

Women's Leadership and the Policy Implementation Gap in Sierra Leone: Governance Mechanisms and Institutional Constraints

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Abstract

Women's participation in political and administrative leadership in Sierra Leone has increased over the past decade, supported by legal reforms, gender quotas, and international commitments to gender equality. However, these gains in representation are yet to be translated into a tangible policy outcome that address gendered development priorities. This paper examines the nature and drivers of the women's leadership policy implementation gap in Sierra Leone, focusing on why increased female presence in leadership positions has not consistently translated into substantive policy influence or effective implementation. The persistent gap between policy formulation and effective implementation remains a central challenge in public governance, particularly in developing and fragile states. While women's leadership in governance has received increasing scholarly attention, existing research focuses largely on representation and policy prioritization, with limited attention to implementation processes. Drawing on qualitative interviews with public officials, frontline implementers, development partners, and civil society actors, complemented by document analysis, the study identifies key structural, political, and socio-cultural barriers that limit women's ability to shape policy agendas and oversee implementation processes. The findings suggest that while symbolic representation and quota-based inclusion are important, they are insufficient in the absence of enabling institutional environments, accountability mechanisms, and leadership autonomy. The paper argues that closing the women's leadership policy implication gap requires a shift from descriptive representation to substantive empowerment, supported by institutional reforms, gender-responsive budgeting, and strengthened implementation frameworks. The study contributes to the literature on gender and governance in post-conflict and fragile states and offers policy-relevant insights for advancing more effective and inclusive leadership outcomes in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: *Governance, Policy Implementation Gap, Representation, Sierra Leone, Women's Leadership.*

Introduction

People's participation is becoming the central issue of our time. The democratic transition in many developing countries, the collapse of many socialist regimes, and the worldwide emergence of people's

organizations- these are all part of a historic change, not just isolated events [1].

According to the United Nations, democracy provides an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely expressed will of the people is exercised [2]. This simply

implies that the voice of every human being should be heard, irrespective of gender and race. Despite this, there is a common belief that women who constitute over 50 percent of the global population are still underrepresented when it comes to making vital decisions at all governance levels around the world. Women's leadership has been increasingly recognized as an essential component of developing inclusive governance, consolidating democracy, and achieving sustainable development. In sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a growing body of policy commitments related to gender equality; however, translating these commitments into meaningful leadership outcomes continues to be uneven. In Sierra Leone, recent legislative reforms most notably the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act of 2022 represent a significant policy shift toward enhancing women's participation in leadership. However, persistent gaps between policy design and implementation continue to constrain women's substantive influence in political and public decision-making. This literature review examines what scholars have said about women's leadership, and policy implementation gaps in Sierra Leone; and relates this discussion to larger theoretical and empirical conversations.

In Africa, women constitute only 24 per cent of the 12,113 parliamentarians in Africa, 25 per cent in the lower houses, and 20 per cent in the upper houses of parliament. While local government is often hailed as a training ground for women in politics, women constitute a mere 21 per cent of councillors in the 19 countries for which complete data could be obtained [3]. Women in Sierra Leone face systemic disadvantages in socio-economic development due to a combination of post-conflict challenges, entrenched cultural and religious practices, and limited access to education and broader societal engagement [4].

Sierra Leone has made notable strides in formalizing gender equality commitments. The GEWE Act (2022) mandates a minimum 30 percent representation of women in public and private-sector leadership positions and requires political parties to field at least 30 percent women candidates [5]. This legislation aligns with regional and international commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Following the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone, women lawmakers now account for 30.4% of the elected seats in the Sierra Leone Parliament, up from 14.5% in the previous election [6]. This surge clearly is as a result of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act in relation to 30 percent quota, which was signed into law by the current Government of Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone's political history can never be told without referencing the role of some great and prominent women. Women's involvement in politics and decision-making dates to the precolonial period. There are a few outstanding women who pushed their way and attained very high positions and incredibly performed in each of the positions. Women like Paramount Chief Madam Yoko, from Moyamba District, in the South, and Paramount Chief Madam Humornya, from Kenema District in the East, were among early female decision-makers in the colonial era in the 1960s. Notable early female members of parliament in the 1960s and early 1970s were Nancy Tucker, from Bonthe District, Ella Kobolo Gulama, from Moyamba District, and Madam Wokie from Kenema District.

The concept of a policy implementation gap refers to the divergence between formally adopted policy objectives and actual outcomes [13]. In gender policy studies, this gap is often attributed to weak institutional capacity, ambiguous policy design, and socio-cultural resistance [14]. Policy Implementation can be deeply political and institutional norms rather

than just a technical process. P& L deLeon argues that policy implementation has too often been practiced as a top-down or governing-elite phenomenon and that its study and practice would be much better served were its practitioners to adopt a more participatory, more directly democratic orientation [7]. Bardach highlights the frustrations faced by government planners in the interval between the making of a policy decision and the establishment of effective operations. It exposes the seemingly countless little steps that add up to delay, procrastination, and, in some cases, defeat or distortion of the program [12]. Researchers are curious about the gap between the making and implementation of a policy, with concern if policies are made without explicit evidence or a well-informed data? Evidence-based policy making (EBPM) has become a popular term to describe the need for more scientific and less ideological policy making. Some compare it to "evidence-based medicine", which describes moves to produce evidence, using commonly-held scientific principles regarding a hierarchy of evidence, which can directly inform practice [8].

Women's leadership is understood not merely as numerical representation but as substantive participation and influence in decision-making processes [17]. Researchers have argued that increased representation of women as leaders does not automatically lead to increased substantive outcomes unless institutions and other political environments support the necessary conditions [18]. This distinction has significant implications in post-conflict societies and low-income countries such as Sierra Leone. Since the end of its civil war in 2002, Sierra Leone has rebuilt series of formal institutions, and have pursued wide-ranging governance reforms aimed at improving social sector outcomes. Policies such as the Free Quality School Education programme, post-Ebola health system reforms, and expanding social protection initiatives

reflect strong policy ambition, yet policy implementation remains a challenge by limited resources, huge donor finance dependence, fragmented administrative authority uneven service delivery, weak monitoring, and coordination failures remain common, leading to a continued policy implementation gap.

Leadership has been identified by the public administration literature as a key determinant of implementation success, especially in complex policy areas such as health, education, and social protection. Leaders have the ability to influence implementation through agenda alignment, bureaucratic oversight, inter-agency coordination, and engagement with frontline implementers.

Women in Sierra Leone have driven significant legal and policy gains on gender equality; they occupy leadership roles across governance institutions, including line ministries, regulatory bodies, and local councils. Yet, translating these into everyday change is uneven. Weak implementation of legislative and policy frameworks is clearly visible with the GEWE Act, 2023, Research points to a recurrent gap in the implementation of the GEWE Act, a clear indication of male dominance, weak institutions, and resource constraints. For example, the 2026 gender budget statement clearly stated how gender responsive decision making is still lacking participation in decision-making structures at the community and public level, with women and youth less likely to hold positions of power and influence key decisions. Gender mainstreaming and integration within policy formulation and training is limited, especially at the central and decentralized levels. [9]. Awareness seems to be limited and enforcement by institutions remains weak. While women have not been formally barred from standing for political office or even participating in decision-making, the history of the nation, systemic and structural factors and forces continue to restrict women's access in Sierra Leone, resulting in wide gaps in the

participation of women and men [10] on a positive note, in enforcing the GEWE Act, and in a bid to promoting gender equality, the government of Sierra Leone has introduced a Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) as an approach that uses fiscal policy and public financial management instruments that outlines specific priorities for narrowing gender gaps.

Limitations

While existing studies provide valuable insights on women's leadership in Sierra Leone, there still remain many gaps. For example, very few empirical studies exist that look at how female leaders in Sierra Leone continue to face institutional barriers after they have taken office and how these barriers affect their ability to implement policies. Second, very few studies have actually linked specific policy implementation barriers to specific developmental results by sector. Finally, there is a need for longitudinal research assessing whether recent legislative reforms produce sustained changes in leadership norms and practices.

Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to understand why progressive gender-equality policies have not consistently translated into substantive leadership outcomes for women, despite having clear legal commitments to increasing women's access to leadership positions and increased descriptive representation over the past few years.

More Specifically, this Objective Seeks to:

1. Examine the role of implementation mechanisms, such as institutional capacity, public finance & budget execution, political party practices, Accountability & oversight institutions, and administrative discretion, in shaping women's access to leadership positions.
2. Identify the institutional, political, and socio-cultural factors that hinder or

facilitate the translation of gender-inclusive policy intent into meaningful leadership opportunities and decision-making power for women.

3. Assess the extent to which existing gender policies are effectively implemented across political, administrative, and local governance structures in Sierra Leone, rather than merely adopted at the legislative level.
4. Evaluate the gap between descriptive representation and substantive leadership, focusing on whether increased numbers of women in office result in real influence over policy formulation, resource allocation, and governance outcomes.

Novelty of the Work

This study offers a novel contribution to the literature on gender and governance by shifting analytical attention from the adoption of gender-equality policies to the policy implementation gap shaping women's leadership outcomes in Sierra Leone. While existing research has largely emphasized legal reforms and quota-based representation, this study noted that most development initiatives by international organizations and existing studies have largely focused on policy formulation for women's political participation and representation and paying little attention on their roles in managing and implementing public policy. It advances understanding by integrating formal policy frameworks with informal socio-cultural norms, political party gatekeeping, public finance & budget execution, and institutional capacity constraints, demonstrating how their interaction undermines substantive leadership gains. By distinguishing between descriptive representation and substantive leadership influence, the study moves beyond numerical indicators to assess real decision-making power.

Materials and Methods

This study used both primary and secondary sources of data. For primary data collection, an in-depth interview, guided by a semi-structured guide, was administered to purposefully select participants. In an effort of gathering data to record the broad perspectives of the targeted groups in Sierra Leone, focus group discussions were carried out in the four regions of the country, and key stakeholders were interviewed. The study was carefully designed, ensuring a deep dive and a blended views of both men and women with a purposive representation across the country.

The researcher designed two distinct interview guides with focus on the level of information required from respondent in aiding analysis and drawing conclusion. One interview guide was designed for the general views of Staff of International Organizations, Civil Society Organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Government Agencies as they possess the superior knowledge in the subject matter. The other research guide was designed for a focus group discussion at community level, with the aim of gathering data relating to the knowledge of the community people on the role of women in policy implementation and their participation in decision making in Sierra Leone.

Tools Used for Data Collection

In-person Survey: Direct discussion and observation during face-to-face interviews, which produced rich and detailed insights, and an opportunity to ask pertinent follow-up questions.

Sampling: A purposive community sampling and the snowball approach was adopted, which carefully guided in selecting a sample representative of the required community, and also helped minimized bias and follow-up opportunities in getting more detailed information.

The governance framework in Sierra Leone has undergone a fundamental change with the intent of increasing women's leadership in governance. Several vital tools have been introduced to institutionalize women's participation and involvement in decision-making in Sierra Leone. While some gains have been made through gender equality legislation and increased advocacy in Sierra Leone, women leaders are often said to have been occupying social-sector portfolios with limited budgetary authority. *Figure 1* depicts the flow and relationship from the policy design, with legal mandates and very strong commitments, especially in political representation, through the decision-making and feedback stage. At the implementation stage, *Figure 1* clearly indicates the institutional and policy impediments that typically lead to the implementation gap, some of which are mentioned below:

Institutional and Political Barriers to Implementation: Despite progressive legislation, the literature consistently identifies institutional weaknesses as a major impediment to effective implementation. Political parties in Sierra Leone function as critical gatekeepers to leadership positions, yet party structures remain male-dominated and resistant to internal gender reform [20]. Women candidates often receive limited access to campaign financing, media visibility, and elite networks, undermining their competitiveness even under quota regimes.

Capacity Constraints and Resource Limitations: Implementation scholars highlight the importance of administrative capacity in translating policy commitments into outcomes. In Sierra Leone, ministries and agencies responsible for gender equality often face chronic underfunding, limited technical expertise, and weak monitoring systems. The MoGCA historically receives less than 1% of the national budget, which by every means is insufficient for nation-wide enforcement and monitoring of the GEWE Act [21]. These

constraints reduce the state's ability to enforce compliance with gender laws and to support women's leadership development through training, mentorship, and public education initiatives. Donor support has played a crucial role in advancing gender reforms, yet reliance on external funding raises concerns about sustainability and national ownership [22]. Without sustained domestic investment, implementation gaps are likely to continue.

Socio-Cultural Norms and Gendered Power Relations: A substantial body of literature emphasizes the role of patriarchal norms in shaping women's leadership opportunities. In Sierra Leone, cultural expectations often frame leadership as a male domain, even where legal frameworks support women's participation, socio-cultural resistance can undermine implementation by discouraging women from contesting

leadership positions or by delegitimizing their authority once elected [23]. This dynamic helps explain why increases in descriptive representation do not always yield substantive policy influence.

Accountability and Oversight:

Establishing accountability frameworks is a positive step, but these tools are still being finalized, validated, and anchored in law and practice. Accountability and oversight are critical to policy implementation; however, capacity constraints and political dynamics may weaken sustained scrutiny, as evident in Sierra Leone. Weak monitoring and evaluation systems limit policy learning. Where feedback mechanisms enable adaptive leadership and iterative policy adjustment, particularly for women operating within constrained institutional environments [11, 19].

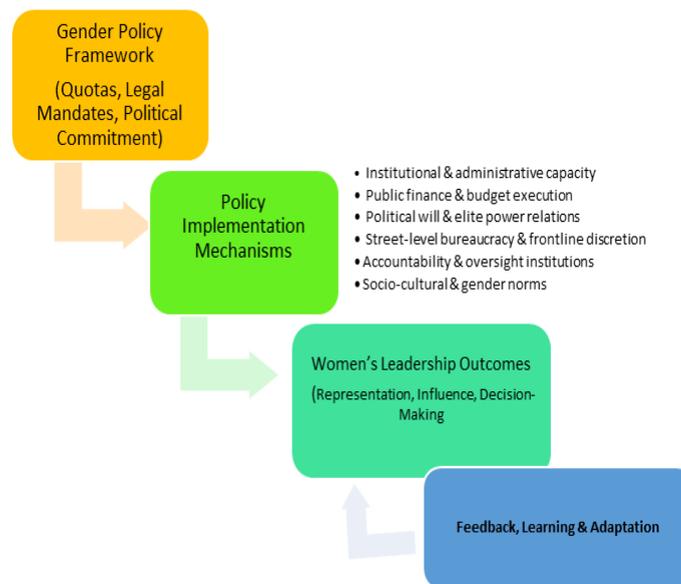


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Policy Design and ' 'Women's Leadership in Sierra Leone

Results

The literature suggests that while gender policy reforms in Sierra Leone have succeeded in improving numerical representation, they have been less effective in transforming power relations within and governance institutions. Policy implementation failure is noted as one of the most persistent challenges in public governance in Sierra Leone. Governments

frequently adopt progressive policies that fail to translate into effective outcomes, resulting in gaps between policy intent and actual implementation. This supports existing research that distinguishes between descriptive and substantive representation, highlighting that increased numbers alone do not guarantee meaningful influence.

The participation of women in governance strengthens women's rights and freedoms, gives female voice in government decision-making, provides an opportunity for women to present their needs and demands to appropriate authorities, and empowers women to contribute in policy formulation and implementation [15], limited implementation of women's leadership policies has broader implications for governance quality and development outcomes The World Bank group refers to policy implementation gap as the disparity between formal policy commitments and actual service delivery outcomes. [16] Sierra Leone has made important progress in establishing a legal framework for women's leadership, particularly in the adoption of quotas and legal protections yet significant implementation gaps remain. These gaps are rooted in institutional weaknesses, socio-cultural norms, and resource constraints. The gap directly affects the Quality and equity of service delivery, Gender-differentiated development outcomes, public trust in government and Institutional legitimacy and state effectiveness. Addressing them requires moving beyond formal representation toward strengthening enforcement, transforming norms, and building institutional capacity. Women's participation in Community Decision-Making Empirical studies show that when women engage in decision-making, improvements in governance and social development are inevitable. For example, Chattopadhyay and Duflo found that female

leaders in India prioritized issues such as public health and education, contributing to policies that were more inclusive and equitable, benefiting the community [24].

Figure 2 clearly depicts how women's leadership in Sierra Leone, to a large extent, is treated as mere representation, with little substantive authority and control over resources, and agenda-setting power. There is a prominent gap between women in leadership positions and the decisions they are equipped to take in achieving result. Figure 2 conceptualized the systematic mismatch between formal policy commitments and actual delivery, observable through delays, partial implementation, or complete non-execution. The research highlighted factors that mediate the relationship between women's leadership and policy execution. The persistence of male-dominated party structures and weak institutional capacity indicates that implementation challenges are deeply embedded in governance systems rather than arising solely from policy design alone. Socio-cultural resistance further 'moderates' policy outcomes, reinforcing informal barriers that operate alongside formal legal frameworks. These findings align with policy implementation theory, which emphasizes the importance of institutional capacity and contextual factors in shaping outcomes. Overall, the results underscore the need to move beyond compliance-oriented approaches toward deeper institutional and normative change.

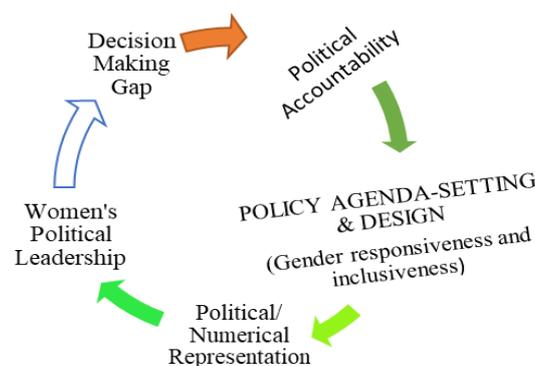


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework: Women's Leadership and Policy Implementation Gap in Sierra Leone

Women leaders emphasized coordination across ministries, agencies, and frontline actors. The interviewees described how women leaders prioritise regular coordination meetings and consultation with district-level officers, reducing disconnects between national policy directives and local realities. Inclusive consultation improved alignment between policy objectives and operational realities, reducing implementation breakdowns.

In health and social welfare programmes, women leaders emphasised adherence to procedures, reporting requirements, and monitoring frameworks. This was particularly referenced as evident in post-Ebola health reforms, where women leaders played key roles in strengthening surveillance, compliance, and community engagement mechanisms. Women leaders were perceived as more attentive to procedural compliance, monitoring mechanisms, and reporting structures. This strengthened implementation oversight and reduced discretionary distortions.

Women leaders were more likely to engage directly with frontline implementers, using feedback to adapt implementation strategies. For example, in social protection programmes, adjustments to beneficiary identification processes were informed by consultations with community-level officers, improving programme reach. Engagement with frontline implementers such as teachers, health workers, and social officers emerged as a key leadership practice. This feedback-driven approach helped adapt policies to local constraints.

Discussion

Findings align with broader scholarship distinguishing between descriptive and substantive representation, reinforcing the argument that increased numbers of women in leadership do not automatically transform power relations. The persistence of male-dominated political and administrative

institutions suggests that implementation challenges are embedded within governance systems rather than arising solely from policy design weaknesses. Findings demonstrate that the gap in women's leadership in Sierra Leone is mostly driven by a policy implementation gap through governance practices rather than symbolic representation. The study highlights that leadership alone cannot close implementation gaps without institutional support. Gender-responsive governance reforms are therefore essential to enable women leaders to translate authority into implementation outcomes.

Future research and policy action should emphasize implementation fidelity, capacity building, and normative change to ensure that policy gains are translated into substantive leadership outcomes for women. The qualitative design limits generalizability. Future studies could adopt mixed methods or comparative country analyses. A longitudinal study should be conducted to understand whether changes in institutional norms and practices created through legislative reforms will persist over time.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that recent gender-equality policies in Sierra Leone have produced measurable gains in women's descriptive representation, particularly following the enactment of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (2022). Women's participation in parliament, local councils, and selected public offices has increased, indicating that quota-based policy design can improve access to formal leadership positions. These gains mark a significant movement from earlier periods of marginal female representation and reflect the immediate effects of legislative reform.

However, the results also reveal a persistent policy implementation gap that limits the translation of numerical gains into substantive leadership outcomes. Women leaders continue

to experience restricted access to strategic decision-making spaces. The implications of these findings are significant for both governance and policy reform. Strengthening enforcement and accountability mechanisms is essential to ensure consistent implementation of gender policies, including clearer sanctions for non-compliance and improved monitoring frameworks. Political parties must be more directly engaged as key implementation actors through internal gender reforms, targeted incentives, and financial and technical support for women candidates. Additionally, sustained efforts to address socio-cultural norms, through public education, community engagement, and traditional leadership dialogue, are critical for legitimizing women's leadership beyond formal institutions. Finally, enhanced institutional capacity, including adequate resourcing of gender-focused ministries and improved gender-disaggregated data systems, is necessary to move women's leadership from formal inclusion toward substantive and sustained influence in Sierra Leone's governance landscape.

Conflict of Interest

None declared by the authors.

Ethical Consideration

Given that the study had to engage in in-person interviews, apart from the review of peer-reviewed literature, we had to obtain ethics clearance from the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee. The Ethics approval number is *020/12/2024*. The study adhered to all key principles of ethical research, including the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of materials and discussions. All participants provided informed consent before they were

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interviewed. They were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point during the study without consequences. They were free to respond or not respond to any or all questions in the guides. All participants were informed that the interviews would be transcribed and password-protected to prevent unauthorized access.

Data Sources

The study used existing peer-reviewed literature on the subject matter and conducted key informant interviews with community and national stakeholders, including decision-makers in civil society organisations, government Ministries, Departments and Agencies, and United Nations agencies. All study participants were adults.

Author Contribution

The corresponding author, Daisy Foday, led the study design, tools, data collection, analysis, and reporting. The second author (Edward) reviewed/edited the written materials and supported data collection.

Funding

There was no external funding for this study. The authors used internally generated funds from their personal incomes to fund this study.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Professor Yusuf-Habeeb, Olafemi Munirat for her invaluable support, and insightful feedback, throughout the research and writing process. Appreciation is also extended to the editorial team for their constructive comments and guidance, which greatly enhanced the quality of this work.

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