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POLICY BRIEF

**Strengthening the Political Participation
of Women in Sierra Leone through
Media Monitoring of Gender
Sensitive Reporting**

**Who Makes the News in Sierra Leone?
- 2023 Media Gender Scorecard**

Executive Summary

Sierra Leone has made significant strides in promoting gender equality in recent years including the passing of a groundbreaking gender equality law, but there is still a need for increased gender-sensitive reporting in the media during elections. The ‘2023 Elections - Strengthening the Political Participation of Women in Sierra Leone through Media Monitoring of Gender Sensitive Reporting project,’ supported by the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), highlights that the participation of women in media processes is still alarmingly lagging. On both the internal front, in access to decision-making posts, and the external front, in media content, women are the victims of a continuing lack of representation. This not only deprives most of them of equal treatment and opportunities but also adds to the impression among the general public that they are still tied to their traditional roles despite their increasingly tangible contribution to Sierra Leone’s economic and political life.

Globally, the situation is even more worrying when it comes to media content. In 2005, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), which looks into the place of women in the news media every five years, came to the sobering conclusion that “the world we see in the news is a world in which women are virtually invisible”. In 2022, the GMMP reported that “All things remaining equal, it will take at least a further 67 years to close the average gender equality gap in traditional news media.” In 2015, the period

remaining to full gender equality based on the Gender Equality Monitoring Index was 72 years, thus the 2020 result signals consistency in the slow cumulative pace of change over time. Full gender equality on numerical counts, however, is insufficient because there is still no improvement in the quality of journalism from a gender perspective.

At the local level, the UNWomen funded the Initiatives for Media Development (IMdev) research on “2018 elections – ‘Who made the news’ highlights an unhealthy imbalance in gender sensitivity. “While there was evidence of an increase in the use of female sources as the weeks progressed, the overall picture was one dominated by male sources by a wider margin. TV also stood out as the media that did poorly, in terms of the use of female sources.”

The media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and influencing political participation, and as such, women’s voices and perspectives are adequately represented. One of the cardinal roles of the media is agenda-setting. This ensures that the electioneering is issue-based to enable the voter to be informed about the plethora of issues, policies and programmes that the individual political parties and their candidates stand for so that the voters would be in the best position to make informed choices. Thus the urgent need for targeted training and mentoring for women, as well as policies and initiatives that encourage and support gender inclusivity in media coverage.

This 2023 Gender Media Scorecard research was implemented over twelve weeks and covered a total of 226 stories published in newspapers, broadcast on radio and television, and disseminated on news websites.

Key Findings

The analysis revealed that men dominated media coverage during the period leading to elections (covering October 2022 to January 2023) with a limited representation of women in the news. Additionally, the coverage of women candidates was often limited to their gender, with less focus on their political platforms or qualifications. To ensure that both genders are represented in a fair and equal manner, it is essential to increase efforts towards sensitisation and awareness-raising, leverage media influence to bring important issues related to inequality and gender bias to the forefront and sensitise media organizations on gender-sensitive reporting during the election period.

The following are the key findings worthy of note:

1. Overall, the findings of the research suggest that radio plays an important role in promoting the representation and participation of women in the media and political decision-making processes in Sierra Leone.
2. Radio has provided opportunities to raise awareness about

gender-related issues but still has a long way to go in terms of achieving gender inclusivity and representation on air.

3. In general, Radio had more gender-focused and inclusive content but certain newspapers had the highest rate of news content surrounding gender inclusion.
4. While television may not be prioritising coverage of gender-related issues, it is still providing opportunities for women to participate in the media as reporters.
5. The analysis revealed that the representation of women in the news during the period leading to elections was low, with men dominating the coverage.
6. The analysis revealed that the coverage of women candidates was often limited to the agenda and did not focus on their political platforms or qualifications.
7. A small fraction of the news was on issues regarding the local communities. At the community level, a lot of bias and gender-associated violence occurs without much force due to poor representation.
8. In most of the media engagements, subordinates were sent instead of actual selected female interviewees. This did not only limit visibility for actual women candidates but also data on women's participation.

Policy Recommendations

To increase gender-sensitive reporting in the media during elections in Sierra Leone, the following policy recommendations are suggested:

1. Conduct a broad advocacy campaign in the media based on the evidence obtained in the 2023 Media Gender scorecard and 2018 Media Gender Scorecard. This includes statistics targeting media houses, media regulatory bodies, media owners Journalists' unions and associations, bloggers, and relevant and competent services under the Ministries of Information and Communication and Women and Gender.
2. Develop a gender equality policy or charter for the media and build a strong partnership with the sectoral ministries concerned and relevant stakeholders such as the Gender Media Advisory panel of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism (SLAWIJ) and other organisations, for the effective application of the gender policy.
3. Set up a multi-sectoral working group comprising the Ministry of Information and Communication, the Ministry of Women and Gender, the Independent Media Commission, the National Fund for Public Interest Media and other

other relevant stakeholders to plan and embark on a Participatory Gender Audit of media houses, the media regulatory body, the journalists union and journalists associations/organisations that work on gender, women and the media, media and journalism training schools/institutions to assess the extent to which gender equality is effectively institutionalised in policies, programmes, organisational structures and proceedings, including decision-making processes, and in the corresponding budgets.

4. UNWomen in collaboration with the Ministries of Gender and Children's Affairs and Information and Communications, device campaigns and programmes for the dissemination and implementation of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Law 2022 in the media sector.
5. Prioritise coverage of gender-related and other development issues from the local communities to ensure that underrepresented groups, including women, are adequately featured in the media.
6. Increase sensitisation and awareness-raising to bridge the information gap and give women a stronger voice in the media.
7. Station managers and Managing editors should give Gender-specific stories more prominence, and space in their publications.

8. The IMC should incorporate gender-sensitive reporting into the election guidelines.
9. Improve collaboration between the media and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to ensure that the media significantly highlights and deepens the coverage of gender issues during elections.
10. The Electoral Commission Sierra Leone (ECSL) and other elections bodies, should ensure that voter education captures the global quest for gender parity.
11. Female political candidates should engage the media more often to not only build their confidence but increase their visibility and prospects for winning their elections.

Conclusion

The findings of this project highlight the need for increased gender-sensitive reporting in the media during elections in Sierra Leone. To ensure that women's voices and perspectives are adequately represented in the media, it is essential to prioritize local community coverage, increase sensitization and awareness-raising efforts, give more prominence to gender-specific stories, sensitize media organizations, and extend the duration of data collection over a longer period. These policy recommendations can help support the political participation of women in Sierra Leone, contributing to greater gender equality and social justice.

About the Initiatives for Media Development (IMdev)

The Initiatives for Media Development (IMdev) aims to build a well-functioning and independent media sector that embeds ethical journalism and mainstreams human rights and gender issues onto the public agenda, imbued with a sustainable culture of excellence in human rights reporting.



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