

5. Breaking the Barriers

Sierra Leonean women on the march



Two councillors in Makeni town council in northern Sierra Leone

Women in Sierra Leone are under-represented in politics and over-represented among poor people. This paper describes the activities of two projects – the Women In Leadership project and its successor, the Promoting A Culture of Equal Representation project – that have aimed to increase the numbers of women in local and national government. In so doing, they have helped female election candidates to overcome some of the considerable barriers facing them.

Introduction

Situated on the west coast of Africa, Sierra Leone has a population of around six million, of whom 52 per cent are women. When Sierra Leone attained independence in 1961, its citizens had high aspirations for their country, which is rich in natural, mineral, and human resources. Women in particular had hopes that with independence, the new regime would promote their rights, and that the discrimination they faced would become a thing of the past.

Unfortunately, this early promise has not yet been realised. Many years of poor governance, corruption, and a lack of respect for human rights led eventually to an 11-year civil war (1990–2001). Women and girls suffered particularly, due to the widespread use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war, and the abduction and sexual exploitation of girls by armed forces. Women were made to suffer the consequences of the poor choices of the male-dominated political leadership of Sierra Leone, and they suffered at the hands of the rebels, the male-led perpetrators of the war.

After the war, as calls for disarmament, rehabilitation, reconstruction and peace took centre stage, so did the cry for the increased participation of women in elected leadership. So widespread was the belief that women had as much right to leadership as men, that one of the key recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (established to broker the peace process in 2001) was that the government of Sierra Leone should immediately establish a policy on political affirmative action for women.

Despite this recommendation, no affirmative-action policies have yet been put in place, and women continue to be under-represented in Sierra Leonean politics and other mechanisms of decision-making. Barriers to women's political participation are grounded in common beliefs and practices that relate to the role of women. These beliefs limit the spheres within which women can practically or acceptably operate, as well as reinforcing the acceptance of gender-based discrimination and violence. Until quite recently, for example, women were disadvantaged in the customary and common law systems (in relation to family law, property, and inheritance rights in particular). This disadvantage was both an expression of and an influence on the relationships within households, in which the wife and children are typically dependent on male relatives for practically all decisions to do with the welfare of the family.

But if women are under-represented in decision-making, they are over-represented among poor people. According to the country's poverty reduction strategy paper, maternal mortality, infant mortality, and fertility rates in Sierra Leone are among the highest in the world. School attendance and literacy rates are significantly higher among males than females, with very marked imbalances in

the eastern and northern regions.¹ The status of women in rural areas is particularly low.

In addition, systems of governance in Sierra Leone are still being re-established. The 2004 local elections marked the first opportunity for Sierra Leoneans to elect local government representatives. The elections also supported a new policy of decentralisation, introduced under the Local Government Act (2004). This gave new powers to local authorities, making them responsible for health, education, and other social services. As such, women elected to local government positions are now in a position to make an impact on the design and delivery of those services, with positive repercussions for all women in Sierra Leone. In particular, election to local government could give women an important opportunity to influence local poverty reduction and development policy, to ensure that it meets the particular needs of poor women.

The Women In Leadership (WIL) project

The WIL project was designed by the 50/50 Group, a Sierra Leonean women's rights organisation committed to increasing the political participation of women at every level,² and Oxfam GB. The aim of the project was to increase the quantity – and quality – of women in local council positions and to ensure that as leaders they would work towards the alleviation of poverty and gender inequality.³ This was to be achieved by identifying 390 women, one from each council ward in Sierra Leone, and providing them with intense training and support during the election period. In this way, they would be equipped with the skills and confidence to stand in the 2004 local elections, and to be effective representatives in the event of their being elected. It was hoped that of the 390 women, all would stand for election, and at least 100 would be elected.

Training was provided by women who had received election training from 50/50 prior to the 2002 parliamentary and presidential elections; several of the trainers were members of Parliament themselves. The training focused on preparing the would-be candidates for election, and covered campaigning skills, communication skills, information on the workings of representative government, and the principles, rights, and responsibilities of an elected government and its electorate. Candidates also received ongoing support from 50/50 throughout the election period, and were assisted in developing their manifestos and campaign strategy.

The successes

Three hundred and seventy women received the training, of whom 116 aspired to council positions. These would-be candidates represented different political parties, and some were independents.

They came from different ethnic backgrounds, representing eight of the ten ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, and most were from poor households and had little formal education. Of the 116, 86 did eventually contest, and 53 were elected (out of a total of 475 councillors). This was far fewer than anticipated. But as the other women who participated in the training were mainly leaders of grassroots women's organisations, community leaders, teachers, and activists, their participation will have had a positive impact on the development of women's leadership at district level. In addition, these participants reported feeling inspired by the training to return to their communities to encourage women to vote in the elections. So their involvement in the training strengthened the participation of women in the electoral process. This was vital in a context where voter ignorance was such that many women did not realise they had the right to *vote*, let alone stand for election.

Women who had participated in the training and went on to stand for election reported that it had strengthened their confidence, both in terms of giving them the courage to stand up and speak on campaign platforms and to challenge intimidation, and in helping them to develop their ideas into a manifesto. Knowing that they had access to ongoing support from 50/50 was also identified as a positive factor that helped them to secure election, as was the support of a good campaign manager, and of family and community members.

While the numbers of women councillors elected was lower than 50/50 and Oxfam GB had hoped, the training and support provided via the WIL project has helped to ensure that the quality of women councillors is higher than it might otherwise have been. Women councillors elected in 2004 are reported to take their responsibilities extremely seriously, seeing themselves as role models who have a duty to 'do a good job' in order to encourage other women to participate in political processes.⁴ Likewise, at an evaluation workshop held by 50/50 after the elections, women talking about what had inspired them to stand for election listed factors such as the desire to work with and for the community, to advocate on behalf of marginalised groups in society, and to uphold women's rights to health, education, and shelter.⁵ In addition, WIL helped build the capacity of 50/50 itself, providing it with the opportunity to expand beyond the capital Freetown, to recruit many new members, and to raise awareness of its activities.

The challenges

Barriers facing women candidates in Sierra Leone

One significant outcome of the WIL project was the information that it generated regarding the specific barriers to women's political leadership and participation in Sierra Leone. These barriers

represented a significant challenge to the project and to the candidates that it sought to support. But the fact that they have now been identified means that in future, projects aiming to improve women's political participation in Sierra Leone can be tailored to overcome them.

Women candidates speaking at the 50/50 evaluation workshop reported that hostile attitudes among men and women towards the very concept of women standing for election was one of the main problems that they faced.⁶ These ranged from men stating that they would only ever vote for male candidates, to women passing moral judgement on female candidates, and saying that they should stay at home and attend to their families, rather than trying to assume 'male' positions of leadership. Women members of Parliament and councillors were interviewed for a baseline survey, used to inform the proposal for the next stage of 50/50 and Oxfam GB's work in this field, and they reported similar experiences.⁷ The lack of solidarity from women voters was particularly difficult for female candidates, as was the lack of support that many received from members of their own families. Both indicate the need for widespread sensitisation of male and female voters, to encourage people to accept that women have the right to enter the political arena, and have vital contributions to make there, for the benefit of all.

Women candidates also identified their *own* lack of confidence and experience as an obstacle to their standing for election, and to fulfilling their duties as councillors once they were elected. Many different factors contribute to this lack of confidence, not least the fear of entering into a 'male' domain where they were likely to face isolation, hostility, and potentially violence.⁸ But of more significance for many women candidates was their own lack of education, and limited literacy, particularly when it came to working in English, rather than Krio⁹ or their own first language. As well as affecting women's confidence and hence their decision to stand for election, poor literacy skills impact on women councillors' capacity to fulfil their duties if they are elected. This points to the need to provide targeted adult literacy programmes for women who, aside from their lack of education, would make excellent councillors or leaders in other sectors, as well as, of course, providing effective school education for future generations of Sierra Leonean women. Women who were elected to councils also reported that they felt they would benefit from ongoing training, again to boost their confidence and improve their skills, in order to allow them to be more effective representatives.

The inability to raise funds was cited as another barrier to women standing for election. Oxfam GB and 50/50 had different approaches to this. 50/50 decided to allocate a grant of Le 200,000 (\$68) to each candidate who had received training, to cover her expenses; Oxfam GB could not endorse this, as it felt that providing funding to

candidates compromised the neutrality of the project. These grants were clearly of great assistance however, as many of the candidates said that having access to this money contributed to enabling them to stand for election.¹⁰

Candidates also reported facing other significant structural barriers, frequently grounded in sexist attitudes regarding the unsuitability of women holding elected office, and in the desire of men to maintain control of the political arena. There was a lack of support from their own political parties, from failing to provide sufficient funding to women candidates, to placing women low down their lists of candidates or replacing them at the last minute with a male candidate. There were even threats, intimidation, and sabotage from male candidates.¹¹ Candidates also referred to the strong, patriarchal patronage system in Sierra Leone, which gave some male candidates access to political and financial support, compromising their accountability to their less influential constituents in the process.

In addition to the lack of support from their own parties, some women candidates reported that the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the institution organising the elections, had made their experience of standing for election *more* difficult, rather than easier. Several women who had stood as independent candidates said that NEC officials had refused to register them, and had challenged their right to stand.¹² In addition, it is clear that NEC was not able to fulfil its remit of informing people about their right to vote, and the voting process.¹³ NEC officials need to be trained in how to deal with all candidates and voters, male and female, in a professional and gender-sensitive manner.

Project limitations

The main limitation of this project was lack of time. The local elections were announced at very short notice, leaving candidates with just a few months to register and organise their campaigns. For the WIL project, this meant that the training of trainers (who then went on to train candidates) was not held until a few days before the start of the campaign period. This meant that some female candidates who could have benefited from the training did not attend, as they decided to prioritise their campaigns instead. Training materials were adapted from a manual developed by 50/50 and the British Council for the 2002 national elections, and did not cover the decentralisation process or the Local Government Act (mainly because information on the latter was not available until too late). This meant that while the training did help the candidates in their campaigning, it did not equip them with the information that they needed to understand the political process in which they were involved, nor make them fully aware of what being a local councillor might involve.¹⁴ This has of course impacted on the capacity of the women councillors to fulfil their responsibilities as elected officials. Supporting and developing

the skills of women once elected is an area that, in retrospect, should have formed a far more central aspect of the project than it did. 50/50 and Oxfam GB are both committed to increasing the numbers of women in elected positions in Sierra Leone; it will be difficult to convince the electorate and the government of the merits of this without being able to show that female leaders are just as capable as their male counterparts at fulfilling their responsibilities as elected officials.

In addition to time constraints, the partnership between Oxfam GB and 50/50 was at times difficult, due for the most part to unrealistic expectations on both sides, particularly regarding the capacity of 50/50 to achieve the very ambitious targets set for the WIL project in such a short space of time. More effort could also have been made to target women from a more diverse range of backgrounds to participate in the WIL training (and hence be encouraged to stand for election, or at least play a more active role in mobilising other women to vote), rather than relying on 50/50's existing contacts.¹⁵

The lessons

There were many other factors, unrelated to the limitations of the WIL project, that contributed to the low numbers of women elected to local councils in the 2004 elections. Chief among these are the attitudinal and structural barriers to women's full participation in the political arena outlined above, and the widespread acceptance of gender inequality – and gender violence – that underpin them. Perhaps the most salient lesson from this project, then, is that striving to increase the numbers of women in positions of leadership will, on its own, have little impact on women's lives unless the discrimination, poverty, and violence that so many women face in Sierra Leone are also challenged.¹⁶

That said, there are lessons that have been learned from the design and implementation of the WIL project and which have been incorporated into the next stage of Oxfam GB and 50/50's work promoting women's leadership in Sierra Leone. Two of the most important lessons are the need to allow sufficient time to plan and implement the project, and to ensure that the project is a genuine joint initiative between the two organisations. Closely linked to the latter is the need to make sure that adequate attention is placed on developing the capacity of 50/50 to be an effective champion of women's rights in Sierra Leone.

Another lesson is the importance of identifying would-be candidates who are genuinely committed to their communities, making sure that they have a realistic understanding of what being a local councillor entails, and then providing ongoing support and training to them once they have been elected. Since the elections in 2004, many councillors – male as well as female – have unfortunately not proved

themselves to be competent representatives. For some women councillors, this is due to difficulties in combining their work as councillors with their other responsibilities, as well as to a lack of skills, confidence, and experience. Many women councillors reported feeling overwhelmed in their new roles, particularly by the need to operate in English. This makes it difficult for them to contribute during council meetings, as does the fact that when they do, they are often over-ruled by male councillors anyway.¹⁷ Targeted training to help women councillors to be more assertive, and to be able to operate effectively in English, would enable women councillors to fulfil their potential as leaders of their communities, as would materials to prepare them for the role itself (such as training materials on the Local Government Act¹⁸). However, while carefully designed and targeted training may be useful in building confidence and leadership skills, it should not be invested in at the expense of reducing the structural constraints to women's full and equal participation in political life.¹⁹

The importance of identifying and mobilising sympathetic male 'champions' of women's right to leadership is a further lesson learned from the WIL project. Without the support of powerful men in their communities, many women felt that they could not stand as candidates.²⁰ Where male leaders were supportive, this not only helped some women to get elected in the first place, but has also allowed them to carry out their duties as councillors in a more effective manner. One positive example comes from Makeni town council. Here, the male council chair recognised that the four female councillors elected in 2004 were less experienced and knowledgeable than other councillors, so has ensured that they attend classes on the national poverty reduction strategy paper, community education for development, urban management systems, and democracy and finances for local government. He also refuses to make council decisions unless all four female councillors are present at council meetings,²¹ which is a clear endorsement of their right to participate in council decision-making and of their ability to do so. However, it is not just a question of 50/50 and Oxfam GB supporting male leaders who have already shown their commitment to women's rights, but also of sensitising men (and women) at all levels of society to the importance of women's participation in politics and governance, the benefits that this can bring for all in terms of promoting inclusive and pro-poor policy, and the fact that women have the *right* to participate, regardless of anything else.²² This would, hopefully, ensure that women intending to stand for election (or wishing to take up other positions of leadership) had the support of their families and communities, rather than resistance from them.

Finally, an important focus for future work needs to be on enabling women from *all* levels of Sierra Leonean society to attain positions of leadership, in recognition of the vast differences between women in terms of socio-economic status, education, and access to power.

Women are not a homogenous group, in Sierra Leone or anywhere else, and it is wrong to assume that a woman elected to office will necessarily represent the interests of other women lower down the social scale. A proactive effort needs to be made to ensure that poorer and otherwise marginalised women are included in any future leadership training and other programme activities,²³ in order that they are then able to contribute to decision-making regarding poverty reduction and development in Sierra Leone. In addition, women already in office need to be encouraged to represent the interests of all their constituents, particularly those at the bottom end of the social spectrum, and to remember that they are accountable to them.

Moving on: promoting a culture of equal representation

The challenges and lessons identified above were taken into careful consideration in the design of the Promoting A Culture of Equal Representation (PACER) project, the next stage of Oxfam GB and 50/50's programme work on women's participation and leadership in Sierra Leone.

The project's first two strategies relate to increasing the numbers of women in Parliament and local councils. Lessons learned from WIL on the need to enable women from all socio-economic levels to attain leadership positions, and to support the capacity of women elected to office to represent their constituencies effectively, will be addressed. Activities include providing tailored training to would-be candidates in public speaking, campaigning, communication, leadership, and fundraising, and encouraging and mobilising people to support the right of women to stand for office. Women elected at the 2007 national and 2008 local elections will be provided with ongoing mentoring support from 50/50 as well as from experienced female and male representatives from the different levels of government in Sierra Leone. Support will include training in gender analysis (including representing the interests of poor women), participatory planning, and participatory monitoring and evaluation.

In addition to helping women representatives to realise their potential as leaders, it is anticipated that the quality of government in Sierra Leone will improve, and that more generally, this will contribute to the country's development and poverty-reduction strategies. As more women become visible as leaders, it is also hoped that they will act as role models, helping to change attitudes about gender roles, and gender discrimination.

The PACER project's third strategy is to bring the government of Sierra Leone to establish formal mechanisms to promote more equal numbers of women at all levels of government, including introducing a quota for female candidates, in co-operation with other civil-society organisations and networks campaigning for electoral reform in

Sierra Leone. It is recognised that for this to occur, other changes must also happen, such as reductions in the official financial requirements for standing for election.

Finally, the project aims to strengthen the capacity of 50/50 to become an effective champion of gender equality in politics and representation through training, human-resource recruitment and development, coaching, fundraising, and strategy development.

Progress so far

The PACER project is ongoing; progress thus far has been encouraging.

50/50 is now firmly established as a national organisation, with offices in Freetown and two other districts. Dedicated programme and administrative staff have been recruited, meaning that the organisation's activities will no longer be dependent on volunteers. Vital information on the existing barriers to women's participation in Sierra Leone has been collected and this is influencing the work of 50/50 and Oxfam GB, and of other organisations working on similar issues. An example of how this information was used is seen in the development of a training manual for use with candidates standing for the 2007 parliamentary elections.

The numbers of women who did stand for Parliament in 2007 was lower than desired (64), in part because the country moved away from the proportional representation system to constituency-based elections. Under the old system, electors voted for a particular party, rather than for an individual candidate. Constituency-based elections require candidates to carry out face-to-face campaigning. This put women candidates at a disadvantage, partly because it is cost-intensive, and women are less likely to have financial sponsorship, and partly because it means coming into direct contact with resistance at the community level to the very idea of a woman member of Parliament. Of course, this again indicates the ongoing need to encourage people to accept women's rights to political participation. Bringing together community leaders, local council officials, and leaders from women's and youth organisations in order to encourage discussion of issues that particularly affect women and young people has helped reduce this resistance, as has targeting male-led organisations and male community leaders as allies, rather than opponents.

Other significant early successes have been that 50/50 and Oxfam GB have managed to ensure that, prior to the 2007 elections, NEC produced new voter education materials that were gender-sensitive. One hundred and sixty-four electoral officials across the country were trained to be more gender-aware in their work during the election period, and to take into account the different needs of women candidates and voters. In addition, 50/50 has successfully formed an alliance with other like-minded organisations to challenge

the national government and political parties to review policies on women, including considering the introduction of quotas for women in government.

Notes

¹ Government of Sierra Leone (2000) 'Status of Women and Children in Sierra Leone: A Household Survey Report', (Multi Indicator Cluster Surveys), Freetown: Government of Sierra Leone.

² 50/50 was founded in 2000 with the aim of increasing women's participation in democratic politics and other decision-making processes. It seeks to achieve this through changing public perceptions of women in politics, encouraging and empowering women to seek and hold public office, and lobbying for equal numbers of men and women in political representation.

³ The WIL project actually consisted of two components, the first of which was to build the capacity of women's organisations, and the second of which was to increase the numbers of women elected. This paper describes the second component.

⁴ M. Harding (2005) 'Evaluation Report of Component Two of the Women In Leadership Project'.

⁵ 50/50 Group (2004) 'Report of the Post-Local Government Elections Assessment Workshop', Freetown: 50/50 Group.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ 50/50 Group and Oxfam (2006) 'Equal Representation (PACER) Project Baseline Survey Report', Freetown: 50/50 Group and Oxfam.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Krio is more widely spoken as a second language throughout Sierra Leone than English, and acts as a 'lingua franca'. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krio_language (last accessed September 2007).

¹⁰ M. Harding *op.cit.*; C. Roseveare (2006) 'Review of Oxfam Sierra Leone Women In Leadership (WIL) Project, Some Learning and Recommendations'; 50/50 Group *op.cit.*

¹¹ 50/50 Group and Oxfam *op.cit.*; Roseveare *op.cit.*

¹² M. Harding *op.cit.*

¹³ M. Harding *op.cit.*; C. Roseveare *op.cit.* To be fair, NEC was convened and asked to organise the elections at very short notice.

¹⁴ C. Roseveare *op.cit.*

¹⁵ M. Harding *op.cit.*; C. Roseveare *op.cit.*

¹⁶ C. Roseveare *op.cit.*

¹⁷ C. Roseveare *op.cit.*; M. Harding *op.cit.*

¹⁸ M. Harding *op.cit.*

¹⁹ C. Roseveare *op.cit.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ M. Harding *op.cit.*

²² 50/50 Group and Oxfam *op.cit.*; 50/50 Group *op.cit.*

²³ M. Harding *op.cit.*

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