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A progressive analysis on role of women in the socio-economic development in Sierra Leone

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This study highlights the gender gap in contemporary Sierra Leone society, and discusses the constraints and underlying attitudes which determine women's disadvantaged position. As new resources, opportunities and structures are introduced in the course of development in Sierra Leone, gender differentials are becoming apparent. Women form a minority in the new wage labor sector, but majority of the petty traders. This research provides an analytical and predictive overview of the current issues on gender analysis on the role of women in the socio-economic development of Sierra Leone. These issues are presented under the following headings: education, socio-political, economy and labor. Gender gaps revealed in the most recent statistics are highlighted, together with an analysis of gender constraints which lead to women being disadvantaged in accessing the materials and non-material resources in contemporary Sierra Leone. The study found that the aftermath of the civil war, polygamy, traditional beliefs backed up with religious practices and lack of educational and global exposure have played a key role in keeping the women voice down in Sierra Leone.

Key words: Socio- economic development, political, gender, education.

INTRODUCTION

Despite many notable advances in the living statuses of women in developed world, there remains an undeniable gap between women and men regarding their political, economic, and social conditions and contributions in developing countries. In these countries, the neglect of women is negatively affecting economic and social development rates as half of the population is left out of the development process. Many societies had much to gain by effectively incorporating women into their development process. The United Nations Development Programme's 1997 Human Development Report states,

"A creative commitment to gender equality will strengthen every area of action to reduce poverty because women can bring new insights and a new basis for organization" (Chandler et al; UNDP, 1997). However, to a great extent in the developing world, women are not equal to men in political, legal, social and economic rights. One of the main findings of the Arab Human Development Report 2002 (World Bank, 2003) is that the low empowerment of women is one of the three deficits which have seriously hampered human development in the last three decades. Hence, in order to effectively and efficiently make strides

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towards development, countries must integrate women into the development process through measures aimed at increasing social, economic, and political equity, and broaden access to fundamental human rights, improvements in nutrition, basic health, and education. The absence of women from structures of governance inevitably means that national, regional, and local priorities are typically defined without meaningful input from women, whose life experience gives them a different awareness of the community's needs, concerns, and interests from that of men (Saadi, 2005).

In 2004, women represented 16% of parliamentarians worldwide, compared with 9% in 1987. Without representation at the parliamentary level, it is difficult for women to influence policy (World Bank, 2000). A World Bank investigation (Tara Chandler et al; UNDP,1997) found that "that gender inequality tends to slow economic progress and make the rise from poverty more difficult". Gender inequality retards both economic growth and poverty reduction. Furthermore, not only does gender inequality exacerbate poverty; poverty exacerbates gender inequality between males and females.

This study contributes in the (1) identification of the roles which women play or played in the socio-economic development, their legal status as individuals in relation to men in Sierra Leone, (2) examination of gender roles as well as gender differences in access to and control over resources in Sierra Leone, and finally (3) identification of major obstacles which women face in the socio-economic development of Sierra Leone. Since there have been sets of new resources, opportunities and structures that have are introduced in the course of development in Sierra Leone, this study shall serve as basis for the government to rationally allocate new resources equitably amongst men and women. This study suggests that the Sierra Leone society might stand to lose in the 21st century if a study of this nature is not implemented in order to incorporate both sexes into long term development strategies. Women's participation in socio-economic development has become more important in the globalized society and the increasing role of the service sector may not require as much physical agrarian labor, but workers more trained in information based technology for accelerated development of economies.

METHODOLOGY

A demographic overview of Sierra Leone

The population of Sierra Leone is 5,732,681 (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2005); the male population was 2,391,998 whilst the female population was 2,538,534. Life expectancy at birth is 48 years .The population density is 58 per Sq km (Economic Intelligent Unit, 2009). Infant mortality rate is 54.43 deaths/1,000 live births, the population growth rate is 2.30 %, the birth rate is 42.84 births/1,000 population, the rate is 20.61% deaths/1,000 population, net migration rate is 6.19 migrants/1,000 population, Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) is 2000 deaths/100,000 births, female 161.06 deaths/1,000 live births, male 125.69 deaths/1,000 live births, total

146. 86 deaths/1,000 live births, Life expectancy at birth is male :37.74 years, female :42.06 years, total population : 42.84 years, total fertility rate, 5.72 children born/woman (Ministry of Health and Sanitation, 2007). The population includes 20 African ethnic groups. The Temne in the north and the Mende in the South are the largest. About 10% of the population is Krio, the descendants of freed slaves who returned to Sierra Leone from Great Britain and North America and from Slave ships captured on the high seas. In addition, about 4,000 Lebanese, 500 Indians, 2000 Chinese and 2,000 Europeans reside in the country (Sierra Leone, 2009).

UNICEF included the economy of Sierra Leone in the group of least developed countries (UNICEF, 2008). Since the end of the civil war in 2002, the economy has gradually been recovering with GDP growth rate between 4 and 7% (Blinker, 2006). In 2008 its GDP in PPP ranked between 147th (World Bank) and 153 rd (CIA) largest in the World. Sierra Leone economic development has always been hampered by an overdependence on mineral exploitation. Successive governments and the population as a whole have always believed that "diamonds and gold" are sufficient generators of foreign currency earnings and lure foreign investment. As a result, large scale agriculture of commodity products, industrial development and sustainable investments have not been given the desired attention by governments (Economy of Sierra Leone, 2008).

About two-thirds of the population engages in subsistence agriculture, which accounts for 52.5% of national income. The Government works with several foreign donors, including the United States, Britain and China among others, to operate integrated rural development and agricultural projects. Agriculture products diverse and include crops like: coffee, cocoa, ginger, palm kernels, palm oil, cassava, bananas, citrus, peanuts, cashews, plantains, rice, sweets potatoes, vegetables, cattle, fish, pigs, poultry, and sheep. Land area is about 30% potentially arable; only 8% is cultivated. The industries in the country include diamonds, bauxite, and rutile mining; forestry; fishing; beverages; flour; cement and other construction goods; plastics; tourism (Sierra Leone 11/15/11-US). In 2000, the Human Development Index (HDI) value is 0.252; the HDI rank for Sierra Leone was 180 out of 182 countries (United Nations, 2000). However, Sierra Leone is an extremely poor African nation with tremendous inequality in income distribution although it has substantial mineral, agricultural, and fishery resources. The economic and social infrastructure is not well developed, and serious social disorders continue to hamper economic development, following an 11-year long civil war.

The study is ethnographic looking at the role of women and their impact at the national as well as local community level. Empirical data were collected by undertaking fieldwork into some localities in Sierra Leone, questionnaires, were administered, and interviews were conducted which helped to assess the impact at the community level. Secondary research entailed an extensive literature review to develop the conceptual framework for the research. This includes analyzing secondary data on women's issues, documents and national policies in other developing countries including China with phenomenal economic growth which could serve as a model for Sierra Leone.

Study design, setting, subjects, and population

This research was conducted among men and women living in Sierra Leone. The study employed a cross-sectional design and was conducted between January and August 2010; the sample size was about 300 which is the accessible population. Data were collected from the sample of the people who were mostly between age 15 and 55+ as the target population. Generalizations were made. In addition, "purposive or judgmental sampling" (DIE4564 Research Methods) was used which was assumed to be

reasonably representative of the target population. The subjects were chosen on a voluntary basis; they are therefore volunteers and no incentives were provided to participate in this research. Four broad criteria for good sampling design were identified: (1) goal orientation, (2) measurability, (3) practicability, and (4) economy for focused evaluation.

Descriptive analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to describe the main features of the data collected in quantitative terms. Unlike inferential or inductive statistics, descriptive statistics aims at quantitatively summarizing the data set, rather than being used to support inferential statements about the population that the data were thought to represent (JML, 2011). In this research the data were generally presented along with more formal analyses. For example reporting subjects typically appears on a tables or figures giving the overall sample size, the proportion of each subject and demographic or characteristics such as the average age, marital status, gender etc.

The influence of cultural norms to women

Cultural norms may prevent women from working on their own or from supervising other workers. Rigid social norms about the appropriate gender division of labor often restrict women's ability to earn income. Women are perpetually underrepresented in the income generating work force, and therefore contribute less directly to nation's development (Tara Chandler et al; UNDP,1997). The world Economic Forum states that, "The economic participation of women is not only important in lowering the disproportionate levels of poverty among women, but also important as a step towards raising household income and encouraging economic development in countries as a whole" (Zohid, 2005). By contributing to the formal sector of the economy, increasing representation of women in the work force is an imperative step in a country's development process.

The women role in the sustainability of development strategies
Mainstreaming gender into sustainable development strategies means literally a commitment to human security. This shall have a significant impact which shall be visible in ecological, economic, social, cultural, and personal security for the society in general. Hence, sustainable development must be for all, men and women alike. However, women rarely have any title to land and are often denied access to effective technologies and resources that would strengthen their capacity to promote environmentally sustainable practices (TChandler et al; UNDP,1997). In Sub-Saharan Africa, if women's access to agricultural inputs was at par with men's, the total agricultural outputs could increase by 20% (World Bank, 2000).

Women throughout developing countries remain substantially disadvantaged when compared to men regarding their access to sufficient nutrition, health care and reproductive facilities, and preventive health and safety measures. Interestingly, it is the women that bear the heaviest burden regarding health and physical safety; while they remain as the most neglected and unequipped lot. Women's disadvantaged position has triggered an increase in communicable illnesses, such as tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS, which are basically having their roots in poverty. Due to inadequate nutrition poor and less educated women are especially vulnerable as a result of inadequate nutrition, and are less likely to seek treatment due to the relatively high costs of both travel and treatment, and also due to gender based restraints such as domestic responsibility. Studies have shown that women and girls are more affected by hunger than men and boys, as females are

often the ones to eat last and least in poor families (World Bank, 2000). Women in the developing world remain particularly vulnerable to violence and reduced physical security. During times for war, women face devastating forms of violence related to gender, including rape as a victim of war, and sexual slavery. According to UN Fund for Women (UNIFEM, 2003), women struggle to keep families together and care for the wounded on the margins of fragile war economies, hence they are the first to be affected by infrastructure breakdown and may be forced into survival strategies that involve exploitation."

An overview of global gender issues

The study of women in the developing world however is by no means confined to questions of inequalities and victimization. After years of neglect, many international agencies and government planners have begun to recognize women's special status and needs in development projects. Their political mobilization has ranged from the quiet subversion common to oppressed groups to more open assertion of political, economic, and social rights. A growing body of scholarly literature now focuses on women's empowerment. Throughout Latin America, for example, women have played a decisive role in grassroots political organizations, known as "new social movement", that have burst upon the scene since the 1970s. Focusing on Gender issues, human rights, poverty, and a range of other concerns, New Social Movement (NSM) has provided important alternatives such as in political parties and unions (Arturo and Sonia, 1990). Elsewhere, revolutionary movement in countries such as El Salvador, Nicaraguan, and China have opened up opportunities for female activism and leadership that had not previously existed in traditional society. And in nations as diverse as Liberia, Malawi, India, the Philippines, Haiti, and Bolivia, Liberia, Gabon (as interim Leader) women have headed the national governments (Greg, 2012). All of these aspects of women's social, economic and political activity deserve our attention.

On 8th March, 2011, the world celebrated the 100th International Women's Day (IWD). Great strides have been made in closing gender gaps since its launch in 1911. At the time, less than five countries had granted women the right to vote. Today, this is a universal right in all but a handful of countries. Over the past century, legislation relating to equal pay, inheritance, property rights and violence has dramatically improved around the world. Health and literacy gaps have been vastly reduced. School enrollment ratios on the some parts of the world have been reversed, with more women than men enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary level education (UNICEF, 2007). Perhaps most evident is the massive influx of women into the workforce in recent decades, resulting in enormous gains for the global economy. Yet, there is still much work to be done in education, health, the workplace, legislation and politics, before women around the globe enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men. The International Women Day and the awareness it creates, holds greater significance than ever in the current global economic downturn.

Women make up one-half of the global human resource. Poor countries that do not invest adequately in educating and empowering girls and capitalizing on the female portion of the talent pool are undermining their economies' resilience, productivity and competitive potential. In developing countries, this is a missed economic opportunity which can be used to capitalize on valuable skills that are more important than ever into (Cape Tow, South Africa, 2009).

Furthermore, there is compelling evidence (Jeffrey F. Milem 2011, University of Maryland) that diverse groups and teams are better at problem solving than homogeneous ones. The reason is simple. Innovation requires new, unique ideas. The best ideas flourish in an environment that encourages the representation of all stakeholders,

diversity of opinion and openness. This implies that most business environments have thus far not been nurturing the best decisions and that the greater representation of women in senior leadership positions within governments and financial institutions is vital, not only to find solutions to the current economic turmoil, but also to help starve off such crises in the future. Prudent business will need to make vital readjustments today to begin preparing for the looming post-crisis labor market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Socio-demographic Information of the respondents

A convenient sampling procedure was used to carry out this research; the respondents were volunteers who were approached at the pilot survey and later for the research studies. Three hundred (300) individuals were given questionnaires but only two hundred and fifty one (251) completed them and returned. The names of the respondents were not recorded because of confidentiality and research ethics. The socio-demographic characteristics of the 251 respondents are represented in Table 1. The sample was evenly split with regards to gender (41.8% males and 58.2 females). The proportion of respondents who were legally married, traditionally married or living with partner was quite similar (16.7, 15.9, and 12.7 %) respectively, while those respondents who were single (never married) were 43.8%. Other categories of the respondents were widowed (2.8%); this is mainly because of the decade long civil war in the country, most women lost their husband during the unrest. At the end of the war they are left to fend for their children. The respondents that divorced were 3.6%; some of the divorced cases are mainly without the consent of the women, and separated were 4.4%. They majority of the study sample were between the ages of 15 and 44 years with cumulative percentage of 84.5, and age 45-54 were 10.4% and age 55+ were the least (5.2%). The cumulative percentage of the respondents who completed elementary, junior, senior or tertiary education were 84.9% while 15.1% did not have formal education. 47.0% of them were either married or living with a partner while 53.0% of the respondents were single.

Religious affiliation was as follows: 50.2% were Christian; 49.4%, Muslim and 0.4%, others. Previous studies in the country reported the Muslim population to be slightly higher than the Christians but our research found a different distribution.

One possible explanation for the differing proportions of religious groups is most of the respondents have converted to Christianity even though their parents are Muslims. However, since Sierra Leone is a secular state, they continue to live in harmony; although this might be due to their duo religious practices in either Christianity or Muslim alongside the indigenous beliefs.

This research further revealed that Sierra Leone comprises mainly a youthful population of which over 50% are females whose socio-economic statuses are

deplorable. Their situation is further compounded by the underrepresentation in decision making processes in the country. Most of the respondents were never married (43.8%), 4.4% were separated, while 3.6 % were divorced and 2.8% were widowed. This was because of the decade long war wherein most women lost their husbands, (Survey of Sierra Leone, 2010); 12.7% were living with partners, 15.9% were traditionally married. Before now traditional or customary marriages were unregistered. However, gender bills passed in parliament recognized traditional or customary marriages (Survey of Sierra Leone, 2010) of which 16.7% were legally married or a registered marriage that was recognized by the Sierra Leone government (Figure 1).

Analysis of education

Although basic education is regarded both as a fundamental human right and a cost-effective investment in development, there are wide disparities in the literacy and educational attainment levels of the study population, with significant differentials according to gender, age and location. The years of war and civil unrest disrupted the education of many adults, and a large proportion, particularly women in rural area, are illiterate and have received little or no formal schooling. Current Figures on adult literacy rates significantly understate the extent of illiteracy, because a standard test has not been developed and figures are based on self-reported rates (Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 1999). The most recent Survey of Sierra Leone puts the national adult literacy rate at 38.4%. The literacy rates of 15-24 years old men are 59.6% while that of women in the same age bracket is 37.4% (UN Statistics Division, 2004).

The literacy rate is highest in Freetown and some urban areas in the South and significantly lower in the North and the Eastern part of Sierra Leone. The female literacy rate in rural areas can be assumed to be worse, although the actual rate is not available. For example Siaka (1993) in his study of factors influencing school enrollment and attendance in rural communities in Sierra Leone, reported that the national enrollment ratio (ER) is 39.7% for all persons aged five and over, but only 24.6% for rural areas. For girls, the national ER is 36.5%, but only 20.6% for girls in rural areas. Although the gender gap is smaller in urban areas and greatest among the poorest quintile, rates for women are lower than those for men across every age group and across all socio-economic strata, signifying both social and economic barriers to the education of females. Sierra Leone has a low level of literacy which is higher among adults with only 37.1% of adults literate in 2006. The level of literacy among 15 to 24 years old is high and it is 52.2% who have a literacy rate of 52.2%.

Attendance within the education system is also low among adults with men averaging four years of formal

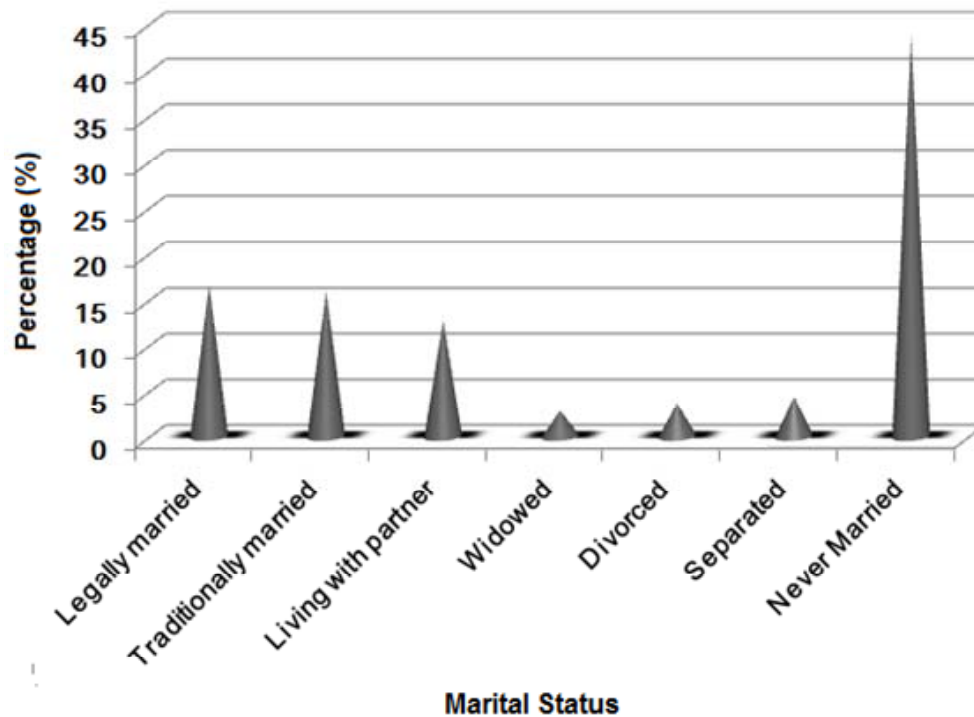


Figure 1. Socio-demographic of the participants' marital statuses in Sierra Leone.

education and women two years (Tan, 2004). This research showed that a large number of the respondents' had completed senior/high school and were at a tertiary institution. According to our findings 57.0% of the respondents were either at a tertiary institution or have completed tertiary education. Comparatively 86.5% of the respondents had completed their primary education while 13.5% did not. Of the people we surveyed, 76.5% completed their secondary education while 23.5% did not.

The reasons why the respondents had not completed schooling were financial constraints (66.1%), pregnancy (21.5%), and supporting their parents (6.4%). Others left school to do business and interestingly these were mostly women and girls. Another 6.0% dropped out of school for other reasons like early marriage, farming or religious and traditional barriers. However, this research also shows gradual narrowing of the gender gap in literacy rates across generations, reflecting a combination of improved access to formal education, changing attitudes towards education itself, and the education of the girl-child specifically in recent years with the new SABABU EDUCATION PROJECT for the education of the girl-child in the country, and the 2004 education act which states that every child should complete primary schooling.

Government's spending on education

Although significant progress has been made in primary

school enrollment, there are still many school-aged children who never attend school. These children are mostly from rural areas, from outside the Western Area, and from poorer households. Gender disparities in the initial access to the primary level are not large, perhaps as a result of the government's effort to enroll girls in primary education; but as with other disparities, the enrolment of girls is decreasing and they become greater as the level of education increase. In general, however, socio-economic and geographic disparities are greater than those related to gender. There are particularly large differences at the district level for Junior Secondary School (JSS) and Senior Secondary School (SSS). Examining students' flow data, this research finds that gender differences emerge some time after entrance to the first primary grade but before completion of primary school and the urban and rural disparities exist at all stages of schooling. The same exist across different levels of household wealth. Inequalities by region are particularly high with respect to entrance to the first primary grade and completion of JSS. Household expenditure on education varies by relative wealth, as expected, but poorer households spent a greater proportion of their household expenditure on education. They also spent a greater proportion of their education expenditure on uniforms, books, and contributions to the Community Teachers Association. According to this research, 65.7% of the respondents said government should spend much more on the education of the girl

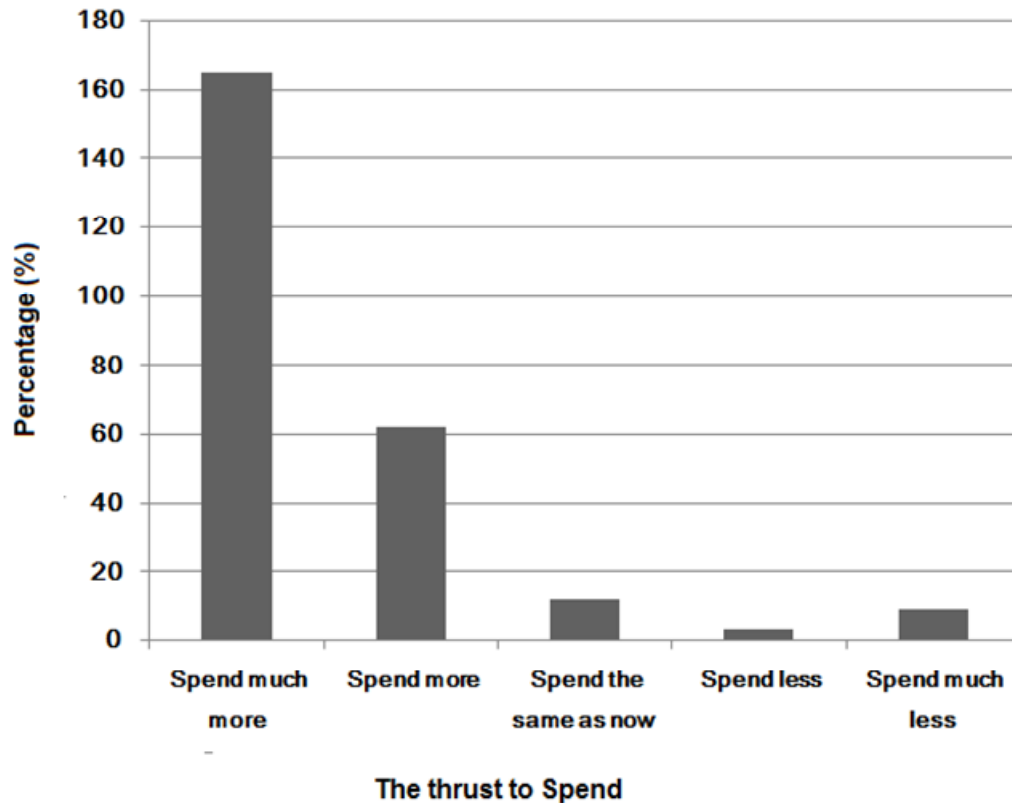


Figure 2. Government of Sierra Leone's spending on the girl child education.

child, 24.7% said government should spend more, 4.8 % said government should spend the same as now while 4.8 % said government should spend less or much less (Figure 2). There are significant inequalities in the distribution of public spending on education: poor households benefit much less from public education expenditure than do rich households. This inequality could be addressed by increased access to schooling and a more equitable distribution across education level.

Analysis of the political participation

Like in most developing countries, Sierra Leonean women have got the right to vote. Political rights have a fundamental role in the socio-economic and political development of the country as they breed loyalty and confidence in the governance strategies amongst its citizens (Gymah-Boadi, 2005). However this research shows that women in Sierra Leone are underrepresented in the decision-making process although they are the majority in the election process. A percentage of 36.7% male respondents voted in the 2008 local council elections while 52.2% female respondents voted. In the 2007 Presidential and Parliamentary elections, 34.3% male respondents voted; 49.8% female respondents also

voted. This research finding shows stark differences between the voting right and representation in the decision-making process. Female members of cabinet in the respondents' locality/district showed that only 32.30% respondents are represented by at least one woman and 67.70% did not have any female members of cabinet. Female members of Parliament showed that a total of 81.3% respondents had no female parliamentarian while only a paltry 18.7% are represented in the legislative arm of government which is the law making organ of the government. At the local governance level almost all district and town councils are headed by males. According to the respondents 98.0% had no female mayor in their districts or town councils while only 2.0% respondents had. Even in female representation, a score of 100% was not realized; showing a female chairpersons of 83.7% of the respondents indicating no female and only 16.3% had in the area of councillorship which is the least in the local governance; 54.6% of the respondents reported that they have a female councilor while 45.4% said they do not have.

Since independence in 1961 women's issues have not been taken seriously by past governments even through the Ministry of Gender, Children and Socio-Economic Development of Sierra Leone. During the decade long war women demonstrated against the war and in the

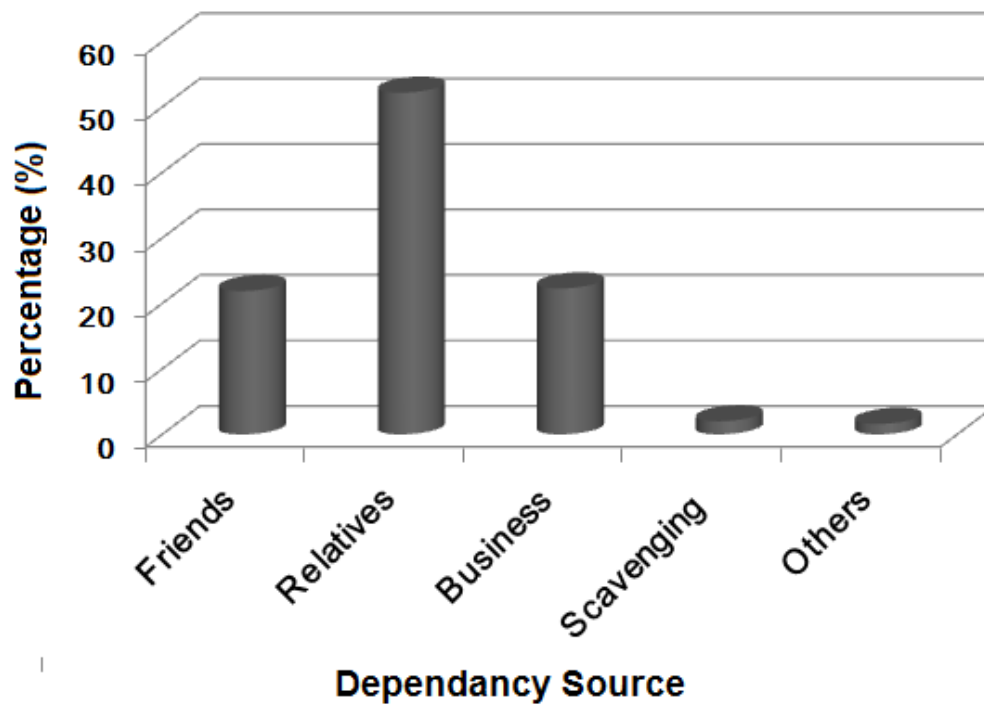


Figure 3. The dependency sources for living in Sierra Leone.

peaceful years, successive governments, and development agencies appeared strangely oblivious to women’s role in the development process (Survey of Sierra Leone, 2010). This research also found that even though there are slight improvements in the local council of female representation, there are very few women in both cabinets

in part because the country moved away from the proportional representation system to constituency-based elections which require candidates to carry out face-to-face campaign that put women candidates at a disadvantage.

The Sierra Leonean parliamentary representation

The current parliament from the August 2007 Presidential and Parliamentary elections comprises three political parties with the following representations; the All People’s Congress (APC) has 40.73% (59) seats, with women occupying 6 (10.2%); the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), 39.54% (45) with women occupying 7 (16.3%), and the Peoples Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), 15.39% (10), with women occupying 1 (10.0%). 12 seats are reserved for Paramount chiefs, with women occupying only 2 (16.7%). The national total number of women parliamentarians at the national level is 16 seats out of 124 seats (13.3%) which is less than the world average of 15.1%.The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report of 2004 (Sierra Leone, 2004) under its imperative recommendation directed that government guarantees that all political parties ensure that at least 30% of their candidates for all public elections are women. This recommendation has never been adhered to by the government. The numbers of women who did stand for Parliament in 2007 was lower than desired (64),

Analysis of the women socio-economic status

In order to determine how the people earn their living, respondents in this survey were asked series of questions based on their labor and subsistence activities. Since most of the respondents (both males and females) were unemployed, investigations were carried out about how they earn their living. A good number of the respondents were students (this may be due to the robust education policy of the Government on primary education). This somewhat compulsory education policy encourages families and communities to send their children to school to acquire at least some years of basic formal education. Figure 3 shows how they earn their living. The data of Figure 3 show that a large number of respondents depend on family and relatives; 21.9 percent indicated that they depend on friends and 52.2 percent depend on parents/relatives.

Occupational distribution of respondents by sex

An analysis of the labor force by occupation is useful for

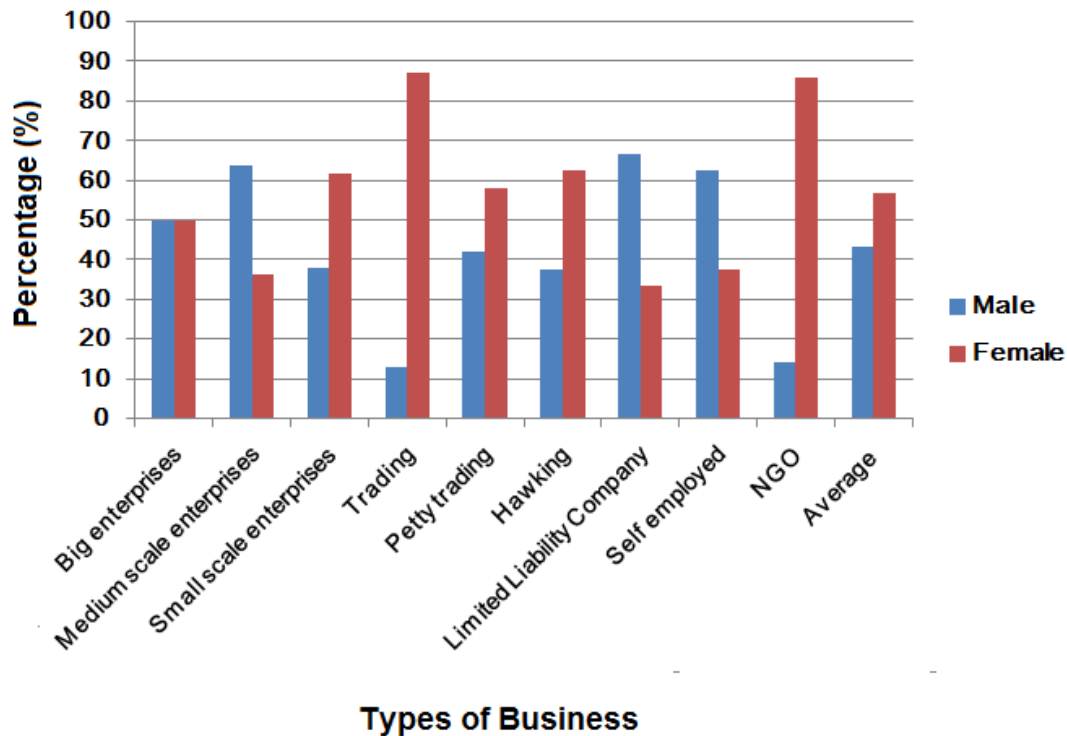


Figure 4. Types of business enterprise by gender in Sierra Leone.

informed decisions on the skill levels of the population. It gives an indication of the type of skills that need to be improved for a certain level of industrial development to be achieved. Figure 4 shows that more women are engaged in business enterprises in the informal sector; more males than females were in legislative/managerial and professional occupations in Sierra Leone. An analysis of the business enterprises by sex reveals a huge gap in the sex distribution in these occupations. About 63.9% of the males were engaged in medium scale enterprises compared to 36.1% of females, one of the sectors that was dominated by males. In small scale enterprise 61.9% females and about 38.1% males are in trading; 87.0% females and 13.0% males are hawkers; on the average, there are more women in this business sector (58.2%) compared to men (41.8%) as shown in Figure 4.

Women’s role in the socio-economic development

Women have a significant role to contribute towards the process of socio-economic transformation in Sierra Leone. Sustainable growth is impossible to implement alongside effective programs for economic and social development without the full participation of women as vital economic links between agriculture, industry and trade (DRSP, 2013-2018). It is against this background

that this research investigated the role of the Sierra Leonean women in the socio-economic development. We found out that 28.3 per cent of the respondents were strongly in favor of, 40.2% were in favor, 17.9% were neither in favor nor against while 6.8% were against and 6.8% were strongly against.

With regard to the labor force, the analysis showed that persons in the labor force who survive up to ages of 15 to 19 would be expected to have about 20 years of working life remaining; taking into consideration that these years could be disrupted by periods of unemployment arising from factors such as occupational injuries, redundancies, sickness etc. One would conclude that working life in Sierra Leone is short when analyzed by sex. The results show that the average remaining years for males who survive to the next age is longer than that of females. Persons in the Western Area who enter the labor force at age 15 are expected to work longer (34.3 years) than persons in the same cohort in other provinces.

DISCUSSION

The Sierra Leonean society is changing fast. Socio-economic change is bringing new opportunities and influences, as technological advances, foreign investment and development organizations link the country to the world in the ongoing globalization era. Yet Sierra Leonean

society is also struggling to regain a sense of national identity through a return to perceived traditional values and ideals in these post conflict years. Perceptions of gender identity, especially the female gender, are closely linked to notions of "culture" and "tradition," and resistance to changes in gender relations is often strong (Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 1999).

Sierra Leone is a hierarchically an ordered society, with notions of power and status conditioning social relations. In this social order, women are considered to be of a lower status relative to men, though the status of an individual is also determined by their age and other characteristics, including wealth. For women, status is additionally determined by marriage and children. What is considered appropriate behavior for a woman may vary considerably according to her age and a range of factors relating to her socio-economic position and family composition. In general, attitudes towards gender roles place great importance on women's role as household managers and men's role as providers for the family. Although women are nominally guaranteed equal rights with men under the Sierra Leonean Constitution with new gender bills, the ability to claim these rights is subject to prevailing social ideals and attitudes about power and gender relations (Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 1999).

Educational opportunities

With the government's commitment and the right policies in place, such as free primary education, the new education act of 2004, and the girl child education; student enrollments have increased rapidly at all levels. Many children and youths who previously had little or no access to formal education are now in school. An increase in enrollment in tertiary education has also been witnessed. Despite great progress made in increasing access to education, the goal of all children completing primary education is still not a reality. A large percentage of primary-school-aged children are currently not in school, amongst this are mostly girls. To achieve the international MDG for all children to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015, Sierra Leone will need to enroll these out-of-school children and then encourage them to stay in school until the completion of the cycle.

With the SABABU EDUCATION project that abolished fees for girls to attend primary and JSS in the Northern and Eastern Regions, this effort should be extended to other regions if cost consideration allows it (World Bank, 2007). Unlike Sierra Leone, the Chinese government has since 1949 made great efforts to eliminate the inequality between boys and girls in education (Shi and Rong, 2001). The government legally ensures that boys and girls have equal opportunity to receive education. The rate of girl's enrollment has been raised from 15% before

the founding of the People's Republic of China to 96% in 1992. Accordingly, the rate of illiterates has been lowered from 90 to 32% in the same period; presently the literacy rate in China is about 96% according to recent surveys (China's Survey, 2010).

For a country to move forward in terms of socio-economic development both women and men should play a very important role in such strides. And the only way this can happen is through equal opportunities in education. Early marriages, reserved traditional attitudes, lack of knowledge of the global advancement in the potentials of women and poverty have contributed in less education to the girl child in education in Sierra Leone (survey of Sierra Leone, 2010). However, studies have shown that none of the rich industrialized countries was able to achieve significant economic growth before attaining universal primary education (Shi and Rong, 2001).

Political participation and decision making

In the political system of Sierra Leone women are severely underrepresented in leadership positions, even in political parties. This research has shown that in most parts of Sierra Leone where women have been active professionally, their level of responsibility as policymakers and planners is still very low. Religion and other cultural factors according to this research ultimately set limits on Sierra Leonean women and influence the opportunities available to them. This is mostly manifested in true fundamentalist Islamic settings especially in the northern and eastern part of the country (Survey of Sierra Leone, 2010). Generally, there are fewer women than men in positions of power, decision-making, local governance in Sierra Leonean society.

Analysis of this research reveals that the political and economic status of Sierra Leonean women is anything but uniform. Their position varies considerably from one region to another; for instance, women in the north and eastern part of the country are not allowed to become paramount chiefs, while educational and professional opportunities exist for small female elite in the west. Most women are marginalized from mainstream economic, political and leadership life in all these regions is exclusively a male preserve. Decision-making at the level of household is complex. There is some evidence to suggest (survey of Sierra Leone, 2010) that men are the overall decision-makers. Although women have considerable say in duties which relate to the day-to-day running of the household, and in certain agricultural tasks, they do not have control in sexual matters, with the result that women are unable to protect themselves from sexual transmissible diseases like HIV which their husbands contract from prostitutes (Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 1999). Improving women's access to education and employment opportunities is a

foundation for gender and social equity (Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 1999) .

Socio-economic participation and employment opportunities

Although women form a majority of the current labor force, they enter the labor market with fewer educational qualifications and skills than men (Khalek (2005). Women's lack of formal education directly affects their representation in the labor market in Sierra Leone. Studies in other countries have put the workforce employed by the informal sector between 30-70% (Todaro, 2005). Learning from China, Sierra Leone should perceive that, the growth of the labor-intensive manufacturing sector can result in new wage labor opportunities for a largely unskilled workforce. However, this employs less than 4 percent of the female workforce. It is significant to note that women constitute the majority of the workforce in the textile and other industries. However, generally, the characteristics of women's informal sector activities show low productivity and low income (Janjua and Naveed, 2009; Mahdi, 2009). The Sierra Leone population in general was quite young; with about 69% of the population being under 30 years of age. There is also high proportion of children in rural areas (45%) than in urban areas (38%). This age structure implies a dependency ratio of 85%, which means that on average each person of working age (15-64 years) had at least one additional person to support. Thus government should focus on reducing dependency by creating more jobs for the youths (SLIHS-Statistics Sierra Leone).

Information on the marital composition of the sampled population revealed that about 61% of the heads of households are in monogamous marriage, while 18% of heads of households are polygamous. The proportions of those widowed and divorced/separated are 10 and 5% respectively; a good number are women, and therefore government should focus more attention on women and avail females of information regarding female opportunities and occupations (Self and Girling, 1983; Pessima, 1995).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Sierra Leone develops, the hierarchical structure of social relations and women's lower status relative to men reflected in this research and household survey findings show that there are few women than men in positions of power, decision-making and status in Sierra Leonean society. Effective participation of women in decision-making is critical to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDG's), not only on gender equality but as a pre-requisite of all on all developmental programs in the country. The local authorities too as institutions of

local government in Sierra Leone have not been women friendly due to lack of gender sensitive policies and programmes. For a long time now, the local authorities have been male dominated as evidenced by the 2009 paramount chieftaincy elections and the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections results. The low prioritization of women's participation in local government has resulted in inequalities in the representation and participation of women.

We have shown that the contribution of women to the socio-economic development in Sierra Leone makes significant contributions to socio-economic development especially as regards to the economy and agricultural development although with limited education coupled with heavy family responsibilities. Other factors which militate against women in Sierra Leone include lack of access to needed resources, execution in planned projects and outright discrimination against them, non-participation in some of the beneficiaries in the affairs concerning them but mainly the poor educational background. Hence, to improve the contribution of women to socio-economic development, these factors should be addressed.

The significant role of education to the women's welfare

Improving women's access to educational services is a significant investment for the Sierra Leone's socio-economic development. Education expands the employment opportunities open to women and improves their productivity capacity. Their social status is no longer solely dependent on marriage and family. Education provides information on contraception, nutrition and sanitation, which potentially improves the quality of life for a woman and her family. Literacy and numeracy also enhance the ability to access and exchange ideas and information and to identify and solve problems. This expands the range of life choices open to a woman and her ability to improve the quality of her life. In this way, education has the potential to improve women's position in Sierra Leonean Society. However, as modernization and the spread of education produces a larger middle class and increasing numbers of literate women, Sierra Leonean women will become more capable of defending themselves. In recent times, women's rights movements have grown in Sierra Leone that were nonexistent or were not even conceivable a decade or two earlier.

Women in agriculture

Contrary to expectations, economic modernization has often had adverse effect on women in Sierra Leone. For example, the commercialization and mechanization of agriculture has generally benefited male cultivator disproportionately, frequently at the expense of women

farmers. Some countries have even made efforts to bring women onboard. For example, in China rapid industrialization based on cheap labor has led to higher wages for most female laborers. Women's high participation in agriculture does not reflect their employment status in that they dominate the unpaid family and household worker categories compared to their men. Hence, there is need to improve women's access to both formal and informal education and also to make the working environment gender sensitive and friendly to facilitate their sustained participation in both paid and unpaid employment.

Mainstreaming gender issues

A glance at the references shows that little has been written on gender issues by Sierra Leonean women themselves. This reinforces the beliefs of those who resist the mainstreaming of gender issues that gender is an externally imposed feminist concept with no relevance to the needs of Sierra Leonean society. Until Sierra Leonean women themselves voice their dissatisfaction with existing gender imbalances, there is a risk that socio-economic development will remain outside the mainstream of development. However, the Sierra Leonean women's relative lack of voiced dissatisfaction with existing gender relations is also symptomatic of the trade-offs women make to cope with oppression in their lives. Women may well be aware of their strategic gender interests, but sacrifice these for other means to secure their well-being. The Sierra Leonean women are far from being passive victims of male oppression, but rather active agents operating within a constrained environment. Gender norms are slowly changing and adapting to the demands of a changing society. Sierra Leonean women are renegotiating gender relations, taking up new roles and public positions themselves, as they are to new ideas and information in modern times.

This is a clear manifestation of why one of the pillars of the Sierra Leone Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper includes job creation and women's empowerment. Without jobs, people are exposed to economic risks and cannot meet their basic needs. Thus, every Sierra Leonean tends to find a means of eking a living and this is why agriculture, based on availability of land, in the first instance, is a popular occupation, not that it is the most rewarding. This implies agricultural practices and activities must be put up stage for the bulk of our population to get out of poverty. Sierra Leone already possesses coherent gender bills and gender policy, garnering resources first for collaboration with other ministries that would be involved in implementing elements of the policy, perhaps creating a gender focal point in each Ministry/Department/Agency (MDA) and then profiling gender characteristics. Reducing female unemployment would require promoting the widespread completion of upper secondary, as well as high quality Technical/Vocational

preparation for all, which would likely increase female labor force participation in the nation as a whole.

It is worthy to note that the issue of female unemployment hinges to a large extent on the state of the economy. However, since the unemployment problem is a national problem, then female employment should be part of an overall strategy of employment creation through the promotion of employment-intensive economic growth. The proportion of females still lags behind the proportion of males in school though there had been deliberate strides to encourage girl child school enrollment. Thus government still needs to stress the increase in school enrollment of the girl child in Sierra Leone as already been done by their Chinese counterpart.

There is a strong need for further research in order to enhance relational analysis that will contribute to theoretical explanation and other understanding of the role women play in socio-economic development in Sierra Leone. This will contribute to policy, programming and project cycle work in the country in the next decade. In this research, it has been revealed that the main problem of women in the socio-economic development for planning in Sierra Leone is the lack of sufficient data for analysis to inform policy makers. Upon a cross - examination of the basic findings of this study, the analysis and interpretation is hereby discussed with a view to proffer policy alternatives that may be relevant for development and economic planning of the country. Most of the development programmes are largely donor funded. Unless this is sustained, with more research on women's roles there could be a reversal of the gains already recorded.

This research however recommends that further research should be carried out in the following areas:(1) Gender issues in the civil service to highlight the working conditions and gender constraints, (2) Gender issues in the mining industry which has been a key stakeholder in the running of the Sierra Leone economy, (3) Gender and land: impact of land reforms, access to land gendered values of land and its inheritance, and (4) Gender and credit : decisions on loan use; control of proceeds, (5) Decisions-making in households: processes of decision-making; women's control over expenditure; impact of wage employment on expenditure; uses of male /female income; urban/rural variations,(6) Perceptions of women in decision-making positions at national and grassroot levels on the quality of their participation; working relations of women and men; constraints women face at work and home, (7) the impact of female income/work outside the home on gender relations in the household, and finally (8) the women's contribution to the economy: quantified and qualified.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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