

WOMEN, ELECTIONS AND VIOLENCE IN WEST AFRICA

Assessing women's
political participation
in Liberia and
Sierra Leone



Tim Kellow

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Liberia and Sierra Leone

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Acronyms

APC	All People's Congress
CDC	Congress for Democratic Change
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
DFS	Department of Field Support
DPA	Department of Political Affairs
EMB	Electoral management body
EURODAD	European Network on Debt and Development
IPU	International Parliamentary Union
NAP	National Action Plan
NEC	National Election Commission
PACER	Promoting a Culture of Equal Representation
PMDC	People's Movement for Democratic Change
PPRC	Political Parties Registration Commission
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UNDPKO	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations
UNIFEM	UN Development Fund for Women
UNMIL	UN Mission for Liberia
UNSCR 1325	UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security
UP	Unity Party
WDC	Ward Development Committees

Executive Summary

The period after a conflict provides a unique opportunity to reform political institutions and processes in a way that will increase the opportunities for women to participate in decision-making. Much of the international peacebuilding effort to build sustainable and peaceful societies has focused on seizing this opportunity. Elections, for example, offer women the chance to translate the new roles they assumed out of necessity during conflict into formal political representation. However, elections also expose women to lingering discriminatory mindsets and cultural practices that are considerable barriers to their greater political participation.

Despite notable positive developments in many post-conflict countries in Africa, women's representation in the parliaments of Liberia and Sierra Leone remains low and elections are still a considerable source of tension. This paper draws on local views to provide a largely qualitative assessment of the current state of women's political participation in the two countries ahead of their forthcoming elections. It initially identifies the expanding opportunities for women that have emerged since conflict ended and shows how accompanying trends affect their greater participation. The paper then highlights the key issues on women's minds ahead of the forthcoming elections, before proposing a set of recommended actions to advance women's political participation further in the two countries.

Women's experiences during the conflicts in each country helped women gain an awareness of their own potential power and encouraged them to participate in the post-conflict election processes. However, women won less than 15 percent of parliamentary seats in the first post-conflict elections in Liberia and Sierra Leone, as many female candidates lacked the capacity to challenge their male rivals. In Sierra Leone, this created a perception of women as ineffective politicians that led in turn to even less representation in parliament after the next election and has contributed to a "glass ceiling" preventing women's future participation. In Liberia, the election of Africa's first female president has created a positive "demonstration effect" that has significantly improved conditions for women's future political participation.

Attempts to establish new structures and mechanisms that would expand women's participation in decision-making in each country have had mixed results. Liberia and Sierra Leone have formally committed to taking affirmative action to guarantee a minimum level of women's political representation. However, steps in this direction have not actually been taken, due largely to resistance from male-dominated political parties and a lack of political will. The main parties in each country have failed to meet their own voluntary commitments for 30 percent of their candidates to be women. Ongoing constitutional review processes in each country present an opportunity to establish formal quotas, but are unlikely to be concluded before the next elections.

The nature of national political structures has a major bearing on the opportunities for women to access and participate in governance structures outside the capital. In Sierra Leone, decentralisation has established elected local government that has provided women with invaluable political experience at the local level. However, it has also created tensions with the existing informal governance structures which have exposed women to intimidation. In Liberia, the inspiration provided by an effective female president has created a sense that women can now strive for any position in society. On the other hand, opportunities for women to participate in politics are limited by the country's centralised political structure.

Civil society in both countries continues to play a vital role in furthering women's participation in politics and elections. Much of this work is conducted by national women's groups – often in partnership, or with technical assistance, from international actors – and has focused on harnessing a sense of solidarity among women to overcome the obstacles they encounter. However, the nature of international support has limited its intended impact and in some cases served to undermine the unity of civil society. Whether this unity can be restored and utilised ahead of the forthcoming elections will have a significant impact on women's ability to overcome the barriers they will face.

Cultural marginalisation has severely limited women's educational opportunities, resulting in high illiteracy levels and a lack of qualifications and skills. These factors block women's participation, both formally and informally. Traditional and religious practices relegate women to traditional household roles, often leaving them in fear of rejection or even a violent reaction from their families if they attempt to enter politics. Women who do try to enter politics face discriminatory attitudes from male-dominated political parties that control the formal political sphere in both countries. Despite their public commitments on the subject, parties have done little to promote women's participation in party structures and as candidates for elections.

The first-past-the-post electoral system employed in both countries is widely considered to restrict women's chances of getting elected. Women lack the finances to run effective constituency campaigns and to compete with established "strongmen" in their communities. Female candidates and their supporters are routinely confronted with gender-based intimidation that creates an aggressive climate and pushes some women to abandon their campaigns. This kind of intimidation is more severe in Sierra Leone, where all-male secret societies use threats of violence to scare off female candidates and their supporters. Women who have been elected to office often lack the political knowledge, experience and skills required to influence decision-making on issues of importance to women in male-dominated parliaments.

The 2012 elections in Sierra Leone will be the first time that local elections take place simultaneously with presidential and parliamentary elections. There is a general assumption that the elections will feature a significant increase in women's participation but this is countered by concerns that the pervading atmosphere may prevent women from attaining greater representation. Hopefully, the formal political experience gained by women at the local level will transfer to greater representation in the national Parliament.

Nonetheless, women's lack of independent wealth and political skills continue to act as major impediments to progress. There are major concerns that many of the aspiring candidates will not secure political party support or will abandon their campaigns as a result of severe intimidation. The lack of a rapid and effective government response to recent incidents of political violence is fuelling a culture of impunity, rumour-mongering and fear that the forthcoming election could spark a return to organised violence. The inability of state institutions to confront political violence and intimidation could deter some women from participating in the 2012 elections. Exaggerated fears of violence created by poor reporting that obscures the facts and is insensitive about past incidents can also serve as a barrier to women's political participation.

Liberia's 2011 elections will be the first time one democratically elected government follows another. There is general confidence that more women will be involved in the election than ever before, and that it will take place in an environment more conducive to their participation than previously. However, there are some fears that political violence could occur. The relative success of an incumbent female president is increasing the chances that people – especially men – are now willing to accept women as leaders and vote them into office. However, there is considerable anxiety that lack of female solidarity will hinder women's chances. There is greater pressure on political parties to select female candidates and there is evidence of their increased willingness to do so. The lack of follow-up to the Truth and Reconciliation Report on

war-time atrocities has contributed to concerns over whether the country's social reconciliation is being sufficiently prioritised, and lingering social divisions could contribute to organised violence around the election. Some people have expressed concern that the ruling party will engage in voter fraud and that violence could result if the under-resourced and over-stretched state bodies organising the election are unable to deal with it.

The overwhelming view from both countries is that women's political participation is improving, but that significant obstacles remain in the way of ensuring that the electoral process is not undermined by political violence and that women have the best chance to seize the opportunities that have been created.

Introduction

It is now internationally acknowledged that women need to be involved in efforts to build sustainable and peaceful societies in the aftermath of violent conflict. Building on existing international gender equality conventions, in 2000 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security, calling on all states ‘to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict’.¹ The post-war period provides a unique opportunity to address longstanding social inequalities and tensions, which have often provided a fertile ground for violence. In particular, it offers a chance for women to translate more active roles - assumed out of necessity during conflict - into greater formal involvement in post-war societies. This thinking has informed international peacebuilding efforts to encourage the establishment of democratic structures and inclusive processes that provide increased opportunities for women to participate in decision-making.²

It is crucial for women’s participation to advance in the political sphere. Parliaments have the power to pass electoral laws and enact affirmative action measures that can overturn longstanding gender inequalities. Elections therefore offer an important opportunity for women to move into the spaces that have opened up for them. However, post-conflict societies continue to reflect many of the conditions that brought about conflict – poverty, exclusion and violence – and a considerable number of players implicated in the hostilities will also be involved in the election process. Elections expose newly formed structures and processes to the lingering prejudices of old, discriminatory mindsets and cultural practices, which can present considerable barriers to women’s attempts to seize the new opportunities available to them. In a country that has recently suffered prolonged violence, there is also a very real danger that the competitive atmosphere of a democratic election can trigger a return to old ways.

Elections serve as the most tangible benchmark for assessing the progress of peacebuilding efforts, especially those aimed at furthering women’s political participation. In the decade since the importance of women’s involvement in peacebuilding was recognised by UNSCR 1325, there have been notable signs of improvement. Many post-conflict countries now feature well over the global average of 18.5 percent female representation in their national parliaments. Africa, where women’s marginalisation has traditionally been most severe, leads the way.³ In Angola, Burundi, Mozambique and Uganda, women hold more than 30 percent of elected positions, and Rwanda’s parliament is the world’s first and only to boast a female majority. Women’s political advancement on the continent was brought to international attention in late 2005 when Liberia voted in Africa’s first elected female head of state.

And yet, in other instances there remains little progress, and even some setbacks. In West Africa, where the impact of violent conflict on women has been marked, women’s representation in parliament remains low, and political competition - elections in particular - remain a considerable source of tension and violence. This was shockingly demonstrated in late 2009 when, just a few months before scheduled elections, soldiers of the ruling military junta in Guinea attacked members of the democratic opposition, killing over 150 people and publicly raping numerous women. In Sierra Leone, despite almost a decade of peace and considerable international engagement, women’s representation in parliament fell at the last election to only 13 percent. Meanwhile, in

1 UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, para 1.

2 UNDPKO (2007) *DPKO/DFS-DPA, Joint Guidelines on Enhancing the Role of Women in post Conflict Electoral Processes*. New York: UN DPKO and UN DPA.

3 International Parliamentary Union (IPU) website, accessed April 2010, available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world300909.htm>

Liberia, the election of a female president has served to mask the fact that women occupy less than 14 percent of seats in the state legislature.

However, an assessment of progress based solely on the increase or otherwise in the numbers of elected women cannot provide a meaningful reflection of the realities and complexities on the ground. Gains may have been achieved principally through external pressure and temporary changes to election systems and policies – often disguising more organic longer-term trends. Furthermore, an increase in female politicians does not in itself ensure that meaningful change to women's lives will result, as they may still be insufficient in number or lack the will or capacity to enact women-friendly legislation. So we need to look behind the numbers and the headlines to assess the true nature and effectiveness of women's political participation, how much they are able to take advantage of greater opportunities, and to measure how severe are the lingering obstacles they encounter.

This paper will seek to do just this by gauging local views on the current state of women's political participation in Sierra Leone and Liberia ahead of their forthcoming elections in 2012 and 2011 respectively. Firstly, it will assess the expanding opportunities that have emerged since conflict ended and the trends that have accompanied them. Then it will look at the barriers that continue to restrain women's participation and some of the ongoing efforts to overcome them. It will also attempt to identify the lessons that can be learned from each case and how they can, potentially, be applied to each other.

1.1 Research Objectives

The aim of this research is to survey women's attitudes towards the forthcoming elections and towards women's political participation, and to document opportunities and barriers to women's participation in the elections. It will look in particular at women's responses to electoral violence and its impact on women's participation in elections. It will aim to build on existing literature and policy advice in this area and contribute to it through detailed, qualitative evidence from two conflict-affected countries in West Africa. It will aim to provide context-specific advice to national actors as well as international agencies active in the region, by documenting and analysing women's voices and experiences.

1.2 Methodology

This report's findings are based principally on field research conducted in Sierra Leone and Liberia during January and February 2010. This was supplemented by desk-based research of relevant policy and legal documents, as well as existing analyses of electoral processes in the two countries. In Sierra Leone, the research was conducted in Freetown, Makeni and Bo; in Liberia, it was conducted in Monrovia, Bong, Grand Cape Mount and Fish Town in the Southeast. The research took the form of key informant interviews and focus group discussions and was largely qualitative in nature, with a focus on making space for respondents' voices and experiences.

2. Expanding Opportunities: Assessing the factors influencing women's political participation

2.1 Post-Conflict Experiences

In Sierra Leone and Liberia, as in much of Africa, society has been traditionally patriarchal in nature, with social and political decision-making roles heavily dominated by men. This relegates women to the household, with little or no access to formal governance structures. Instead, their lives are governed by traditional and religious processes that often discriminate against women and marginalise them.

During the long and brutal conflicts that each country experienced, societies were torn apart and some dynamics started to be realigned. A positive outcome of the conflicts was that people – especially women, who bore the brunt of the violence - became more aware that their lives were affected by politics and the state. The greater community responsibilities that women took on during the fighting - due largely to men's involvement in the conflict - helped them to play an active role in bringing the violence to an end in each country. As a result, women gained awareness of their own potential power and were encouraged to aspire to formal decision-making roles in the post-conflict society, in which they represented the majority. However, women in Sierra Leone and Liberia had differing experiences of how these aspirations transferred to political participation, that continue to have an effect today.

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone held its first post-conflict presidential and parliamentary elections in 2002, within months of the cessation of hostilities. The United Nations organised the election and international and national civil society conducted widespread awareness-raising about the importance of the elections and women's involvement in them. Initially, a first-past-the-post constitutional election system was established, but it was amended to what was effectively proportional representation. This was principally to account for the mass population displacement brought about by the war, but also because the system is perceived as improving women's chances of getting elected. Women's groups had played an active role in the pro-democracy movement that helped to end the war and were hoping that the women they supported would do well.

Although female candidates nearly doubled their share of seats compared with the previous parliament, the 18 seats they won was disappointing because it equated to less than 15 percent representation for more than 50 percent of the population.⁴ Factors contributing to this were that the women who stood as candidates had very little time to prepare and many lacked the capacity to challenge their male rivals. This experience had a lasting and damaging impact on women's future political participation (see Box 1). At the next national election in 2007, generally viewed as successful and violence-free, women won only 16 seats and their representation in parliament fell to under 13 percent.

⁴ Sierra Leone has a uni-cameral 124-member parliament, comprising 112 directly elected seats and 12 seats allocated for "indirectly elected" traditional leaders.

Box 1: Negative effect of first post-war election

The majority of female candidates who contested the 2002 elections did so under strong encouragement from women's groups to seize the new opportunities on offer to them. Most lacked the required political knowledge, experience, and skills to run and win an effective campaign. The majority of those who were elected to office - with the considerable assistance of the amended election system - were unprepared for the task and overwhelmed in their attempts to be effective politicians.

Many observers now suggest that the impression the women who participated in the 2002 election left on the public and their political parties explains why women fared even worse in the 2007 election. Despite many more women aspiring to stand and a marked rise in female registered voters, parties were reluctant to select women candidates, even in safe seats. Only 64 female candidates contested the election - 11 percent of the total - and none stood for the presidency.

Women's involvement in 2002 was neither organic nor sustainable, and resulted in women's participation being set back many years. As one respondent put it: 'The 2007 election was not bad in terms of violence but very bad for women's participation in politics. The lesson from 2002 is that the quality of women's participation is more important than the quantity.'

Liberia

Women played a very visible role in bringing an end to Liberia's war. As such they demanded to be included in the peace talks, and co-signed the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This involvement raised women's awareness of their power to effect change and of their potential to lead, and therefore to challenge men for formal leadership positions.

Prior to the first post-conflict elections in 2005, women's civil society groups - with international support - led a mass awareness-raising drive on the importance of women's participation in all aspects of the election. This included a nationwide voter registration campaign which attracted many women who had not voted before and resulted in more women voting than men. The campaign encouraged and supported over 100 female candidates, including two for the presidency and four for the vice-presidency. Women also played a significant role in monitoring the elections, contributing to a conducive environment for women's participation.

The election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as president was a groundbreaking development for women's political participation - not only in Liberia but also across Africa - especially as it was brought about by a display of solidarity among women voters in the presidential run-off vote. However this overshadowed the relatively disappointing number of women elected to office - less than 14 percent in both houses⁵. Whereas before the election women had relatively little knowledge and experience of politics, by the end of the process this had improved significantly. An activist who played a leading role in the 2003 women's movement remarked on the impact of the election: 'Women realise that they have the power; they are now demanding the right to participate rather than waiting for it to be given'.

2.2 Fluid Policy Environment

The experience of the conflicts in both countries, and the sustained international engagement that followed, has fostered an awareness of the need to include previously excluded elements of society in decision-making in order to avoid replicating the conditions that led to violence. This has led to attempts to establish new structures and mechanisms that expand the opportunities

⁵ Liberia has a bicameral legislature, comprising a 64-member House of Representatives and a 30-member Senate.

available for formerly marginalised groups – women and youth in particular – to participate in decision-making.

Quotas guaranteeing a minimum level of women’s political representation offer the most effective rapid means of achieving this (See Box 2). Sierra Leone and Liberia have formally committed to taking such steps through their ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, as well as non-binding commitments to other international mechanisms such as UNSCR 1325.

However, their lack of progress in implementing these undermines the chance of building on the progress that has been made to date. A window of opportunity now exists for the necessary steps to be taken so that such policies could take effect at the next elections.

Box 2: Quotas and their implementation

Quotas are widely seen as the most effective policy tool for increasing women’s political participation. A target of 30 percent female representation in political decision-making positions has been set by the UN and others as it is generally believed to be the minimum level to achieve “critical mass” – enabling women to effectively influence policy change.

Three main quota systems exist to reach this goal: provisions in a state’s constitution to reserve seats for women in the national parliament; provisions written into national legislation for minimum levels of women’s involvement in parliament or as election candidates; and voluntary commitments from political parties to put forward a minimum number of female election candidates.

Constitutional quotas are by far the most effective means of achieving greater participation rapidly and have been successfully introduced in many post-conflict states – most notably in Central Africa⁶. Establishing quotas through legislation is very difficult, due to low female representation in national parliaments, and political parties often lack the will to fulfil their voluntary commitments.

Sierra Leone

The 2004 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report recommended establishing a formal quota for 30 percent of parliamentary representatives to be women. It has not been adopted despite sustained lobbying by women’s groups, largely because of lack of political will and resistance from male-dominated political parties. The three main parties have voluntarily committed themselves to selecting women for 30 percent of their candidates but have failed to meet this at the last two elections – putting forward only 11 percent in 2007 and 15 percent in the 2008 local elections.

In December 2009, civil society groups launched a new campaign for political parties to establish a formal 30 percent quota ahead of the 2012 elections. An ongoing constitutional review process presents an ideal opportunity to establish such a system and meet the government’s international commitments. However, the process was initiated by the previous government and is not being prioritised by the current one, making it unlikely that it will be concluded before the next election. The process has also been criticised for not consulting widely enough and for counting only four women among the 30-member commission conducting it.

⁶ For an overview of quotas in Africa, see Ballington, J. (ed) (2004) *The Implementation of Quotas: The African Experience*. Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

The government has developed a number of other policies relating to women's participation in consultation with key ministries, UN agencies and international and national NGOs. These include a policy for the advancement of women, relating to its CEDAW commitments, and a gender mainstreaming policy, establishing a gender focal point in each ministry. It is also in the process of launching a national gender strategic plan, which will recommend 30 percent female political participation, and its much-awaited National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325.

However, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs - which is responsible for implementing these policies - has very limited capacity, and has not yet demonstrated any real progress in doing so. An activist on women's issues, referring to the gap between policy and practice, commented, 'It is not the law that disenfranchises women, but its interpretation.' This view is exemplified by the recent case of a woman being blocked from contesting an election because of her gender (See Case study 1).

Case study 1: Tradition trumps women's rights in chieftaincy election

In December 2009, Elizabeth Torto stood as a candidate in the Paramount Chieftaincy election in Kono District. Directly descended from a former chief, she had received the full support of traditional leaders in her community and was confident of victory. However, the all-male "poro" society viewed her candidacy as a contradiction of traditional practices and vowed to block her from standing. When she appeared in public she was confronted by extreme intimidation from men in her community. 'They accused me of starting a revolution,' she recalls. She received death threats warning her never to return to the area and her supporters were attacked and beaten. Under a hail of stones she was eventually flown to safety in Freetown in a UN helicopter.

In her absence, a loophole in a recently passed law was used to bar her from the resultant election, which was won by a man. The 2009 Chieftaincy Act stipulates that women have equal rights to contest chieftaincy elections, but only 'where tradition so specifies'.⁷ Torto and her supporters refused to give up and are taking her case to Sierra Leone's High Court. The issue has since been widely publicised by national and international women's groups and has spiralled into an international civil liberties case, catching the attention of the UN Secretary-General. The head of a local women's group remarked, 'Madame Torto's fight is a woman's fight. If we are able to (allow) her to contest the election then we would have broken a strong barrier to [women's] equal participation in politics.'

Liberia

In contrast to its neighbour, the ministry responsible for gender affairs in Liberia is well resourced and capacitated, thanks to substantial international support. It has produced a raft of gender-specific policy frameworks that reflect the government's commitments to furthering women's political participation. These include its National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, its 2008 CEDAW progress report, its recently released national gender policy, and a civil service reform strategy that calls for greater gender equality and affirmative action to achieve it.

However, implementation of these policies remains problematic due to a combination of obstruction by the male-dominated legislature and a lack of cooperation between the Ministry of Gender and Development and civil society – and among civil society itself. There are also concerns that the active role played by the Ministry is creating male resentment. As a woman from Bong County remarked, 'There is a perception, especially among men, that the Ministry of Gender is only for women.'

⁷ 2009 Chieftaincy Act (17 September 2009); Section 8 (1)(b).

The National Election Commission's (NEC) guidelines set a target for political parties to put forward women as 30 percent of their candidates, but parties' lack of will to meet this is matched by NEC's lack of teeth to enforce it. A constitutional review process launched after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2009 report is expected to recommend the establishment of a formal quota for female candidates ahead of the next election. But this - as with a "Fairness Bill" drafted by female legislators and containing similar recommendations - has only a very slim chance of being introduced before the election, given the lack of legislative support and the intricacies in amending the constitution.

2.3 Local Linkages

A major factor in women's cultural marginalisation from formal decision-making is the centralised nature of national political structures. The absence of opportunities to participate in formal governance structures outside the capital creates an accountability gap between the majority of the population and their government. It also leaves women at the mercy of informal traditional and religious governance structures that commonly discriminate against them. The progress that each country has made in closing this accountability gap differs markedly and continues to have a significant impact on the opportunities and barriers that women face in achieving greater political participation.

Sierra Leone

An important step in the peacebuilding process was decentralisation, which aimed to develop more accountable state institutions and create more opportunities for local women and youth to participate in politics. This policy re-established democratically elected local councils in each of the 13 districts and six major towns that had been abolished in 1972. It gave the councils authority over many areas of local governance that had previously been the responsibility of traditional rulers. This was significant as the councils' remit covered many of the domestic, development and resource allocation issues that are of particular concern to women.

In the first post-war local elections, in 2004, women won 10 percent of the 474 seats up for grabs, but very low voter registration reflected the public's lack of awareness about the new council's purpose. Following the elections, a system of Ward Development Committees (WDC) was established at the sub-local level, and this considerably expanded the opportunities for women to participate in formal governance (see Box 3).

Prior to the 2008 local elections, international and national NGOs raised awareness about the councils' purpose and encouraged women to participate by training them in public speaking, community leadership and campaigning. This, combined with women's experiences in the WDCs, resulted in a significant rise in female candidates and a near doubling of women elected as councillors to 86, or 19 percent. However, the elections also exposed women to high levels of intimidation, due largely to political parties' determination to assert their influence. This was also a symptom of tensions between new formal local governance structures and the longstanding male-dominated traditional ones. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that the increased opportunities brought about by decentralisation, and WDCs in particular, are generating "bottom-up" pressure for women's political participation that augurs well for the next election.

Box 3: Building women's participation from the bottom up

In Sierra Leone, the 2004 Local Government Act established Ward Development Committees below the local councils – with each councillor responsible for an individual ward – to provide a link between them and the community. WDCs are stipulated to comprise 10 elected members – five men and five women – and therefore represent the country's only formalised quota system. These new bodies enable local women who had become more active in their communities as a result of the conflict to take on formal roles and gain valuable political experience. However, the 2004 Act did not establish clear mechanisms for elections to these bodies, leaving the process in the hands of newly elected individual Councillors. In 2004 virtually all members of WDCs were “selected” rather than elected, but by 2008 around 50 percent had been formally elected.

Ongoing engagement by national and international NGOs is improving the accountability of these bodies. Campaigners for women's rights anticipate that by 2012 around 75 percent of WDCs will hold elections, and are coaching their female members to be better local leaders. There are already signs that women's participation in WDCs is having a knock-on effect as it has enlarged the pool of women with political experience hoping to contest local and national elections in 2012.

Liberia

Liberia does not have an elected local governmental structure. Instead, counties are administrated by government appointed bureaucrats – senior amongst them being superintendents and mayors. The vast majority of those appointed are ruling party stalwarts and in many cases are not well known in the counties they administer. This system creates a feeling of disconnect between the people and their government and severely restricts political accountability and representation. Although not acting as a barrier per se to women's political participation, in practice the preponderance of government representatives at county level are men.

In an attempt to ameliorate these issues, President Johnson-Sirleaf has introduced a consultative appointment process by which a list of five candidates for each position is submitted by county representatives prior to each appointment, stipulating that at least two of these must be suitable women. However, the county representatives are predominantly male and many people question the process. In some cases, appointments [of men] have been met with demonstrations by local communities [both men and women] who feel they have not been consulted and are unwilling to accept officials they do not know. Civil society groups are lobbying the government to open up the county representative posts for public election ahead of 2011, as the Constitution allows for them to be elected.

Local opportunities for women's participation are further restricted by the conspicuous absence of elections for chieftaincy posts, which are heavily dominated by men. Only one Paramount Chief is currently a woman. Paramount Chiefs sit on a council of elders that is consulted by the President on all major decisions and therefore has significant political influence. Although the Constitution stipulates that chieftaincy elections should be held, it does not specify a time-scale, and these have not occurred in 20 years. Civil society is advocating for elections to be held and for a fixed six-year term for Paramount Chiefs to be established, but there is little sign of progress in this area.

2.4 Civil Society Support

Civil society in both countries plays a vital role in furthering women's participation in politics and elections. This involves advocating for policies that will increase space for women's involvement; encouraging women to vote and serve as monitors in elections; supporting them to stand as candidates and run a campaign; and, once elected, to be effective politicians and role models. Much of this work is conducted by national women's groups – often in partnership, or with technical assistance, from international actors – and has focused on harnessing a sense of solidarity among women to overcome the obstacles they encounter. However, the nature of the support provided by the international community has restricted its intended impact and in some cases served to undermine the unity of civil society (see Box 4). Whether this unity can be restored and utilised ahead of the forthcoming elections will have a significant impact on women's ability to overcome the barriers that they will face.

Box 4: Mixed effects of international support

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the vital support provided by the international community in furthering women's political participation, many respondents expressed frustration at the nature of this support. In both countries, international actors are viewed as engaging too late in the election process – typically only six months before the vote – and then disengaging too soon after the results have been announced. As one Liberian respondent remarked, 'You cannot change mindsets or pass effective legislation six months before an election.'

There is also a sense that support for female candidates is often offered too late or is not specifically targeted to have a meaningful effect. In particular, international NGOs and the UN are criticised for encouraging women to stand as candidates and then leaving them "high and dry" during their campaigns. They assume this is because international actors are reluctant to provide candidates with financial support so as not to be perceived as interfering in politics. Women who have been elected often feel let down by international partners, as they are not offered the necessary support and training to be effective politicians and role models for others. There is also a sense that donor support has focused on an exclusive group of national NGOs whose actions reflect external priorities of building a visible "women's solidarity" movement.⁸ This reflects a tendency to attempt to superimpose "Western" notions of gendered power relations, rather than to facilitate the growth of organic and sustainable national women's movements.⁹

Sierra Leone

In the absence of concerted national action, international donors have sought to build civil society's capacity to further women's political participation. This has led to the development of highly visible and effective women's groups, such as the 50-50 Group of Sierra Leone, and to initiatives that harness solidarity to overcome barriers to female participation. For example, civil society has successfully campaigned to promulgate legislation on gender equality and has provided tangible support to female candidates before, during and after the two previous elections.

However, there is a widely held perception that the vast majority of international support has been received by a few national women's rights NGOs and does not have an effect outside of the capital. These Freetown-based NGOs are criticised by some women's rights activists from outside of the

⁸ The impact of donor support on civil society in Sierra Leone is discussed in EURODAD & Campaign for Good Governance (2007). 'Square Pegs in Round Holes: Aid and Accountability in Sierra Leone'.

⁹ This is discussed in A. Cornwall (2007). 'Myths To Live By? Female Solidarity and Female Autonomy Reconsidered', *Development and Change*, Vol. 38, No.1, pp149-168 (IDS: Brighton, UK).

capital for lacking representation at the local level and for not sufficiently consulting and supporting community-based women's groups outside the capital. Many more women are expected to stand in the 2012 election than ever before – particularly in local elections where intimidation is more severe. Thus there is an urgent need to reinvigorate a sense of female solidarity in the face of adversity, especially at the local level, to ensure that all women candidates are effectively supported.

Liberia

The unity and determination of the women's movement that emerged at the end of the conflict was essential in empowering women to participate in the 2005 elections. The nationwide drive for women to vote proved crucial in electing women with no previous political experience to the legislature and securing Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's victory in the presidential run-off vote.

Although considerably more women are expected to stand as candidates in the next elections, there are growing concerns that the women's unity that characterised the last elections is dissipating. A recent survey by the Coalition of Political Party Women of Liberia identified lack of solidarity among women as the biggest challenge to their increased political participation. In an environment that's become more conducive to their participation since 2005, women are demonstrating a more individualistic nature and acting more along party lines than in concert with each other. This is creating competition between women's groups, which undermines the potential strength of their joint action and engenders mutual mistrust. This means that women's chances at the next election are likely to be restricted, as they will not receive the support of other women.

There is an urgent need to replicate the initiatives carried out prior to 2005 to ensure that women's solidarity can be harnessed ahead of the next election to provide the greatest chance of increasing their representation. As one unsuccessful female candidate in a recent bye-election put it, 'Women need to remember what it says in our national anthem: "In union strong, success is sure. We cannot fail".'

2.5 Female Role Models

Women's participation in the political sector cannot be viewed independently from women's roles in other areas of society such as civil society, the private sector and the media. The existing representation and performance of women in senior positions in society has a substantial impact on women's future participation in politics. Effective and high-profile female operators in the political or non-political sphere can help to change discriminatory mindsets and encourage other women to aspire to political participation. Although Sierra Leone and Liberia have similarly low numbers of women in their parliaments and traditional governance structures, they have starkly differing levels of female role models in other areas of society. This contrast is likely to have a significant effect on the prospects for increased women's participation in each country.

Sierra Leone

Prior to both the 2007 national and 2008 local elections, nationwide civic education and awareness-raising programmes placed a strong focus on sensitising the population about the need for women to participate. This resulted in a significant rise in women voting, but it failed to bring about the hoped-for breakthrough in numbers elected into office. Despite gains at the local level, low female representation in parliament makes it very difficult to raise and discuss issues of particular concern to women. There has not been any notable improvement in women's participation in senior or high-profile positions in other sections of society either. Women make up only two of the current 24-member Cabinet and account for a very small percentage of those appointed to national commissions – although it is worth mentioning the impressive female head of the National Election Commission (NEC). Furthermore there is a conspicuous lack of women

holding senior positions outside politics, especially in the private sector, contributing to a “glass ceiling” effect (see Box 5).

Some progress has been made in the traditional governance sphere. The 2009 Chieftaincy Act has improved transparency and provided women with a fairer chance of achieving chieftancy status. It has helped make it possible for three female chiefs to be elected recently in the South. However, the most influential Paramount Chieftaincy positions remain almost exclusively in the hands of men, and women continue to face discrimination and intimidation when challenging for these roles – especially outside the south of the country.

Box 5: “Glass ceiling” to women’s participation

Whilst progress has been made in changing attitudes towards women’s role in decision-making in Sierra Leone, both men and women refer to a “glass ceiling” that limits women’s social and political participation. Women’s lack of education and low perception of themselves makes it difficult for them to imagine challenging men, participating in decision-making structures, and voting for other women. A male journalist remarked, ‘Even those who do aspire to a political role often do not view themselves as able to challenge men for senior positions.’ This “glass ceiling” is reinforced by the perceived poor performance of female politicians elected in 2002 and the dearth of women in senior positions in society that could serve as inspiring role models.

Liberia

The election of a female president continues to have a considerable and positive “demonstration effect” on women’s participation in all aspects of society (see Box 6). The appointments made by the president have helped to alter traditional perceptions of women as poor leaders – especially among men. Significantly more women now hold appointed political decision-making positions than ever before. For example, women make up a third of county superintendents, a quarter of cabinet posts and hold two of five seats on the Supreme Court.

There is an overriding view - although less commonly held outside of the capital - that the majority of women in these posts have done a good job and demonstrated to the electorate that women are just as capable as men, if not more so. One female politician commented, ‘Men have started to understand that women have a stake in politics – and some are even encouraging them to participate.’ This trend adds to the “demonstration effect” of a female president and should translate into more women being elected at the next election. Whereas the majority of existing female parliamentarians are well-educated and widely viewed as members of the “Monrovia elite”, expectations are that many more rural and less-educated women will stand as candidates in 2011.

Box 6: Female president’s “demonstration effect”

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s election has not only generated interest in politics among women and girls, but, as one female civil society member put it, ‘[It] has demonstrated that women can aspire to, and reach, any position in society. Due to this, she has already left a legacy!’ Many respondents referred to a sense that the “glass ceiling” to women’s participation has now been irreversibly smashed. This effect is being felt nationwide, including in areas where traditional and religious practices are strongest, such as Lofa County and in the Southeast. Rural and illiterate women now understand that they too can run for office. A female senator of a predominantly rural region commented, ‘The other day I asked a young girl in my constituency what she wanted to be when she grew up and she replied, “I want to be President.” This would not have happened before.’

3. Lingering Challenges: Identifying the barriers hindering women's participation

As opportunities have opened up for greater involvement by women in politics, it has also highlighted the considerable barriers they continue to face. Challenges exist at every stage of women's participation in the political sphere – from realising that they possess the rights and capacity to potentially lead others, to doing so effectively once they have been elected. While there are many similar barriers in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the extent to which women's progress is held back varies in a number of ways. Analysis of how much impact the obstacles have on women's effective political participation in each context offers a guide to the focus and priority of action aimed at overcoming them.

3.1 Barriers to Entry

The initial, and possibly greatest, barrier to women's political participation is lack of self-confidence and self-belief to aspire to leadership positions. This is largely due to the cultural marginalisation that has restricted women's rights and opportunities, and undervalued their potential role in society.

3.1.1 Traditional and religious practices

Both societies remain largely dominated by traditional and religious patriarchal hierarchies. Although more extreme in rural and isolated areas, these practices effectively block women from seeking involvement in decision-making. Women are relegated to traditional household roles as care-givers, often resulting in arranged marriages and pregnancy at a young age, which leave women feeling trapped with few rights. 'The tradition here is patriarchy, and therefore all of the decisions, all of the policies, have been done by men', as one woman who tried to stand in the 2007 election in Sierra Leone described this situation. The demands of family and household responsibilities often preclude women from even considering participating in politics. As a Liberian woman put it, 'The burden for caring for the family makes it impossible for women to stand out in public life even though [they are] qualified and capable.'

This is reinforced by women's fear of rejection or even violence from husband and family if they strive to enter politics. A woman working in Bo, Sierra Leone, to build women's capacity to stand in the elections commented, 'Most married women who stand either drop out or get divorced,' noting also how much harder it is for women to run without the support of a husband.

Box 7: Opening up informal political spaces for women

Since the 2005 election, women's increased interest in politics in Liberia has been matched by the emergence of a range of informal spaces offering opportunities for them to gain political experience. The Women's Peace Network in Liberia has established 19 "peace huts" in rural areas across the country that aim to encourage women's participation in community decision-making and strengthen their peacebuilding capacity. This project seeks to challenge the customary exclusion of women's voices from discussions in "palava huts" – traditional community dispute-resolution areas – and also to identify suitable candidates to stand in the next election.

A similar but more organic development is the emergence of informal discussion centres in some larger towns known as "hatie centres". These offer opportunities for aspiring male and female

political candidates to practice public speaking and trial their views. Also, in Grand Cape Mount, the Liberia Human Rights & Social Justice Organisation has encouraged active local women to form their own community group to engage with local authorities. The group now holds regular monthly meetings with national politicians and local government officials, each member taking it in turns to represent the group. This has built the confidence and capacity of local women to engage in politics and has led to at least one of the group deciding to run for office in 2011.

3.1.2 Limited education and literacy

Structural barriers of poverty and class and the cultural marginalisation of women have severely limited their educational opportunities. As a result, high levels of illiteracy among women and their lack of qualifications and skills serve as a major barrier for their political participation – both formally and informally. In Sierra Leone fluency in English is a requirement for presidential and parliamentary candidates – a condition that only a very small minority of women can meet. In both Liberia and Sierra Leone, literacy is generally considered to be essential for all candidates, especially women, and may soon become a formal requirement. Illiterate female candidates find it much harder to win public and party confidence in their suitability and often struggle to operate effectively if they are elected. Whereas just under half of the adult male population are literate in Sierra Leone, less than a quarter of women are. Around 65 percent of women in Liberia cannot read and write.

Case study 2: Breaking barriers to women’s participation in the North

In the 2008 local elections in Sierra Leone, six women were elected as councillors in Koinadugu – the first time that women had ever held political office in the northern town. This represents a significant breakthrough for women’s political participation in a region with strong traditional practices. Much of the credit for the shift in attitudes that brought this about goes to a joint initiative of Oxfam GB and the 50-50 Group of Sierra Leone. The Promoting a Culture of Equal Representation (PACER) project featured regionwide awareness-raising of the importance of women’s leadership among voters and key power brokers, and sustained support for aspiring candidates throughout the election process. A follow-up project is now under way, focusing on supporting women to be effective politicians and role models.

3.1.3 Ignorance of rights and opportunities

Despite ongoing civic education programmes, many women still lack a basic understanding of their political system and the role of government. This prevents women from knowing their rights and how to claim them, and from appreciating how much elections can help them to seize the available opportunities. A woman working for a civil society group in southeastern Liberia remarked, ‘Women think that only if you went to university can you get involved in politics. They need to be informed that it is not the case.’ Women’s lack of basic civic education serves to reinforce the traditional view that politics is “men’s business” and makes it much less likely that they will vote for female candidates – if they vote at all.

Case Study 3: Using drama to break traditional barriers

In Liberia, the Flomo Theatre Group is using drama to illustrate women’s right to equal participation in social and political life. Focussed on communities in rural areas where traditional beliefs are strongest, they aim to demonstrate how traditions can be an inclusive celebration of culture rather than an instrument of discrimination against women. Their dramas concentrate on women’s empowerment, with a particular focus on increased political participation.

One drama depicts the rise of a female candidate to elected office, highlighting the challenges she faced along the way and her role as an effective politician responding to the community's needs. Another drama encourages women to challenge men for traditional leadership roles. It shows a male Paramount Chief telling a woman that she cannot stand in a chieftaincy election, to which she responds, 'But it is my right.' It concludes with her winning the election and being reconciled with the community. The reach of this initiative is being extended through training local communities to perform their own dramas and to broadcast them on community radio stations.

3.2 Limits to leadership

Women who have overcome these “internal” barriers and aspire to greater political involvement face discriminatory attitudes of social and political powerbrokers. Male-dominated political parties control the formal political sphere in both countries. Despite their public commitments to promote women's participation in party structures and as candidates for election, women regularly find their ambitions frustrated.

3.2.1 Nomination process

Large political parties dominate the political system in both countries, leaving very little space for independent candidates. This means that securing a party's support is vital for the chances of aspiring candidates. In the absence of formal quotas, the main political parties in each country have voluntarily committed themselves to selecting at least 30 percent female candidates, but have abjectly failed to do it. Parties have done little to identify and train suitable women from their membership and have a tendency to sideline them into “women's wings” that have very little influence. The same can be said of youth members aspiring to run for office with the potential to break out of traditional mindsets. One female activist in Liberia compared this practice to a common local insect. ‘We often refer to parties as buga bugs [*sic*] as they both use their wings to fly to the light and shed them when they get there,’ she said.

Case study 4: Determination to stand brings results

A young Journalism graduate from Freetown, Melrose During, received the nomination of the ruling All People's Congress (APC) party to stand in the 2008 local council elections. However, days after her nomination was officially announced on the radio, the party withdrew its nomination without explanation and transferred it to a male candidate. With the support of other women, she petitioned the party to reinstate her and took the story to the media. This generated a great deal of public attention and some negative publicity for the APC (then in government), and she was eventually reinstated. She went on to win the election against numerous male rivals – becoming the youngest councillor in the country. She is now widely regarded as one of the most effective and active councillors and will hopefully serve as an example for aspiring female candidates at the next election.

3.2.2 Political tokenism

In Sierra Leone, politics is dominated by two main parties – the ruling APC and the main opposition Sierra Leone People's (SLPP). Quotas do not necessarily translate into increased participation of women as a high number of female candidates may be selected to stand in marginal seats they are not likely to win. For example, all of the APC candidates in the 2008 local elections standing in Bo District – a notoriously SLPP area – were women, and they all lost. Parties also encourage women to stand with the promise of training and resources but women are then left to fend for

themselves during the campaign. Often, there is a lack of support for women candidates beyond paying registration fees. In Liberia, female candidates who only stood in 2005 on the basis of their parties' promises of assistance became a laughing stock.

Case study 5: Supporting Liberian women to stand

Ahead of the 2005 elections, civil society activists collaborated with female politicians and members of political parties to organise a National Women's Political Conference aimed at building the capacity of aspiring female candidates. The Liberian Women's Initiative, the Coalition of Political Party Women and the Women's Legislative Caucus brought female candidates together with the country's major political stakeholders in a week-long nationwide consultation process. This provided an opportunity for these women to meet senior figures in their parties, leading civil society representatives, and each other, to discuss political issues and put forward their campaign platforms. The process resulted in a "Women's Manifesto" that included a list of all female candidates and a joint plan of action to lobby political parties to select women candidates for 30 percent of posts and the government to implement women-specific policy mechanisms.

Plans are now under way to repeat the process ahead of the next election. Scheduled for July 2010, the initiative will aim to assess political parties' attempts to support women, identify the training needs of female candidates, and update the 2005 Women's Manifesto. The organisers are identifying suitable candidates to participate, mostly from rural areas, and copies of the 2005 Women's Manifesto are being circulated among key stakeholders to stimulate ideas. Ruth Caesar, one of the initiative's organisers, commented, 'Women from the counties are already calling me and saying, "When are we going to start the politics, Mrs Caesar?"'

3.2.3 Electoral system

Both countries use the first-past-the-post election system at the constituency level as opposed to proportional representation (PR), whereby parties allocate seats to pre-selected candidates according to their share of the votes. Political analysts think PR offers women a greater chance of election, as it is generally considered easier to convince parties to nominate women for their lists than for female candidates to run costly campaigns and overcome discrimination at the constituency level.¹⁰

Despite this, having experienced PR in the past, a vast majority of women prefer the current system and say it ensures greater accountability from their politicians. As a female campaigner from Sierra Leone commented, 'We want more female representation, but better governance must be the priority.' The downside to this is that women's chances are restricted as parties continue to view women as high-risk candidates who could lose them vital seats.

3.3 Getting Elected

After registering as a candidate for an election, by securing the support of either a political party or powerbrokers in the community, women face a number of hurdles in running an effective campaign and attaining office. In some instances, even if the necessary elements are in place, female candidates and their supporters can be easier targets than their male counterparts for intimidation and even violence, which the perpetrators justify by their entrenched discriminatory attitudes and traditional practices.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the gender implications of electoral systems, see Larserud, S. and Taphorn, R. (2008). *Designing for Equality: Best-fit, medium-fit and non-favourable combinations of electoral systems and gender quotas*. Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

3.3.1 Effective campaigning

The most significant barrier preventing women in both Sierra Leone and Liberia from running effective campaigns and getting elected is lack of political skills and experience. Limited knowledge of political systems and policy mechanisms restricts women's ability to formulate a campaign platform.

Political inexperience makes it much harder to access existing power structures and know how to influence them. Most importantly, women lack skills such as fundraising, public speaking and campaigning, which are essential to run an effective campaign and win public support. The ability to access and make good use of the media is also vital for an effective campaign. Not only does the media enable a candidate to reach a large audience with his or her campaign message, it also has the ability to influence society's perception of women more generally (see Case study 6).

Case study 6: Using the media to raise women's profiles

The Ministry of Gender and Development is working in partnership with the Liberian Women's Media Coalition, with support from UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women), on a new initiative to raise the profile of female candidates ahead of the 2011 election. The "Raising her Voice" project aims to increase awareness of women's rights and political opportunities and provides potential female candidates with public speaking training and access to the media.

There is a particular focus on providing opportunities for women to speak out on political issues and put forward campaign ideas on the radio. However, such national initiatives have little effect in remote and isolated areas of the country where English is often not widely spoken or communities are out of reach of national radio. To bridge this gap, International Alert has helped to establish eight community radio stations in isolated parts of the country, broadcasting in local languages. A key aim of the project is to provide training to local women in broadcasting to provide greater opportunities for women's voices to be heard and to encourage their participation in decision-making.

3.3.2 Funding a campaign

Women often lack the financial resources to run effective constituency campaigns and to compete with established "strong men" in their communities. Money is required for the registration fee - in Liberia, for example, it costs US\$500 to stand for the House of Representatives and US\$750 for the Senate - as well as to fund campaign materials, media publicity, and travel, host meetings and entertain supporters. Most aspiring female candidates who do not have enough the finances choose not to stand, as they do not want to embarrass themselves. Some female candidates are forced to abandon their campaigns when they run out of money, and others, especially in Sierra Leone, back down after being harassed and then bought off by opposition candidates.

Case study 7: Solidarity initiative provides financial support

Ahead of the 2008 local elections in Sierra Leone, a collaboration of civil society groups provided significant financial support to women candidates that helped them run more effective campaigns. The Women's Solidarity Initiative, led by the 50-50 Group, initially succeeded in lobbying the National Election Commission to lower the registration fees for female candidates. It then set up the Women's Solidarity Fund, with donations from wealthy individuals and institutions, to pay the registration fees and offer female candidates a 25kg bag of rice to help feed supporters at campaign meetings.

The Initiative is planning to provide similar support to female candidates in 2012. It is currently in the process of identifying six suitable women in each district to champion and support in the run-up to the next election. A similar initiative was recently launched in Liberia, but the partisan atmosphere and lack of collaboration by women's groups in the country makes it unlikely that the proposed fund will take effect before the 2011 election.

3.3.3 Intimidation

Most female candidates and their supporters are routinely confronted with some form of gender-based intimidation, which persuades some women to abandon their campaigns. Aggression most commonly takes the form of verbal harassment during campaign meetings. It is aimed at embarrassing women by questioning their competency or insulting them with accusations of being prostitutes. It is women's activists, rather than candidates themselves, who are often the most vulnerable to gender-based violence, precisely because they are the ones working at the grassroots level to challenge gender inequalities.

In Sierra Leone, intimidation is more severe and sometimes involves threats of violence. Women candidates are warned that their husbands or supporters will be beaten or even killed if they do not withdraw from the race. One woman during the 2008 local election was threatened with rape unless she abandoned her campaign. In rural areas where traditional practices are strong, especially in the North, men belonging to the secret "poro" society threaten to bring out the "poro devil" mask – which women are forbidden from seeing – to scare off female candidates and their supporters. More extreme forms of traditional intimidation involve threats that women will be taken to the bush, beaten and left there. Some women have also reported physical violence being used to intimidate, most commonly stones being thrown, but in one instance a female candidate was locked in her house on the day of the election.

Case study 8: Overcoming intimidation in Sierra Leone

In the 2007 election, Veronica Sesay had backing from the SLPP party to stand as the first female candidate in Moyamba District. She was confronted by organised intimidation from members of the all-male "poro" society, who had taken an oath to block women from running for office in the region. She received many aggressive threats at meetings early in her campaign ordering her to step down and, when she refused, was sent a letter signed by numerous men from her community demanding her withdrawal.

Determined to fight the discrimination, she secured the support of key women's groups both in civil society and parliament – the 50-50 Group and the Women's Parliamentary Caucus – as well as that of her party's Secretary-General. They drew media attention to her struggle and accompanied her to campaign meetings, helping to prevent any violence towards her and her supporters. With the support of her husband, she took the threatening letter she had received to the Paramount Chief and other key power brokers. She called meetings at the village level and read out the list of men who had signed the letter, asking, 'Why don't you want a woman to participate in politics?' Many of the men denied signing the letter, so she asked them publicly if they would campaign for her. And they agreed.

Sesay is now one of only 16 women in Parliament and an active member of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus. She wrote a drama based on her experience that has created much interest and has been performed for the president and members of parliament.

Such instances are less severe and much less common in Liberia and are restricted to rural areas, in particular Lofa County and the Southeast. Furthermore, state authorities' reaction to this kind of intimidation is very different. The Liberian government and political parties are keen to be seen to be dealing effectively with any incidents of violence against women, due to the mobilisation power of civil society. For example, many police stations have a desk especially for women and children to report incidents of abuse. A male activist remarked, 'Any intimidation of women at the next election will be reacted to very quickly by the authorities – after all, the deputy police commissioner is a woman.'

3.4 Obstacles to Effectiveness

Once voted into posts, women continue to face obstacles to their performance, holding them back from acting effectively and making a substantive change in women's lives. This can create resentment among female campaigners who perceive that once in office, some women turn their backs on those that got them there. Elected women often lack the political skills and experience required to formulate and deliver cogent arguments, influence decision-making, and build support for proposed legislation – even among themselves.

This deficiency is particularly acute in raising issues of importance to women in male-dominated parliaments, where women often face obstruction from their male colleagues. For example, female politicians in both countries referred to instances of male politicians withholding agendas and other information for key debates in order to restrict women's ability to prepare and formulate a common position. A lack of joint action by female politicians hampers the progress of women-friendly legislation. A female senator in Liberia expressed her disappointment at the lack of solidarity displayed by her female colleagues, remarking, 'Men seem to be able to act together to block us – why can't we do the same?'

Case study 9: Building the effectiveness of elected women

Following the 2005 election, UNIFEM worked with a group of international NGOs to establish the Women Legislative Caucus of Liberia. The new body, formally launched in 2007 by all 14 women in the Legislature, strives to reform existing policies to advance the needs of women and female youth and to increase their participation in decision-making processes. This has led to the joint drafting of the "Fairness Bill" which calls for quotas to guarantee a minimal level of women's participation in all national bodies. The Caucus also provides its members with national and international networking opportunities as well as exchange programmes with other countries' parliaments.

A similar initiative is under way in Sierra Leone, where Oxfam has helped to develop the Women's Parliamentary Caucus to support elected women to become effective politicians and role models. Having benefited from a recent visit to the Rwandan Parliament to establish their strategic plan, the Caucus now strives to raise women's issues in Parliament and identify and support female candidates during their election campaigns.

4. Major Issues for the Next Election

Sierra Leone

The 2012 elections in Sierra Leone will mark a decade of peace. Not only will they be the second set of national elections conducted independently of the United Nations, but it is also the first time that local elections will take place simultaneously with presidential and parliamentary elections. The overriding view is that the elections will feature a significant increase in women's participation but this is countered by concerns that the environment in which they will be conducted may prevent women from attaining greater representation. Recent incidents of political violence have brought to the surface fears that the forthcoming election could spark a return to organised social violence and a culture of impunity.

Based on experience garnered from the 2007 and 2008 elections and ongoing civic education and gender awareness activities by civil society, it seems likely that more women will vote in 2012. The high profile role of women's groups in generating a sense of female solidarity in overcoming gender inequality and discrimination is expected to translate into women crossing party lines to support female candidates. The increased roles that women have played at the local level in recent years - informally in community-based organisations and formally in Ward Development Committees - is helping to generate a sense that women are effective at managing community affairs and local development. There is a general view that more women than ever before will aspire to be candidates, especially at the local level. Women's rights campaigners hope that the formal political experience gained by women at the local level will transfer to greater representation in the national Parliament. However, the scarcity of independent wealth and political skills continue to act as serious impediments to progress.

There are also major concerns that many of these aspiring candidates will not manage to contest the election if they are unable to secure political party support or if threats force women to abandon their campaigns. An outbreak of large-scale political violence in 2009, and the extreme intimidation of women during recent Paramount Chieftaincy elections, has added to fears that the next election could feature high levels of violence (see Box 8). The lack of a rapid and effective government response to such incidents is believed to be fuelling a culture of impunity, rumour-mongering and fear. This is reflected in a recent survey by civil society group National Election Watch, which identified fear of organised violence as a major issue in the forthcoming elections.

Box 8: Response to recent violence fuels culture of fear

In March 2009 supporters of Sierra Leone's two main political parties clashed in Freetown in one of the most serious incidents of political violence in recent years. The outburst – including the alleged rape of six women - led to numerous injuries. News of the incident spread fear and panic throughout the city, invoking memories of past violence. The absence of an effective public response from the government made the situation worse, fuelling the spread of hysterical rumours and generating a sense of impunity. This was compounded by the response from civil society and the international community, who remained mute despite the sensitivity of the issue. It was not until more than two weeks after the incident that the two parties concerned released a joint communiqué condemning 'any form of violence against women, in particular sexual violence directed against women as a form of... intimidation'.¹¹

11 All Peoples Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) Joint Communiqué, 2nd April 2009. p2.

The violence, and the government's response to it, has further undermined public confidence in state institutions. The perceived inability of the police and judiciary to respond effectively and neutrally to political violence – especially when it is directed at women – is a significant concern to women ahead of the next election. One male respondent remarked, 'If a strong female candidate is intimidated in 2012 and the police do nothing, it could spark serious violence.'

There is very little public confidence in state institutions – especially the police and judiciary – to respond effectively to incidents of political violence. The other bodies involved in the complaints procedure – the National Electoral Commission (NEC), Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) and the Human Rights Commission – are generally considered to be more neutral, but they lack the capacity and teeth to take effective action against the perpetrators. Many opposition party supporters and candidates, as well as independents, expect the ruling APC Party to engage in considerable intimidation at the next election. They also hinted that when confronted with violent intimidation, and with very little protection from police, the only option might be to resort to violence in self-defence.

There is little doubt that concerns over political violence and intimidation will be on women's minds ahead of the next election. Recent incidents of violence could serve to deter some women from participating in politics in general, and in the 2012 elections in particular. This is especially the case if they lack political knowledge and experience. The main reason given for this is that when such incidents have occurred in the past they see nothing being done about it – no police or judicial action against the perpetrators and no condemnation from the government – creating an environment conducive to further violence..

However, some do not predict the risk of violence having too negative an impact on women. A female councillor said, 'Violence will make some women afraid of entering politics, but those already empowered will be more determined.' Others view the risk of violence to be overstated and fueled by rumours, especially in the media. Exaggerated fears of violence created by an absence of facts and insensitive reporting of past incidents can also impede women's political participation. A woman from Freetown summed up the need for evidence-based assessments to be made public, saying 'The more incidents are brought into the open and discussed, the more confidence can be restored and such incidents prevented in future.'

Liberia

The election scheduled for October 2011 will be a significant benchmark in Liberia's progress towards peaceful and sustainable democracy. It will mark the first time in the country's history that one democratically elected government will be followed by another – with no concessions made due to violent conflict. There is a near-universal expectation that not only will more women be involved in the election than ever before, but it will take place in an environment more conducive to their participation than previously. However, as with any election in a recently post-conflict country, there are some fears of political violence.

Ongoing civic education and awareness-raising by both national and international bodies has created greater general awareness of the rights of women and the need to include them in politics. Women's campaigners hope this will lead to increased voter responsibility – favouring candidates based on issues and likely future performance, as opposed to clan-allegiance or short-term gain. There is evidence that more men are now willing to accept women as leaders and vote them into office. This can be attributed to the demonstration effect created by an experienced and effective female president and, to a lesser extent, the performance of the women she has appointed to senior positions. However, there is considerable anxiety that a lack of female solidarity will lead to women voting along party lines, thus hindering the chances of female candidates being elected. It is evident that there will be more female candidates standing at the next election. Women feel

that they are better prepared than in 2005, although many still lack the finances and political skills to effectively challenge their male counterparts. An experienced women's activist commented, 'Women have tested the waters and know that competition will be fierce, but they are ready for it.' There is greater pressure on political parties to select female candidates and there is evidence of their increased willingness to do so (see Box 9).

Box 9: Recent bye-election bodes well for 2011

In a December 2009 bye-election for the vacant junior senator seat in the Monserado region, four out of the nine candidates standing were women. This reflected political parties' acceptance of the mood among voters to favour women candidates. In an area that was considered to be a stronghold of the ruling Unity Party (UP), a woman from the main opposition Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) party defeated the male UP candidate. The bye-election is considered to have kickstarted the politicking ahead of the 2011 election, so the apparent trend of it being "fashionable" for women to be elected is a positive sign. A male activist remarked that this demonstrated to political parties that 'If you want to get into office, put up a woman.' However, fashions are by their nature temporary and, with over a year to go before the election, there are concerns that things may revert to "normal" before the election. As one aspiring female candidate commented, 'Some men are now saying that women have had their chance, and now it's their turn.'

A positive sign is that the major political parties are appointing women to senior posts and have already begun training their members in campaigning, both men and women. Since the atmosphere is more conducive for women's participation, it may well lead to women standing as independent candidates if they are not nominated by parties. However, this may well expose them to greater intimidation, as witnessed in Sierra Leone. In addition to participating as voters and candidates, women will also feature visibly in the administration of the election, both as election officials and observers. The NEC estimates that as many as 60 percent of observers will be women.

President Johnson-Sirleaf's announcement that she will seek re-election has quelled the uncertainty caused by her previous stated intent not to, and the TRC's recommendation that she be barred from public office for 10 years. However, this does raise concerns over whether the rest of the TRC's recommendations will be ignored and the effect this may have on social cohesion. There are some fears that violence lurks not far below the surface of society, because social reconciliation has not been prioritised and many people remain traumatised. This, combined with high levels of youth unemployment and lingering social divisions, could provide fertile ground for a resurgence of organised violence in the divisive political atmosphere of an election. Analysts suggest that the potential spark for such violence is likely to be not the election itself, but how the process is conducted.

There is concern, particularly among opposition party supporters, that the ruling party could engage in voter fraud and the NEC would turn a blind eye to it. This perception is largely due to the NEC's disastrous administration of a recent bye-election in which many of the registered voters discovered they were not eligible to participate in the election – allegedly because the ruling party had bought their voting cards for US\$10 a piece.

Such misgivings will no doubt persist and even intensify because NEC's effectiveness will continue to be jeopardised as it is vastly under-resourced and over-stretched. This situation may well be exacerbated in the likely event that it will be called on to conduct a referendum about constitutional amendments prior to the 2011 election.

On the positive side, only a few respondents considered potential violence to be a major issue at the next election and not one predicted it would overtly affect women's participation. There was also a belief that the police would respond quickly and neutrally to any incidence of violence, although this was attributed to the presence of the UN Mission for Liberia (UNMIL).

5. Conclusion

This report has outlined the opportunities for women to participate in politics in Sierra Leone and Liberia. It has also identified the barriers – psychological, social, cultural and political - that continue to block women’s greater participation, whilst demonstrating practical steps being taken to overcome them. The overwhelming view from both countries is that the situation of women’s political participation is improving, but there is still a great deal of work to do.

The majority of those interviewed for this report were positive that the forthcoming elections would feature higher levels of female participation than ever before – as voters, observers, election officials and, especially, as candidates. Many respondents expressed confidence that the next elections would result in an increase in elected female parliamentarians.

Developments in recent years have created new obstacles for women’s participation in politics - for differing reasons in each country - as well as expanding opportunities. For instance, local government in Sierra Leone has created new fault lines between informal traditional practices and formal governance. This has led to increased intimidation of female candidates and hampered their effective participation if elected.

This report’s discussion of the specific context in each country helps to highlight what is lacking in the other. Liberia needs increased local representation and accountability to expand local-level opportunities for women, and Sierra Leone needs more high-profile female leaders to act as role models and break through the “glass ceiling” holding back women’s participation.

It will be a challenge to ensure that the electoral process is not undermined by political violence and that women have the best possible chance of seizing the opportunities that have emerged since the end of the region’s conflicts. Targeted and sustained international engagement – ahead of the next elections, during the elections themselves and in the years that follow – can make a significant contribution in achieving progress in women’s political participation, as well as making it more sustainable.

Looking at **Sierra Leone**, three main areas relating to women’s participation are in most need of structural reform. These are establishing a formal quota system, perhaps only on a temporary basis, guaranteeing a minimum number of women as candidates or parliamentarians; closing the loophole in the Chieftaincy Act that allows women to be barred from Chieftaincy elections; and formalising the procedures for elections to Ward Development Committees.

At the level of institutions, a number of concrete steps could be taken to enhance women’s political participation. Above all, there is an ongoing need to build the capacity of the Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children’s Affairs. In addition, the development and launch of Sierra Leone’s National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 seems critical, with a view to coordinating and strengthening the government’s implementation of Resolution 1325. The government, and perhaps opposition parties, could give a significant impetus to furthering women’s participation by publicly committing to appointing more women to senior decision-making positions – especially in the Cabinet and on national commissions.

With a view to the upcoming elections, it is vital that the election-monitoring body is given more resources and teeth to enable it to enforce commitments made by political parties, especially regarding their conduct. In order to support female candidates, the government could consider incentivising political parties to meet their voluntary commitments to women’s participation and establishing a “hardship fund” for women to be administered by a board containing representatives from all political parties, election management bodies and civil society.

State institutions play a crucial role in determining whether violence will escalate around elections. The speed and effectiveness of police and judiciary when responding to incidents of political violence still needs to be improved, especially when women are involved. One potential strategy would be to conduct police training to increase sensitivity to gender issues. Training should take place in close cooperation with political parties, civil society and international partners to prevent incidents of political violence at the next election and provide a conducive environment to women's participation.

As for **Liberia**, the ongoing constitutional review represents a concrete entry point to enhance women's political participation. Ideally, the process should be thorough and gender-sensitive, and involve nationwide consultation to ensure that women's priorities are sufficiently taken into consideration.

In addition, the government should continue to identify and implement mechanisms to strengthen women's political participation. This could include the introduction of a formal quota system to increase the number of female candidates for election in public office. Further investment in decentralising governance constitutes another pathway towards wider democratic accountability and greater opportunities for women to participate in decision-making.

The upcoming elections offer a number of opportunities to strengthen women's participation. The ongoing process of raising the capacity of the National Election Commission and ensuring its neutrality is a critical entry point. This includes training women as election officials and monitors. There also remains a need to develop clear guidelines on the conduct of political parties as their internal selection and decision-making processes currently lack accountability and transparency. This could be achieved by establishing a political party registration committee – like Sierra Leone's – to help monitor the candidate selection process and the conduct of party supporters during the campaign. In order to support female candidates, the government should consider incentivising political parties to meet their voluntary commitments to women's participation and establishing a "hardship fund" to be administered by a board containing representatives from all political parties, NEC and civil society.

At the level of civil society in **both Liberia and Sierra Leone**, national and community-based organisations will have to increase their advocacy towards the government and Parliament to formally adopt a quota system. The 10th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 in October 2010 offers an opportunity to attract (international) attention to lobbying efforts. Civil society should consider developing mechanisms to monitor and encourage government implementation of other gender commitments, such as creating "shadow" reports on CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 NAP implementation.

Civil society can help to identify and support suitable female candidates from a range of backgrounds to stand in the next election. Such support would include helping them to manage their family and household responsibilities, building their capacity to campaign effectively, and facilitating their engagement with power brokers. In addition, civil society groups have an important role to play in civic education programmes to encourage voter responsibility and more issue-based political campaigning. There is also a need to move beyond civic education and general skills training for candidates to more political- and election- specific skills training.

NGOs, with support from international NGOs, can play a part in training aspirant female candidates and women already in elected positions in the skills required to be effective political operators. These skills will not only significantly improve women's chances of winning the electorate's support, but also ensure that those in office are effective politicians and good role models. In addition, advocacy directed at political parties could focus on explaining why it is in their interest and that of broader society to put forward more female candidates at the election. Civil society should then work with political parties to identify and train suitable candidates

and support them during a campaign. It should also play a vital monitoring role throughout the election process, in particular by deploying high levels of female monitors during election campaigns.

International actors can play an important role by supporting the governments of both countries to take further steps to improve women's participation in politics. Ongoing political dialogues between both governments and the international community represent a concrete entry point to highlight the governments' obligations to bring standards for women's political participation in line with international commitments such as CEDAW and 1325. The provision of financial support and technical assistance could help to develop and implement the gender equality structures and mechanisms in both countries.

With a view to the upcoming elections, more resources could be channelled towards election monitoring bodies and other state institutions involved in administering the elections. Overall, interventions by international NGOs and other actors aimed at increasing women's participation in the elections must begin as early as possible in the electoral process – and be sustained until the electoral process has been completed. Furthermore, sustained international monitoring and engagement is required to ensure that security is maintained, disputes resolved and results are accepted and implemented peacefully.

Finally, a vibrant and active civil society is an important element of furthering women's political participation. International actors should therefore ensure that resources are channelled towards civil society to sustain civil society organisations in their efforts to lobby government and parliament for women-friendly policy reform, to engage with political parties to secure more female candidates, and to identify and support female candidates.

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Annex I: List of interviews

Sierra Leone

Tuesday, 26th January - Freetown

Alicia Kamara – Gender Programme Officer, International Alert

Harriett Turay - President, 50-50 Group of Sierra Leone

Abator Thomas - Founding member and former President, 50-50 Group of Sierra Leone

Alimatu Abdullah - National Treasurer, 50-50 Group of Sierra Leone

Wednesday, 27th January - Freetown

Marcella Macaulay - Head of Programmes, Campaign for Good Governance (C4GG)

Hon. Veronika Seesay - Member of Parliament; Public Relations Officer, Women's Parliamentary Caucus

Hon. Marie Yansanah - Member of Parliament, President, Women's Parliamentary Caucus

Thursday, 28th January - Freetown

Florie de Jager Meezenbroek - Governance Programme Manager, Oxfam

Friday, 29th January - Makeni

Isatu Fornah - Councillor and Deputy Mayor, Makeni City Council

Betty Alimany Sesay - Journalist; Spokesperson, Women's Action for Human Dignity

Mary Y Conteh - Community activist; Head, Women's Centre for Good Governance and Human Rights

Adama Boima - Independent candidate in 2008 election; Heads a local adult literacy organisation (standing in 2012 elections)

Aminata Fofanah - SLPP candidate in 2008 election (standing in 2012 elections)

Monday, 1st February - Bo

Gladys Gbappy-Brima - Founder and National Coordinator, Women's Partnership for Justice and Peace (WPJP)

Sheku Sesay (M) - Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Women's Partnership for Justice and Peace (WPJP)

Mary Cokar - Councillor, Bo City Council

Paul Lansana Koroma (M) - Regional Director, Network Movement for Justice and Development

Tuesday, 2nd February - Freetown

Lucy Vandy Lamin - Information Officer, Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC)

Josephine Libber - Administrative Assistant, Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC)

Simbiwa Elizabeth Torto - Candidate in 2009 Paramount Chieftancy Elections, Kono District

Wednesday, 3rd February - Freetown

Ken Ganna Conteh (M) - Talking Drum Studio, Search for Common Ground (SFCG)

Dr Christiana Thorpe - Chief Commissioner, National Election Commission (NEC)

Thursday, 4th February - Freetown

Musa Bangura - Gender Focal Point, UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL)

Ngolo Katta (M) - Spokesperson, National Election Watch (NEW)

Liberia

Monday, 8th February - Monrovia

Etweda Cooper - Women's activist (worked with UNMIL, Ministry of Gender & Development, Liberian Women's Initiative)

Bernice Freeman - Programme Officer for Advocacy, Women's Peace Network (WIPNET)

Christopher S. Geweh (M) - Accounts Manager, Women's Peace Network (WIPNET)

Tuesday, 9th February - Monrovia

Marpu Spear - Coordinator, Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL)

Annette Kiawu - Acting Minister, Ministry of Gender & Development, Government of Liberia

George Weah (M) - South Eastern Women's Development Association (SEWODA)

Wednesday, 10th February - Monrovia

Sen. Gloria Musu Scott - Junior Senator for Maryland County (UP) (standing in 2011 elections)

Sen. Jewel Howard Taylor - Senior Senator for Bong County (NPP) (former First Lady)

Cerue Garlo - Women's activist and workshop facilitator; former Coordinator, Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL)

Hon. Mariah Farnah - Representative for Montserrado County; Secretary-General, Liberty Party; Head, Coalition of Political Party Women in Liberia (standing in 2011 elections)

Friday, 12th February - South East region: Fish Town (by phone)

Regina Saytue - Fund for International Dignity (FIND)

Angie Swen - Medicine Mondiale

Monday, 15th February - Grand Cape Mount

Randolph Kiatamba (M) - Field Officer, Liberia Human Rights and Social Justice Organisation

Focus group - 7 women from local community (including women's appointed representatives)

Tuesday, 16th February - Bong County

Marline Jarwoe - Supervisor (Gbangra Office), Centre for Justice and Peace Studies

Esther Coaline Warbey - Mayoress, Gbangra City

Mary Loweal - President, Panta Women Community Group

Estelle Walker - Regional Coordinator (Bong), Coalition of Political Party Women in Liberia

Focus group - 8 women in skill training centre (6 participants and 2 trainers)

Wednesday, 17th February - Monrovia

Estella Nelson - Executive Director, Liberia Women Media Action Coalition (LWOMAC)

Carole Doucet - Chief, Office of the Gender Adviser, UNMIL

Katrine Hoyer - Adviser to the SRSG, UNMIL

Grace T. Kpan - Head of Dockworkers Union (stood in Nov'09 Montserrado bye-election; standing in 2011 elections)

Alexander Chavarria (M) - Resident Director, National Democratic Institute (NDI)

Fatu J. Massaley - Standing in 2011 elections (Liberty Party candidate, Montserrado Rep.)

Thursday, 18th February - Monrovia

Ruth Caesar - Focal point and founding member of MRU Women's Peace Network Liberia (independent candidate in 2005 elections)

Peter Balah (M) - Artistic Director, FLOMO Theatre Group

John R. Yancy (M) - Manager, FLOMO Theatre Group

Bobby Livingstone (M) - Director-Public Information, National Election Commission (NEC)

Annex II: List of sample interview questions

Perceptions of the current status of women's political participation

What is your view of the current status of women's participation in the political process? Is it improving?

Is there considerable interest among women in politics and elections?

Do women have sound knowledge of the political process?

Do women have equal access to the political process?

Are women represented at both the national and local levels?

Are women involved in decision-making processes?

Are women's views and issues included in discussions?

Assessing opportunities

How do women access the political domain?

What specific opportunities exist for women to participate in elections?

(EG voters, election officials, candidates – local, national, Presidency)

What kind of women participate and why? (EG education, urban/rural, married/unmarried, employed, ethnicity/regional)

Are those that do participate, representative of the female population?

Do those that are elected give voice to women's concerns?

How far do women participate in decision-making outside of the formal political sphere? (EG education, private sector, civil society, media)

Does women's involvement in these areas have an effect on women's participation in politics?

Identifying barriers

What are the main barriers that hinder women's full participation in the political process?

(EG education/literacy, awareness, wealth/economic dependency, household responsibilities, cultural expectations, time restrictions, geography, intimidation, electoral system, tradition - chief)

Does the electoral system hinder or help female participation? How?

What are the key concerns of women around the election? (EG ability to vote, female candidates, women's issues, other substantive policy issues; identity issues; election fraud; election violence; voter/candidate intimidation)

Are the barriers to political participation similar for men as they are for women?

Overcoming barriers

Are you aware of specific national policies and mechanisms that aim to increase women's participation in politics?

(EG Electoral systems, quotas, political parties, voter mobilisation, gender equality policies, strategies and programmes)

Affirmative action

Gender quotas are widely regarded as the most effective policy tool for increasing women's political participation. Are existing quotas being fully implemented?

Are they ensuring that women are better represented and that women's issues are placed on the political agenda?

Political parties

What is being done to increase the involvement of women in their own political parties?

Are there separate women's parties, or women's wings of main parties?

Are there existing programmes that encourage women to become candidates, or leadership training programmes for female candidates?

National policy

What, if any, national gender equality policies, strategies and programmes exist? And are these being fully implemented? (EG gender quality programmes in all ministries, gender responsive budgeting)

Is it more important to increase the number of women in political positions or to support those (men or women) who are openly committed to gender equality policies?

Media

What role, if any, does the media play in influencing women's participation in elections?

What more could be done to encourage this?

International engagement

What is the impact of the international community (positive and/or negative) on women's participation in elections?

What could be done to improve the impact of the international community on women's participation in elections?

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone can illustrate various campaigns to promote women's participation in elections. Have these had an impact?

What are women's attitudes around election violence?

How has the political violence during local elections (July 2008) and more recently in Freetown (March 2009) influenced women's perceptions and attitudes towards participating politically?

What, if any, lessons can be drawn from Sierra Leone's experience and be applied to improve women's political participation in the other MRU countries?

Who else should I be speaking to on these issues?

Liberia

Liberia is seen as a leader in women's political participation in the region, but what opportunities do ordinary women have to participate in the elections?

Has having a female president had an impact on women's interest and willingness to participate politically in Liberia or in the region?

Has the presence of other high profile female role models helped to encourage greater interest and involvement in the political process? (EG ministers, civil society activists, Indian peacekeepers, UN/NGO practitioners)

Are you aware that the government has produced a National Action Plan to implement UN SCR 1325 on women, peace and security? Is it being implemented?

What, if any, lessons can be drawn from Liberia's experience and be applied to improve women's political participation in the other MRU countries?

Who else should I be speaking to on these issues?

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