender equality or be accountable to women members.[23]

[20] "Democratising Democracy: Feminist Perspectives", Cornwall and Goetz, 2005.

[21] "Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-Conflict Countries", Ellis, 2004.

[22] "Microcredit" appears to be a term widely used to refer to money given by powerful institutions (political parties, CSOs, local government institutions, individual politicians etc) to citizens, rather than to an actual microcredit scheme. It is interesting to see how this development concept has become a euphemism for a bribe or gift by a patron.

[23] "Democratising Democracy: Feminist Perspectives", Cornwall and Goetz, 2005.

Women's ability to operate and exercise influence

Those women in Sierra Leone who have been able to get into formal politics often face significant barriers that prevent them operating effectively within political institutions or influencing political decision making. However, with most support for women's political participation focused on getting significant numbers of women into political institutions, this critical issue of what women are able to do once they are there is often overlooked.

A major challenge for many women is lack of capacity and confidence to operate within a male dominated political environment, often in the face of discrimination or exclusion by male colleagues. While all the female councillors and MPs interviewed reported receiving training on campaigning skills before elections, very few had received any training after they were elected. Most felt that they needed training in order to be able to operate effectively, in particular on their own role and responsibilities, on public speaking and on budgets – a number said that their lack of basic financial skills meant they were unable to play any oversight role. Female Ward Committee members appeared to have had the least training and in some cases to be unaware of their basic responsibilities. The fact that council meetings are mostly conducted in English often prevents women councillors from fully participating in these meetings, as well as undermines the accountability of the council to constituents, who may be unable to follow council proceedings. In Kambiah women councillors requested that the council speak in Krio, but the council leader refused.

Women's ability to operate effectively within formal politics depends in part on their ability to build political alliances through which they can lobby and advocate. The extent to which women politicians in Sierra Leone are able to do this varies between political institutions, and appears to be largely determined by the numbers of women within the institution and their capacity. In all three district

councils (Freetown, Moyamba and Kambiah) female councillors reported that they work together to raise gender equality issues and that they build alliances with male councillors to generate support for these issues. However, where women politicians are in a very small minority, including in Moyamba Council where there are just two women out of 24 councillors and Kambiah Council where there are three women out of 22 councillors, they reported that female councillors have not been able to have any real influence on policy. Likewise, women's civil society activists suggested that the small number of women MPs in the national parliament was preventing them from having any significant policy impact. In contrast, in Freetown Council, where there are 14 women out of 39 councillors, female councillors felt that they were able to have significant influence in debates and over policy decisions, although they stressed that after just one year it was too soon to see concrete outcomes of this influence. Despite the challenge of being such a minority, all the women politicians interviewed reported that they were taken seriously by male colleagues, which presents an interesting contrast to the humiliation and ridicule women reported facing when running for office. Dishearteningly, neither women politicians nor women activists could identify a policy change at either local or national level which had come about through the efforts of women politicians.

The other question which arose is the extent to which women in politics are able to take leadership or strategic roles. As with the political parties, in formal political institutions it appears that women are rarely given leadership roles. As already mentioned, at national level only 2 out of a total of 24 ministers are women. Moreover, at both national and local level, where women are given leadership posts these are often in relation to "women's issues" or "social issues" and not broader political agendas. Some interesting developments in women's ability to access leadership roles on strategic issues can be seen in Kambiah Council following the 2008 election. While previously there had only been one woman councillor, who had chaired the "Women and Child Committee" since

2008, there have been three women councillors, whose portfolios include agriculture and education, as well as women and children. The female councillors believe that gaining these posts beyond "women's issues" has been an important victory for them and a sign of greater acceptance of their role in local politics. Some women who had achieved leadership roles reported facing obstruction and harassment by male colleagues. For example, one Deputy Minister reported that it has been very difficult for her to undertake her role because her Minister refuses to share information with her or inform her when meetings are taking place, as he objects to having a female deputy.

IDRC research points out how women in local government can end up taking on a "social worker" role, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles and failing to engage on policy issues.[24] This certainly appears to be the case for a number of the female councillors interviewed in Sierra Leone, who reported that one of their main roles is resolving the individual problems of women constituents who approach them seeking help related to issues such as domestic violence, child maintenance or livelihoods (none reported being approached for help by male constituents, who presumably go to male councillors or customary leaders with their problems). While these efforts to help individual women constituents are both expected and appreciated by their constituents – and such personal intervention is undoubtedly an integral part of being a local leader in Sierra Leone –, these female politicians do appear to be in more of a "social worker" than a political role.

Another challenge for women who have reached political office is lack of resources to operate effectively. Women district councillors reported that they lack funds to travel, meet with constituents or conduct any activities for their communities. While those women councillors who chair committees are given some funding for their committee's activities (equal to that given to male chairs), the reality is that

councillors often use their own money or leverage money through patronage networks to provide activities and resources for their communities (such as small scale livelihood activities, feeding people who attend meetings etc.). Women councillors do not usually have much personal money or ability to mobilise funds through informal networks, meaning they are unable to conduct these activities and are seen by communities as "not delivering" for them. This raises the fundamental question of how women can compete in a political system where political allegiance is to a large extent "bought".

Commitment to gender equality and accountability to women constituents

The underlying assumption behind much thinking on women's political participation is that once women are in power they will champion women's interests. However, this is not by any means inevitably the case. As Cornwall and Goetz point out, "Women in office do not necessarily defend a feminist position on policies. Indeed for some women winning and keeping office can be contingent upon *downplaying* feminist sympathies".[25] Obviously women politicians should not be expected to be more accountable to their female constituents than their male constituents, nor should male politicians be expected to be less accountable to women constituents or on gender equality issues. However, the question of to what extent women politicians are committed to gender equality issues and are accountable to women constituents is an important one, as it is a critical factor in creating political institutions that address women's interests and are accountable to women. The challenges for genuine political accountability between women politicians and their female constituents reveal some of the broader problems of patronage and lack of accountability within Sierra Leone's political system.

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24 "Women Gaining Voice: Political Representation and Participation in Decentralised Systems", MacLean, IDRC, 2008.

25 "Democratising Democracy: Feminist Perspectives", Cornwall and Goetz, 2005.

It was reported that local level female politicians are generally available to meet their constituents and that many local women come to them with individual problems, which these councillors or Ward Committee members seek to resolve. However, the way in which local politicians resolve these problems tends to be more personal than political, for example by mediating in family disputes. Perceptions of the availability of female MPs to their constituents were more mixed. Representatives of some women's CSOs reported that women MPs only meet with local women around election time in order to gain their support, and otherwise are not available to them or concerned with their issues. However, others argued that not all MPs behave in this way and that some female MPs remain connected to their constituencies and actively encourage local women to become more engaged in politics.

All the women politicians interviewed expressed concern with gender equality issues. At local level they most commonly cited violence against women and lack of financial support by husbands as the most pressing issues for women and the ones that they wanted to address. It is not clear to what extent local female politicians are able to translate this concern into policy or programming by the political institutions they represent, or can respond only with personal intervention, as outlined above. However, male council chairmen did report that women councillors often raise issues of women's rights and gender equality in council. At national level, female MPs and ministers expressed concerned with policy issues related to gender, including marriage laws and electoral quotas.

Despite the fact that all women politicians were aware that they "should" express interest in gender issues, a small minority did not appear to have knowledge of these - or any other - issues relevant to their constituents. For example, one Ward Committee member in Moyamba reported that she could not think of any issues of particular concern to local women, had never attended a committee meeting in the five months since she was appointed, and had stood for the post because a local councillor had suggested she should.

Obviously male or female politicians who are "placed" into posts in this way and do not have any political agenda of their own are not going to be accountable to their constituents on any issues.

Along with violence and family issues, the other "women's issue" that was most often cited by local women politicians was the need for better livelihoods for women, with almost all councillors saying they want to mobilise "microcredit" for their female constituents. While poverty and livelihoods are clearly a pressing problem for women and one which their political representatives are right to take up, the desire to mobilise financial resources for their constituents on an individual basis, and to be seen personally to be responsible for constituents receiving this money, seems to reflect a wider pattern of patronage relations between politicians and supporters.

All female politicians reported that it is important that they are seen to deliver material benefits to those groups that voted for them, in order to ensure their continued support. For example, one female councillor in Kambiah said that she was concerned because she could not access resources for youth, who had been the main supporters in her campaign, while another said that she needs money to provide benefits to local women so that they will see the value of voting for a woman candidate. Likewise, one female MP reported that she has used her personal salary to provide TVs and football kits for young people, scholarships for girls, seeds for local women, and food for her constituents at Christmas. Although this is a significant personal expense for her, she stated that "if I don't give these things to the people, they will say that women don't deliver".

While in all contexts politicians seek to bring benefits for their constituents in order to ensure re-election, it appears that in Sierra Leone the population mostly do not expect politicians to deliver policy changes or development programmes that will benefit the constituency, but to provide financial or material resources to supporters as individuals. This patronage system not only skews accountability relationships - as politicians are held accountable not for their politics

but their ability to dispense resources - but also disadvantages women who have less personal money to dispense and less ability to access funds through patronage networks.

This reflects a broader problem within Sierra Leone's politics, which is the way that patronage systems distort genuine political accountability at every level. This can be seen on a macro level in the way that the political parties mobilise resources for their "home" regions when they are in power, thereby reinforcing the regionalisation of voting patterns as people vote for their "local" party expecting it to deliver funds, development programmes, or infrastructure for their area in particular.[26] As one female councillor in Freetown put it, "development assistance only comes when your party is in power". It is perhaps not particularly surprising that where the electorate is very poor, the state is weak and has a history of corruption and political parties garner support through financial incentives rather than policy agendas, people will expect politics to be corrupt and based on patronage and will hold politicians accountable not for their politics, but their ability to mobilise resources.

This patronage politics has serious implications for politicians' accountability on gender equality, as with all other issues. There are also specific implications for the ability of women to succeed in this political environment as they have less access to patronage networks and resources. However, this is not an entirely bleak picture. While there is clearly a high level of patronage and expectations of patronage by the electorate, there are some genuine policy agendas that do attract support from the population (as can be seen from the change of government in 2007 when some traditional SLPP supporters voted for the APC). Moreover, CSOs play an important role in pressing politicians to be accountable on policy issues, for example on women's legal rights in the context of the "Gender Bills",[27] or pressing for parliamentary quotas.

Outcomes of women's political participation

The outcomes from increased women's participation in politics are mixed. As previously mentioned, there appears to have been relatively little impact on national policy or on council decisions. This limited policy impact is unsurprising given that women in politics are a small minority, there are many structural obstacles to female politicians' full participation and effectiveness, and political institutions themselves are weak and often lack a clear policy agenda.

However, women's participation in politics, especially at local level, appears to have had a major impact on social attitudes. All interviewees - from political party leaders and chiefs to women's CSOs - reported that women's participation in politics had raised awareness and created greater acceptance within communities of women's right to participate in public life. For example, the district council chairman in Kambiah reported that the presence of three women councillors following the 2008 election had shown the community that women can take leadership roles. It also appears that women politicians are important role models that inspire other women to get involved in politics. For example, one Ward Committee member in Moyamba reported that she sees her local female MP as a role model, while a female district councillor in Kambiah reported that she ran for office because she wanted to set an example that women can participate in politics. Moreover, not only are these women politicians shaping attitudes just by their presence, but also by their role in addressing female constituents' problems. For example, intervening in cases of domestic violence - although it is a personal and not a political response - does have the effect of further sensitising the community on women's rights. In addition, some local politicians undertake sensitisation activities together with CSOs.

The other area, as mentioned above, where women politicians are making a significant difference is in

26 In general APC has its support bases in the north and SLPP in the south, although there was some swing of SLPP traditional supporters to the APC in the last national election. A sign that voting is not entirely regionally determined.

27 The Gender Bills were passed in 2007 and give women important new rights in the areas of marriage and divorce, inheritance and domestic violence.

mobilising resources for women constituents and supporters. While this is essentially a patronage relationship, the reality is that it is one that is pervasive in Sierra Leone and that male politicians and the political parties themselves have always employed to maintain supporters. Therefore, in mobilising seeds, food, money, loans or scholarships for women and girls, female politicians could be argued to be redistributing the resources that have until now been confined to the domain of men. This is clearly not democratic politics based on accountability for delivering policies, but it does raise some complex questions: if male politicians engage in these patronage practices, do women have any choice but to do the same? How can the influence of patronage be reduced to enable more women to participate and improve accountability?

Support for women's political participation

Both international and national organisations have provided support for women's participation in the run up to national and local elections, some of which has been funded by Sierra Leone's international donors. This has included capacity building, finances and campaign materials and was reported by women politicians as being very useful. The state has not provided any specific support to facilitate women's participation in politics.

While the majority of the support for women in politics has been to help them get elected, what appears to be lacking is support to women once they are elected - to enable them to perform effectively, take leadership positions and influence policy. All the women politicians interviewed said they needed training on their role and on how to operate effectively, especially given the significant barriers and discrimination that they face. Also, there does not seem to be any long term support provided to prepare women leaders who could run in future elections. One female MP remarked that what is needed is to create ''educated women of substance'' who can take leadership roles in the future.

This short term focus on elections ignores the fact that what women are able to do when they have power is equally important as getting them there, and that transforming the position of women within political institutions, and the ability of these institutions to deliver for women, is a long term process. It appears that support is needed in the form of awareness raising outside election periods, for example women's organisations working on women's political participation report that they need funds well before elections in order to do the ground work, as well as sustained funds afterwards to follow up.

In terms of support for voter education, a similar pattern emerges. There have been civil society campaigns to educate voters about their role, the importance of choosing candidates based on policy and the value of voting for women. The National Electoral Commission also undertakes voter education activities, although these contain no focus on the value of supporting women candidates. However, such voter education campaigns only happen around election time. Transforming citizens' ideas on what they should expect from politicians, how to hold politicians to account and how to make choices based on policy is a long term process that involves transforming attitudes and beliefs.

The national institutions and policies that regulate political life are not particularly supportive of bringing women to power. As already mentioned, a quota for women in office has been rejected apart from at the lowest level of government (Ward Committee). The guiding structure for the decentralisation process, which brought into place the district councils, is the Local Government Act (2004), which does not make any specific gender equality provisions. While there is reportedly a ''gender'' post within the Decentralisation Secretariat[28] and a gender policy was drafted to inform the decentralisation policy, donors reported that these have not had much impact. The 50/50 group complained that there was very limited consultation

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28 The Decentralisation Secretariat is the body tasked with managing the decentralisation process.

with women's groups on the design of decentralised structures or on the decentralisation process.

Donor support to women's political participation has been mostly confined to election time and has been rather limited. Much of the support from DFID and the European Commission has been channelled through ENCISS.[29] ENCISS reported that it supported 54 candidates in the 2008 local elections with material and training, but none in the 2007 national elections because of lack of funding. UNDP has also provided some support to women candidates through its decentralisation project, and the World Bank supported the creation of a "Council of Women Councillors" following the first local elections in 2004. No donor seems to be providing funding for sustained work with women politicians or citizens aimed at changing attitudes and political behaviours, strengthening accountability relationships, or supporting women politicians to effectively represent their constituents.

Women's involvement in customary governance

Customary governance institutions have traditionally excluded women, although there are significant regional variations in this regard. These institutions are by far the most powerful structures in Sierra Leone and wield great influence over every aspect of public and political life. Chiefs generally command high levels of loyalty (or at least obedience) from their populations and, as mentioned above, play a key role in deciding who can participate in both formal and customary politics. Even the formally mandated authorities of the district council cannot easily take actions that go against the chief's wishes. Given the power of the chieftaincy, the extent to which women can participate in and influence these customary institutions and the attitude of these institutions to women are critical for shaping women's rights and participation in all areas of public life.

Ability to participate in customary governance

The extent to which women can participate in customary governance institutions varies across the country. In the north, women can only play very junior roles such as that of Ya'alimamy, which is a low level female chief that settles non-serious disputes. While this means that women have very little power within the customary system, it is some improvement on the previous situation in which women could not hold any customary office. In some areas of the south women can hold all levels of customary office, including that of paramount chief, although in practice it is difficult for women to achieve high office within the customary system because of the power of the male secret societies in allocating these roles. However, there have been some significant developments in terms of women's participation in customary governance in the south, for example in Moyamba one third of divisional chiefs are now women. An important question is which women are chosen for customary leadership roles. Obviously these are women with some status in the community and often from important families, but it is likely that they are probably also women who do not challenge gender norms. As Cornwall and Goetz point out, where the selection of women for office is done by socially conservative men, socially conservative women will be chosen.[30]

Women customary leaders' ability to exercise influence

The extent to which women in customary governance can exercise influence depends primarily on the level of

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30 "Democratising Democracy: Feminist Perspectives", Cornwall and Goetz, 2005.

office they are given, but also on the authority they are able to command within the community. The Ya'alimamys interviewed in Kambiah and the female divisional chiefs interviewed in Moyamba reported that while they are generally respected by the community, some men do defy their decisions because they are women and that they have to refer these men to more senior chiefs.

Most women customary leaders reported that they had had no training on legal or rights issues and had little knowledge of these. However, in Moyamba, where there has been a lot of sensitisation on gender issues by civil society, as well as the influential Justice Sector Development Programme (JSDP) that has worked with customary institutions,[31] some of the women divisional chiefs had received training on their role and on human rights. They reported that this training had made a big difference to their ability to do their job and the decisions that they make.

Customary leaders' attitude to gender issues

The attitudes of the female customary leaders interviewed to women's rights and participation was mixed (and in some cases contradictory), although there was a clear variation between north and south, with leaders in the north expressing more conservative views. For example, while all the women customary leaders agreed that the biggest problem for women in their communities is domestic violence (an analysis they shared with local level female politicians), the way in which women customary leaders reported responding to cases of domestic violence differed between regions. In Kambiah the female leaders focused more on persuading a woman experiencing violence to reconcile with her husband, while in the south they put more emphasis on punishing the violent man, although only in cases of serious violence. One Ya'alimamy in Kambiah stated that she was unhappy

with the current promotion of human rights, which she said was causing disharmony and threatening tradition, while all women customary leaders in Moyamba spoke in favour of human rights and women's rights.

Women customary leaders in Moyamba said they would like to see more women taking on senior chieftaincy roles and spoke with frustration about the barriers that women face in doing this – particularly obstruction by the male secret societies. However, in Kambiah the women customary leaders simply responded that it is not possible for women to be senior customary leaders and seemed not to question this situation, apart from one Ya'alimamy who said that if the rules were different she would like to be a paramount chief. In Moyamba some women customary leaders appeared to be creating new space and opportunities for women in their communities. For example, one female divisional chief had included women in the communal labour of digging roads - work that was previously only done by men - thereby challenging established gender roles and opening up a new income source for women who can now also earn money for this work. Interestingly, one of the female divisional chiefs in Moyamba said that she would like to run as a councillor in the next local elections, suggesting that the experience of being a customary leader may give some women the interest, capacity and public support to move into formal politics.

The attitude of male customary leaders to women's participation in public life appears to be slowly changing. Most women politicians and activists reported that the majority of chiefs still oppose women's participation in formal politics, as can be seen in the use of secret societies to harass women candidates, but that in some chiefdoms this attitude is shifting due to sensitisation activities. However, while chiefs may be increasingly accepting women's participation in formal politics, they appear to be much more resistant to women's participation in customary governance, which threatens their own power. This can be seen in the attitude of the paramount chief in Kambiah. This chief is reported to be sensitive on women's issues and said that he would like to see more

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[31] See "Government of Sierra Leone Justice Sector Reform Strategy and Investment Plan, 2008-2010", Government of Sierra Leone, 2007, for more on the work of JSDP.

women in the district council, but insisted that it is impossible for women to take more senior customary governance roles as this is against tradition.

There is debate about the extent to which customary governance institutions can be reformed to include women and uphold their rights, or whether - as Beall argues - "chieftaincies are antithetical to gendered local democracy and women's political and socio-economic rights".[32] Certainly in Sierra Leone these institutions seem to be for the most part deeply discriminatory against women, although there are cases where sensitisation has clearly changed attitudes and practices within customary institutions. For example, in Kambiah a civil society campaign to raise the age at which girls undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) resulted in an agreement by all paramount chiefs in Kambiah district that FGM would not be conducted on girls under 18. This is a major step given the conservative gender attitudes in the region and the extreme sensitivity of the issue of FGM.

Women's political participation through civil society

Women's civil society activism in Sierra Leone emerged during the war, with the development of women's groups that advocated and campaigned for peace. Following the end of the conflict there has been a further growth in both national and local women's CSOs, as part of the broader development of civil society in Sierra Leone. In addition, many CSOs that work on governance and rights have taken on a gender equality agenda. Civil society has therefore been the domain where women have had the greatest space for political mobilisation and action. However, a number of women activists, such as Human Rights Commissioner Jamesina King, are concerned that in recent years the Sierra Leonean women's movement has lost much of its drive and energy, partly because the pressing imperative of conflict which spurred women to mobilise has been removed, and partly because gender issues

32 "Decentralisation, Women's Rights and Development", Beall, 2007.

have been incorporated in the rhetoric of the government, thereby "pacifying" the women's movement. In contrast, other women activists described the situation of the women's movement from a more positive perspective. For example, a representative of FAWE argued that "women's issues are now more mainstream so women are less vocal, they are inside and not shouting from the outside".

It appears to be CSOs (including women's organisations, development or rights focused NGOs and community level groups) that have had by far the greatest role in changing gender norms and creating space for women to participate in public life. These organisations carry out a wide range of sensitisation activities to raise awareness among communities and community leaders about women's rights and political participation. All respondents - from women activists to chiefs and politicians - reported that civil society sensitisation has had significant impact in changing attitudes, and to a lesser extent practices, although this change is slow. In particular it was reported that civil society has created awareness of women's rights and challenged some of the most rights violating practices, as well as helped build social acceptance for women's participation in politics and supported individual women candidates' participation.

However, these civil society activities to promote women's rights do face resistance from men in the community, as well as from customary authorities. In both Kambiah and Moyamba it was reported that many men do not want their wives to participate in the activities organised by women's groups, as these encourage women "to defy their men". However, it appears that male resistance to women's participation in civil society activities is much less than resistance to women's participation in formal politics, suggesting that civil society is a less contested political space, perhaps because it is less connected to traditional structures of power and patronage. It is particularly difficult for CSOs to address women's rights issues related to customary institutions, such as secret societies or local courts, as this is perceived as highly threatening by customary authorities. For example, all

the women's organisations interviewed said that the most difficult issue for them to work on is FGM (a practice that is undertaken by the women's secret societies), and that any criticism of this practice would result in them facing hostility or violence from the communities in which they work.[33]

Cornwall and Goetz argue that support for civil society, as part of the good governance agenda, has created "new democratic spaces" in which women can pressure the policy process from outside formal political institutions.[34] This certainly seems to be the case in Sierra Leone, where the expansion of civil society has provided women with an important new space to mobilise, identify and articulate their interests and make political demands. However, it is not clear to what extent women's civil society action can impact government policy. Many of the women's organisations interviewed felt that they have very limited impact on government policy, pointing to the government's rejection of demands by the women's movement for a 30 percent quota in parliament as evidence of this. However, on some occasions the women's movement has been able to make significant policy impact. For example, it was sustained advocacy by women's organisations that resulted in the adoption of the three "Gender Bills" that gave Sierra Leonean women critical new rights. According to women activists, factors that were crucial to the success of the "Gender Bills" campaign were the strength of the civil society collaboration around it and the fact that all women across the country were affected by these issues. Collaboration has been a challenge within the Sierra Leone women's movement, as many women's organisations develop separate agendas and compete for funds.

Importantly, civil society leadership, especially at local level, appears to offer a stepping stone for women to enter formal politics without having to come up

through political party structures that present such serious gender barriers. The vast majority of female counsellors and MPs interviewed had a civil society background. In particular, it appears that experience of civil society politics enables women to strengthen their political skills, develop a political agenda, and – perhaps most importantly – emerge as local leaders who have the support of the community. From this position of having developed a profile and credibility through civil society work, women are more likely to be given a party nomination and to gain support from the electorate, thereby managing to avoid to some extent the system of patronage usually required to get nominated and elected. However, this is not to assume that civil society is entirely delinked from traditional power structures and patronage relations, which it can often mirror and recreate.

Women's organisations face serious challenges in terms of capacity and funding. Many local level women's groups rely on volunteers and have no basic facilities such as office space or equipment, and crucially no transport to reach communities outside the district headquarters. All the women's organisations interviewed stressed that their greatest need is training for their staff. Funding for civil society in Sierra Leone comes primarily from donors or international NGOs. Given the high levels of illiteracy among women, the limited access to information outside Freetown, and the often heavy administrative requirements of funders, it is often difficult for local women's organisations to find out about funding opportunities or apply for funding.

Cornwall and Goetz point out that the reliance of feminist NGOs on external support has on the one hand helped them to expand their scope and activities, but on the other has resulted in the "professionalisation – 'NGO-isation' – of women's movements, with implications for internal democracy and the political potential of such organisations..."[35] This is certainly the case in Sierra Leone, where one major barrier to

[33] An example of the sensitivity of the issue of FGM can be seen in the events on 9 February in Kenema District, where some journalists who had made public comments about the practice were captured, stripped and intimidated by the local women's secret society.

[34] "Democratising Democracy: Feminist Perspectives", Cornwall and Goetz, 2005.

[35] "Democratising Democracy: Feminist Perspectives", Cornwall and Goetz, 2005.

the development of an independent and effective women's movement is that funding for women's organisations is mostly given on a short-term project basis, with very little core funding available for CSOs from any source. This makes it difficult for women's organisations to develop their own political agenda that is independent from donor's agendas, build up organisational and staff capacity or develop sustainable activities. Instead, many women's organisations develop projects in response to donor priorities that may not address community needs and cannot be sustained. For example, a number of women's CSOs complained that they have had to change their agenda – often to one that is less relevant to realities on the ground – in order to receive donor funding; that donor funding is fragmented and they often have to apply separately for different elements of one project; and that funding is usually for a "one off" project so they cannot follow up and build on their activities.

Interestingly, donors complained that Sierra Leone's CSOs have weak capacity, are engaged in diverse activities and do not specialise in one area – which could be a consequence (as well as perhaps a reason for?) the piecemeal funding approaches of donors. DFID has made some attempt to address the challenges of funding civil society, through the establishment of ENCISS, which is intended to operate as a route for donors to channel funds to CSOs for governance activities in a way that is strategic and relieves some of the bureaucratic burden of applying for donors' funding. However, this approach has had mixed success as many CSOs resent the establishment of ENCISS and complain that it operates as a gatekeeper, dictating civil society agendas and blocking CSOs direct access to donors for funding and advocacy. Another barrier that prevents civil society from being an effective conduit to raise women's political concerns is the extent to which women's organisations in Sierra Leone are elite run and do not represent the interests of the majority of women. The pattern in this regard is mixed. Certainly, many women's organisations are membership based and have significant outreach, are well networked with genuine grassroots organisations or have developed as an organic response to local issues. But others are clearly not representative of, or accountable to, the population of "ordinary women" they claim to represent and instead respond to the priority of funders or use the organisation to further the political and power interests of its leaders. This problem can be seen in the fact that a number of relatively elite women appear to have their "own" CSO, suggesting that this is maybe seen as a new way to access resources and power. A number of women activists agreed that one of the main challenges for the women's movement is to reach out to and genuinely represent women in rural areas, rather than just speak for them or "deliver" activities to them. This is a widespread problem for civil society in highly donor dependent countries, and is certainly not unique either to women's organisations or to Sierra Leone.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that some important progress has been made in increasing women's presence within formal politics in Sierra Leone, although significant obstacles remain for women who wish to enter politics. However, it does not appear that this has yet resulted in any real transformation of Sierra Leone's political institutions to become more responsive or accountable to women. This is, of course, partly due to the small numbers of women who have made it into political institutions, but also to the range of structural and cultural constraints that prevent women from exercising political influence from inside or outside political institutions.

Moreover, it seems that those actors in Sierra Leone who are concerned with promoting women's involvement in politics (from donors to CSOs) are overwhelmingly focused on the target of getting women elected to formal political institutions. The issues of which women get into politics; what they are able to do once they are there; how political institutions can be made accountable to women; and how women

participate and exercise influence within non-formal political domains, appear to be somewhat overlooked. While having significant numbers of women in politics is important, both for gender justice and for genuine democracy, this alone will not create a politics that is responsive and accountable to women.

It appears that what is needed to genuinely "engender" Sierra Leone's politics is a holistic and long term approach that goes beyond elections and focuses on strengthening the multiple ways in which women can be political actors; ensures that male and female political actors are accountable - and are held accountable – for women's rights and for gender equality; and builds political institutions within the formal and informal sector that provide space for women to participate, influence and lead.

The role of donors in promoting women's political participation in any context is inevitably limited by concerns about interference with the national policy agenda, as well as donors' general discomfort at becoming too involved in overtly "political" issues. However, Sierra Leone's donors do appear to recognise the importance of women's full political participation for the development of the country, and certainly have a large amount of influence with which they could promote this agenda. Therefore, the following recommendations are made to Sierra Leone's donors: The implementation of quotas for women in the national parliament and district councils could transform the political landscape in Sierra Leone, removing many of the obstacles faced by women attempting to run for office and bringing large numbers of women into political institutions. Donors should make the case for the implementation of quotas in their policy dialogue with the government of Sierra Leone and the political parties. The UN has a particularly important role to play in this because of its more "neutral" position and involvement in post-conflict transformation processes.

Civil society is clearly an important arena where women can mobilise politically, as well as a stepping stone for women to enter formal politics. Moreover,

women's civil society organisations play a vital role in campaigning for women's greater involvement in politics, sensitising communities and community leaders on the importance of women's political participation, and supporting women to run for office. It is important that donors provide core funding to women's organisations – particularly those with genuine grassroots outreach or a broad membership base - to allow them to build up their capacity and independent political agenda.

Donors' interest in, and support for, women's political participation should not just be confined to election periods. Donor support should also be aimed at building the capacity of women who are already in political office, as well as of young women and non-elite women who have the potential to be future political leaders.

A major barrier to women's ability to participate in formal politics, take leadership roles or influence policy is the patriarchal culture and structures of the political parties. Donors are increasingly saying that they want to work with a broader civil society – beyond NGOs – and this includes political parties. Greater support for work with political parties (for example by international parliamentary or democracy institutions) to address discriminatory attitudes and practices and support women to attain leadership positions could be one way in which donors could usefully expand their engagement with civil society.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is addressing the culture of patronage that infuses politics in Sierra Leone and acts as a major barrier to women's participation, as well as to accountability relationships between political institutions and citizens. There is currently a lot of debate – and little agreement - on how to reduce the influence of patronage within democratic politics. One measure that donors can take is to support civil society initiatives that raise awareness among communities on the roles and responsibilities of political institutions, and the importance of holding these institutions to account on policy issues. This must go beyond just sponsoring voter education at election time, as

changing citizens' attitudes to - and expectations of - politics is a long term process.

Making politics more accountable to women is not only about bringing women into positions of political power, but also involves reforming the structures and culture of political institutions. Sierra Leone has been reforming and rebuilding its governance institutions since the end of the war, a process that is largely financed (and in reality often led) by Sierra Leone's donors. Stronger integration of a gender focus into governance reform processes could be a major step in building institutions that are accountable to women and for gender equality, and is something that donors could easily promote.[36] The failure to integrate gender concerns effectively into the decentralisation process demonstrates the need for this.

Donors need to recognise the extremely important role that customary institutions play in allocating power and resources, shaping the political arena and hindering or facilitating women's participation in politics.[37] It is important that donors engage with, understand and support the reform of customary governance structures rather than working only with the formal governance structures with which they are comfortable.

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36 For more on building gender accountable institutions see "Gender and Accountability: Challenges for Reform in Developing States", Goetz, 2006.

37 In fact, donor actions to re-instate and support customary institutions following the end of the war have added to this power.

WORKING PAPERS

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FRIDE

The establishment of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on gender equality and the development of the "good governance" agenda have increased international interest in women's political participation. It is now widely recognised that women's exclusion from political decision making results in government institutions and policies that are not accountable or responsive to women citizens, and that women's participation in politics is both a right and a requirement for effective development.

Post conflict state-building processes offer an important opportunity to strengthen women's political participation, developing governance rules, institutions and processes that are inclusive of women, and supporting women to engage in politics. However, in many contexts these opportunities are missed and women's exclusion is reinforced within newly (re-)constructed political structures.

Sierra Leone presents an interesting case of both the opportunities and challenges in strengthening women's political participation in contexts of state building. This Working Paper explores the extent to which women in post-conflict Sierra Leone are able to participate in politics, the barriers that they face in doing this, and the outcomes of increased female political participation. It examines the policy framework and international support for women's participation and makes recommendations on how Sierra Leone's donors can more effectively support women's involvement in politics. The Working Paper is based on field research conducted by FRIDE and Campaign for Good Governance and is part of a broader FRIDE research project on women's citizenship in the context of state-building.

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