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# It's Our Turn To Rule: The 30% Gender Quota Campaign in Sierra Leone:

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## **“It’s Our Turn to Rule”: The 30% Gender Quota Campaign in Sierra Leone**

### **Abstract**

Post-war reconstruction efforts in Sierra Leone, combined with global discourses around issues of democracy and participation, have, to some extent, created a space for political engagement of traditionally marginalized groups, including women. Women’s political engagement has, in recent times, centered on a campaign organized by the Women’s Solidarity Support Group (WSSG), a coalition of women’s groups. The campaign is promoting a 30% constitutionally mandated gender quota system, as the WSSG believes that such a system will be the most effective way to get more female representation in legislatures and narrow the wide numeric gap between the genders that exists in the public sphere. This paper seeks to examine women’s engagement with political processes in Sierra Leone, and pays particular attention to how the WSSG is evoking international and national instruments to advocate for a quota system. The paper argues that this campaign has little chance of succeeding in a Sierra Leone that is constantly grappling with democratic governance and sustainability and whose elite male cadre has resisted women’s full and equal participation in the public sphere in various ways. Moreover, a quick fix such as a quota system is not a panacea for unbalanced representation, nor does it necessarily address the critical issue of unequal power relations.

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Since the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), the level of women’s activism has grown: focusing on legal reform, advocating for changing laws that discriminate against women, and increasing women’s participation in politics and in decision-making bodies.

Many of these campaigns are influenced by emerging international norms or international discourses of equality and representation. These norms and discourses are couched in instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BFA). The campaign for a 30% constitutionally mandated gender quota, now at its peak, is one such advocacy effort that women activist groups in post-war Sierra Leone are undertaking to build an equality agenda.

In many ways, “international and transnational dynamics intervene in national quota debates in at least four ways: International actors impose quotas on national actors, transnational sharing inspires national quota campaigns, international events tip the balance in national quota debates, and international actors block the adoption of national quotas.”<sup>1</sup> However, even though imposing quota systems is often feasible in post-conflict countries, where international actors provide the funds for running the affairs of state and are therefore able to impose certain conditions for aid, this was not the case in Sierra Leone. The campaign for a quota surfaced neither during the signing of the final peace accord, which was an opportunity to demand that the quota be included in the new constitution, nor immediately after the war, probably because the electoral arena was not a critical site of contestation at the time. Rather, the demand for a quota system erupted after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its report in 2004. There are two main reasons for this demand arising at that time: first, the majority of Sierra Leoneans see the report as a legally binding instrument that strengthens and solidifies the

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<sup>1</sup> Krook, Mona Lena. 2006. “Reforming Representation: The Diffusion of Candidate Gender Quotas Worldwide” *Politics & Gender* 2:3:303-327. Pg 211.

consolidation of peace, and second, because after two elections, one during and the other after the war, Sierra Leonean women came to realize that in the absence of any form of affirmative action, women will remain under-represented in decision-making positions in that country. The TRC's recommendations of 2004 became a prime opportunity to launch a gender quota campaign.

The TRC, noting that "Before, during and after the conflict, women have been largely excluded from meaningful decision making in the political arena,"<sup>2</sup> and after being convinced that "simply calling for the opening up of the political space for women is not sufficient," declared that "If Sierra Leone is serious about giving a meaningful voice to women in representative politics, then more serious efforts have to be made to achieve this end."<sup>3</sup> The following imperative recommendations were made:

- that political parties be required to ensure that at least 30% of their candidates for public elections are women. This includes national elections, local government and district council elections. Legislation should be enacted to make this [quota] a legal requirement. The National Electoral Commission should be required to enforce this minimum representation. Such a stipulation will require all political parties to nurture and develop meaningful participation of women;
- that Government and Parliament work towards achieving 50/50 gender parity in representative politics (Parliament, District Council and Local Government) within the next 10 years;
- that the Government work towards achieving a representation of at least 30% women in cabinet and other political posts. Government should also work towards incrementally achieving 50/50 gender parity in cabinet and political posts within the next 10 years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 172–173.

Another imperative recommendation of the TRC is that “‘the Father of the Nation’ [...] as ‘Head of State’, should acknowledge the harm suffered by women and girls during the conflict in Sierra Leone and offer an unequivocal apology to them on behalf of the government and preceding governments in Sierra Leone.” This apology did not happen until March 27, 2010, when the current head of state, Ernest Koroma, acknowledged the injustices women face on a daily basis and made the following statement during a celebration to mark International Women’s Day:

As Head of State I apologise for the wrongs wrought on women, as Commander-in-Chief I ask for forgiveness for the armed forces, as Fountain of Honour and Justice I pledge this country’s commitment to honour, protect, and defend the rights and aspirations of the women of this country. As a Sierra Leonean man, I urge all men of this nation to stand by women to defeat these long-standing injustices suffered by more than half our population ... we will adhere to women’s demands for a 30% quota in Parliament and other significant areas of governance.<sup>5</sup>

This speech is important in a number of ways for the 30% gender quota campaign: it legitimizes the TRC’s recommendations, gives the campaign some political legitimacy, and creates an opening for further advocacy. The WSSG is demanding a constitutionally mandated quota because, in the words of one respondent, “The constitution is the most supreme document in the country, and whatever the constitution states, no body or government has the power to change, except through due process. The constitution will also make provision on how to protect this quota.”

This paper is based on interviews conducted in Sierra Leone in March and April 2010. It aims to answer the following questions:

- How effective are the strategies employed by the WSSG in its campaign?

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<sup>5</sup> Presidential apology speech made in Moyamba on March 27, 2010.

- What are the prevailing discourses around the issue of gender quotas in Sierra Leone?
- Are people aware of and do they support the campaign?
- Can a quota system create the space for changing unequal power relations in Sierra Leone?

Since the campaign is about numerically increasing women's presence in Parliament and other decision-making positions, the discussion in this paper starts with an analysis of women's political participation and representation in Sierra Leone, followed by an analysis of the 30% gender campaign and a conclusion.

### **Women's political participation and representation**

Sierra Leonean women have for a long time been part of the political sphere as traditional rulers, voters, members of political parties, candidates and legislators. The many prominent female traditional rulers include Fatima I, paramount chief of Bullom in the 1600s; Madam Yoko, paramount chief of the Kpaa Mendes from 1898 to 1906; and Madam Ella Koblo Gulama, paramount chief of Kaiyamba chiefdom from 1953 to 2006. These women were either born into ruling families and, as there were no male heirs, succeeded their fathers, or they were married to a member of a ruling family and succeeded their husbands. All these women were rulers in traditional institutions and had access to power before independence. Thus, understanding the current hostilities towards women and the denial of their right to stand for paramount chieftaincy positions requires an analysis of how power operates in the post-colonial nation-state and what this situation means for women's citizenship rights.

Sierra Leonean women, like women globally, continue to face immense barriers to their full participation in the public sphere. Some research has shown that women encounter pervasive obstacles while vying for office, including social bias; narrow gender roles; restrictive religious doctrines; unequal laws and education; discriminatory socio-economic conditions; male-biased party leadership; party political structures, including nomination processes; and the nature of the electoral system.<sup>6</sup> Other works draw attention to the barriers that elected women face in the political arena. These include conflict between work and domestic responsibilities, lack of knowledge of election management structures and processes, absence of gender awareness in the planning and execution of the election, lack of support after being nominated and elected by political parties, lack of requisite skills for dealing with Parliament, silencing by male colleagues, and having to work twice as hard as male colleagues to be seen as effective.<sup>7</sup> Based on responses from interviewees, the most pervasive barriers that Sierra Leonean women face are fear of violence, intimidation by secret societies, lack of funds, stigma, party structures, and lack of political will. In the words of a female candidate in the last elections,

One of the barriers is the fear of being humiliated and fear of violence. Women who want to participate in politics face humiliation. They may request to be nominated by their parties but instead the party will nominate a man, who during the competition may have gone around saying bad things about the female candidate. Aware of this, many women do retreat and many more of them drop out of the race. There is also the issue of

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this see topic, see Wilma Rule. 1994. "Women's Underrepresentation and Electoral Systems." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27: 689–92; and Shireen Hassim. 1999. "The Dual Politics of Representation: Women and Electoral Politics in South Africa." *South African Journal of Political Studies*, 26:2, 201–212.

<sup>7</sup> See Julie Ballington. 1998. "Women's Parliamentary Representation: The Effect of List PR." *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 25:2, 77–93; and Wilma Rule. 1994b. "Parliaments of, by, and for the People: Except for Women?" In *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*, ed. Wilma Rule and Joseph F. Zimmerman. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

money. Most women do not have money and the men that have it will defeat the women who do not have it.

Another had this to say:

I am the first female MP from my constituency. Men had taken an oath at the *Porro* secret society that they will never again put a woman in a position of trust or authority because the then paramount chief was a woman. So, I had to break that taboo. It was a big tussle. It was not easy. People wrote anonymous letters claiming that I was a loose woman. They wrote so many bad things about me. I had no money but I was determined and went house to house talking to men and women about who I was and why they should vote me into Parliament. It was really difficult.

The continuous struggle by Sierra Leonean women to carve an important space in the political sphere and to entrench themselves as legitimate political actors is a reflection of the private/public dichotomy and of socially imposed sexual divisions of labour that support ideologies justifying women's social differentiation from men. These mythical separations of spheres, combined with a lack of political will, have served to keep Sierra Leonean women from explicitly challenging men during elections. As one respondent observes,

Men are always prominent in politics and women always left behind. They see us only as supporters who dance and vote for them or as housewives who have no place in politics. The men that we vote for are not interested in seeing us as rulers or in helping us get elected to Parliament. Women are human beings and can perform equally as men do. We as woman should stop being behind and come to the front. We should stop vying for leadership in women's wings and vie for positions as party chairman, secretary-general, or even the flag bearer of our parties. Having women as party chairmen will be a very good thing because it will open the door for more women in politics.

For a long time after independence in 1961, women became members of Parliament (MPs) mainly through presidential appointments. By 1995, there were only four women in a Parliament of 114. The 1996 elections, conducted while the war still raged in some

parts of the country, marked the transition from military to civilian rule. Arguably, these elections can be described as the first opportunity for women's numerical representation in Parliament. For the first time in the country's electoral history, the elections were conducted using a proportional representation national list (PRNL) electoral system, in which political parties presented rank-listed candidates for each constituency. Electoral systems have been shown to have the most significant impact on the proportion of women elected; multimember proportional representation systems (PRs) have been found to be more empirically favourable to getting more women into legislatures than single-member majority or plurality systems.<sup>8</sup> What a PR system would mean for Sierra Leonean women is that, with the political will, parties would promote the advancement of women by placing them high on the lists and in effect ensure their success in the elections.

Yet as one respondent reflects, "After all our efforts in demanding this elections from the junta, we expected each political party to have many women at the top of their lists. But as you know, this was not the case." Out of a Parliament of 80, only five female parliamentarians emerged from the 1996 elections. The inability of women to make a significant impact in these elections points to the fact that, among other things, political parties, party leaders and electoral systems decide who gets nominated for public office and are the major determinants of the notable presence or absence of women in national

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<sup>8</sup> Wilma Rule. 1987. "Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors, and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies." *Western Political Quarterly* 40:477-98.

legislatures.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, this situation highlights the fact that greater legislative representation of women resides in the political will of major parties—particularly in the willingness of ruling parties to nominate more women and place them in good constituencies or in winnable positions on their list.<sup>10</sup> Apparently, none of the political parties in Sierra Leone was willing to nominate female candidates or have a significant number of women at the top of their lists.

The 2002 elections saw the country's first female presidential candidate and 18 women as representatives in a Parliament of 124 members. The 2004 local government elections saw women clinch 60 of the 473 council seats nationwide. Both elections were conducted using the district block representation system (DBRS), another form of the PR system. Under DBRS, the country was divided into districts and voters were required to cast their ballots for political parties rather than for individuals. Like the list PR system, DBRS could have been of immense benefit to women if there had been the political will on the side of both the ruling party and the opposition to nominate more female candidates. The presence of women high on party lists did not, however, guarantee them a seat in Parliament. A current female MP said,

I spent two years in Parliament, from 2005 to 2007. I was on the party list for the 2002 elections, which was under the PR system. I was bullied; I was the person who should have been given the seat but I was bullied and removed by my party. The seat was given to a male member in my party who was way down the list from me. You should have three things in mind: this is my time; this is not my time; and my time is past. And I knew

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<sup>9</sup> Julie Ballington. 2002. "Political Parties, Gender Equality and Elections in South Africa." In *One Woman, One Vote: The Gender Politics of South African Election*. Eds. Ficks, G; Meintjes, S; & Simons, M. Johannesburg,: Electoral Institute of South Africa.

<sup>10</sup> Mi Yung Yoon. 2004. "Explaining Women's Legislative Representation in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29:3, 447–468.

very well that that was not my time. So I waited patiently and in the end the MP died mid-term and I was asked to complete his term.

In 2007, the country reverted to the first past the post (FPTP) electoral system because, as both major political parties argued, Sierra Leoneans were more accustomed to this system and the district boundaries delimitation process had been successfully completed. In an FPTP electoral system, a candidate must receive over 50% of the popular vote to win an absolute majority. In such a system, there is usually a single nomination per party per constituency; voters are required to indicate a single “X” on a ballot paper. The candidate with the highest number of votes wins. While this approach tends to create a stable parliamentary majority for the government, it is not likely to adequately represent a pluralistic modern society, because women and other minorities are often not at the top of party endorsements. Also, the primary focus of political parties is often directed at maximizing their chances of converting votes into seats. Stereotypes of women as ineffectual leaders and prejudice against women’s presence in the political sphere often contribute to the unwillingness of political parties to support women as candidates in such an electoral system.<sup>11</sup> According to an aspiring candidate in the 2007 elections,

After working tirelessly for my party and after being assured that I would be nominated for my constituency, I was rather surprised that when the list came out, my name was not on it. A few days later our chairman came to my house to explain that they had decided to nominate a male candidate because the opposition had nominated a man who was very popular in the constituency. What they were suggesting is that even though I was popular in my constituency, I had no chance against a man and they were not willing to take a chance on me. That, my sister, was the end of my political aspirations.

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<sup>11</sup>Pippa Norris. 1996. “Legislative Recruitment.” In *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*, ed. L. LeDuc, R. G. Niemi, and P. Norris. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Wilma Rule. 1981. “Why Women Don’t Run: The Critical Factors in Women’s Legislative Recruitment.” *Western Political Quarterly* 34:60–77.

gain, because of a lack of political will, many women were not nominated by their parties. Those who were nominated were put forward for unwinnable seats. As a result, only 16 women won seats in a Parliament of 124, and 86 women won as councillors out of 225 local council seats. Disenchanted with these barriers and the continued political marginalization of women, many saw the need for new strategies or for a fast-track approach to an enhanced participatory role for women in the public domain. Hence, the 30% gender quota campaign.

### **The 30% gender campaign**

Electoral gender quotas may be constitutional or legislative, or may be set as a political party quota. They may apply to the number of women candidates proposed by a party for election, or may take the form of reserved seats in the legislature.<sup>12</sup> Constitutional and legislative quotas are legal mandates through the constitution (e.g., Uganda, Tanzania) or electoral laws (e.g., Chile, Guatemala, Belgium). Voluntary party quotas are based on the goodwill of political leaders. Although these quotas are neither mandated by law nor legally binding, they have helped to increase the number of women in elected office (e.g., South Africa, Argentina, Sweden). The government of Sierra Leone instituted a constitution review process in 2007; the WSSG has capitalized on this process as the vehicle for implementing the TRC's recommendations. According to a legal expert and member of the campaign,

The current constitutional framework can certainly accommodate quotas for women and necessary legislation is permissible under section 74 of the constitution to facilitate this. This can be done by amending the electoral laws and the political parties' laws. It is permissible to make a law saying

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<sup>12</sup> Drude Dahlerup. 2003. "Comparative Studies of Electoral Gender Quotas." Paper presented at IDEA Regional Workshop on *The Implementation of Quota: Latin American Experiences*, Lima, Peru.

that for the reserved seats for chiefs 50% should be women and then introduce quotas for the election of ordinary members. Under section 109 of the constitution, Parliament has residual authority to make laws on any matter arising out of the constitution where there is no provision expressed or, by necessary implication, which deals with a matter that has arisen.<sup>13</sup>

The primary aim of the WSSG is to make the constitutional review process synonymous with the 30% gender quota and, as the country celebrates 50 years of independence in April 2011, tie this process into the idea of a new human rights and jubilee constitution. According to one respondent, “If the principle of the quota or reserved seats can be established and put into the constitution as a constitutional right for women, then the details of it can be worked out later.”<sup>14</sup> Even though some members of the coalition are aware that because of political sensibilities, most quota legislation does not originate at the level of the constitution, and that it is more expedient to amend the electoral and political party legislation to include a mandated quota system,<sup>15</sup> they still advocate for a constitutionally mandated quota and not a voluntary party quota. They are aware that “Politicians will deceive women and pretend to accept a voluntary quota only because they want to lure the women into voting for them. They will never comply.” This skepticism, though valid, may be ignoring the reality that

even though constitutional amendments and new electoral laws providing gender quotas may seem more commanding, it is not at all evident that these methods are more efficient than political party quotas in increasing the number of women in parliament. It all depends on the actual rules and the possible sanctions for non-compliance, as well as on the general opportunities that exist for quotas within the country.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jamesina King. “Quotas Within the Sierra Leonean Context: Legal Framework.” Paper presented at a conference held at the Hotel Kimbima Conference Hall, Aberdeen, Freetown, on 16-17 December 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, Human Rights Commissioner and member of WSSG. March 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Mona Krook. 2006. “Gender Quotas, Norms and Politics.” *Politics & Gender* 2:1:110–118.

<sup>16</sup> Drude Dahlerup. 2003. “Quotas Are Changing the History of Women.” Paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/Electoral Institute of Southern

In December 2009, the WSSG organized a two-day conference at the Kimbima Hotel in Freetown “[t]o explore the levels of female participation in leadership positions in Sierra Leone, and to consolidate a strategy on how to achieve the 30% female participation quota that the 2004 Truth and Reconciliation Report recommends.”<sup>17</sup> Participants at the workshop, among other things, drew up a generic list of why a quota system is needed in Sierra Leone. The list included these arguments:

- women comprise half the population
- women’s experiences must be represented
- men and women have partly different interests
- there is no democracy without the inclusion of women
- use all the talents of society rather than letting half lie idle
- a 30% gender quota will increase the number of women in politics
- more women in politics means certainty that issues affecting women will be addressed at the decision-making table, and
- it is a short- to medium-term method for redressing the under-representation of women in the political sphere.

Those at the workshop agreed to advocate for a constitutionally mandated 30% quota and argued that the request was not out of the ordinary, since some forms of quotas already exist in the current constitution. These include seats, one per district, reserved for paramount chiefs indirectly elected by the Paramount Chiefs Council (Art.74:1991);

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Africa (EISA)/Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum Conference on *The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences*. Pretoria, South Africa.

<sup>17</sup> “Advocacy Intervention for the Legislation of 30% Quota Representation for Women in Political Leadership in Sierra Leone: Challenges, Opportunities and Strategies.” Report of the WSSG conference held at the Hotel Kimbima Conference Hall, Aberdeen, Freetown, on 16-17 December 2009.

geographic or “population quotas” (Art. 38 (6)); and the *Local Government Act* of 2004, which stipulates that ward committees shall consist of five women and five men (50/50). The conference ended with a tentative agreement to consider a mixed quota system, named the “Salone [Sierra Leone] Salad.” It would include the following:

- a. 14 new reserved seats at the district level for women to be elected on a non-partisan basis;
- b. 50% of reserved chiefs seats in Parliament to be allocated to women by rotation among the district’s female chiefs and women in traditional leadership;
- c. 20% of winnable seats to be reserved for women by political parties.<sup>18</sup>

#### *The “Salone Salad”*

A constitutionally mandated mixed quota system proposed by the WSSG is ambitious and desirable, but one respondent has described such a system as a “forlorn hope in a Republic full of men without reflection or imagination who are likely to argue that the Sierra Leone constitution grants equal protection and there is no existing organic law which must be amended to permit a 30% quota system.”<sup>19</sup> Constitutions are usually amended when there is an existing law that is arguably discriminatory. In essence, “the amendment process presumes an existing discriminatory deprivation in the equal protection clause which needs to be altered to create parity.”<sup>20</sup> This situation makes it impossible for the WSSG to ask for an amendment; rather, it must request an alteration of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Email interview with John Musa, Director, Parliamentary Oversight Committee, May 18, 2010

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

the constitution to include the provision of a 30% gender quota, as exists in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. Aware of the male-dominated nature of the Parliament, many suggest that the WSSG should advocate for a statutory act that will guarantee a 30% quota for women in the political selection of candidates, under chapter three of the constitution, which deals with the fundamental rights of women. Others say that the campaign should not rule out voluntary party quotas, because there is a chance that a constitutionally mandated quota might not happen in the short or medium term.

Though the majority of Sierra Leonean women support the quota (based on interviews collected), there are many obstacles to the success of the quota campaign. For one, the women's movement is fragmented, lacks the funds to sustain such a campaign, and lacks the specific expertise required to engage the state and political elites. Even though the coalition is made up of more than 12 women's organizations, only two of these are the driving forces behind the campaign. Moreover, two dynamics—what has been described as “a lack of oneness of mind and purpose,”<sup>21</sup> along with the competition among different organizations for limited funds—in many ways adds to the complexity of the issue. For example, even as the Coalition was working on the 30% quota, simultaneous efforts were being made on the same issue by other organizations, such as the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Sierra

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<sup>21</sup> Nemata Majeks-Walker. “Background Paper on 30% Quota Advocacy in Sierra Leone.” Paper presented at a conference held at the Hotel Kimbima Conference Hall, Aberdeen, Freetown, on 16-17 December 2009.

Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (SLANGO).<sup>22</sup> As one respondent noted,

We have been slow to achieve our goals, or failed completely, because everyone wants to remain in their own small corners and do things their own way. This is because everyone wants to take full credit for any success. Unfortunately, what is happening is that successes have been few and far between and they have not made as much impact as they should, because there has been too little force propelling the issues. It is crucial for all organizations advocating for women's participation in governance to get together to form a strong and united women's movement. That way, duplication and fragmentation of efforts can be avoided and the task of pushing the women's agenda on the issue of the 30% representation of women in governance can be minimized.

The coalition is also handicapped in terms of expertise on the theories and practices of quota systems, in large part due to lack of funds. To date, the coalition has not been able to raise the funds necessary for such a campaign and the individual member organizations do not have the financial capacity to fund one. This situation translates into an inability to pay for expert knowledge or to effectively mobilize the general populace. A lack of expertise has made it difficult for the coalition to clearly articulate its demands and to understand that implementing quotas in a majoritarian system, such as Sierra Leone's, can be quite challenging.

An interesting example of quotas implemented in such a system is the United Republic of Tanzania, where the constitution stipulates that 30% of special seats in the National Assembly are reserved for women. Also, the constitution requires two of the five seats set

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. According to Dr. Majeks-Walker, The Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) had developed a Women's Memorandum for Sierra Leone that aims, among other things, to promote the increased participation of women in governance positions by requesting a 30% quota for representation. The National Democratic Institute (NDI), in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGA) and the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (SLANGO), produced a communiqué expressing the need for a 30% representation of women in governance.

aside for candidates from Zanzibar, and five out of ten seats set aside for presidential appointees, be reserved for women. After the 2005 elections, women made up 30.4% of the National Assembly of Tanzania,<sup>23</sup> making it one of the countries with the highest percentage of women ever represented in a majoritarian electoral system. The reserved seats for women in Tanzania go back to the time when the country was a one-party state: “The initial objective of these special seats for women and other groups was not to redress a historic imbalance, which had excluded them from Parliament, but rather to ‘add’ more voices, to enhance the representation of varied interests under a one-party regime.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike Tanzania, Sierra Leone went through a one-party dictatorship that created no symbolic space in which women and other marginalized groups could participate. Thus, advocating for a reserved seat quota system in a majoritarian system not only is a novel idea, but also raises the following questions: How many seats are to be reserved for women? Are these women going to be selected by their parties, as occurs in Tanzania? Are they going to be elected at the national or district level? Who is eligible to vote for these women? Are they going to be voted for by all voters, as in Uganda or Morocco, or by a special electoral college, as in Rwanda?

Understanding the limitations of a reserved seat is imperative. This expertise is necessary for the success of the campaign. One of the critiques of the reserved seat quota system in Tanzania, where “[t]he reserved seats for women are allocated in direct proportion to the number of seats a political party wins in the parliamentary elections,” is that there is a

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<sup>23</sup> Women in National Parliaments: World Classification. 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Meena. “The Politics of Quotas in Tanzania.” Paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA)/Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum Conference: The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences. Pretoria, South Africa, 11–12 November 2003.

lack of uniform criteria in the nomination of women candidates for the quota positions.

“Each of the victorious political parties sets out its own mechanisms for appointing/electing candidates, some of which are not included in the constitution of the party.”<sup>25</sup> This practice has often led to the accusation that many political parties hand-pick women candidates solely on patronage and not on merit, an approach that “introduces into the political system the potential for corruption, including sexual corruption, thereby undermining the integrity of female candidates, even those who entered via a more transparent system.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition, as has happened in Uganda and Tanzania, reserved seats can create two classes of MPs—constituency and reserved seats MPs—in which constituency MPs tend to enjoy a higher status than their reserved seat colleagues, because the legitimacy of women who do not go through some form of democratic process, such as a primary election, is questioned. Sierra Leonean women may be able to avoid or minimize this type of quota stigma by requesting a reserved seat system in which women go through election campaigns and are elected through the ballot box. However, in order to ensure that other women also have a fair chance of contesting these elections, these reserved seats should be contested at the district and not the constituency level. Thus, as in Uganda, each district will end up with its constituency as well as its district MPs. Unlike the situation in Uganda, where elections are done through an electoral college, the entire district will vote for female candidates. This model, if adopted, will address a number of issues: it will minimize the frequent problems of lack of accountability to a constituency

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

base, lack of incentive to contest a constituency seat, and the potential for all forms of corrupt practices. Moreover, a two-term limit for reserved quota seats will create the space for more women to gain experience for a possible move to contest constituency seats.

Quotas have been seen to limit women's political engagement, in the sense that the seat becomes "a special arrangement to engage women without necessarily threatening the chances of their male competitors in regard to accessing parliament. Also, it is a safe way of involving women without transforming the male dominated culture of parliamentary politics."<sup>27</sup> Political parties have also used quotas to their own advantage and the disadvantage of women, as in Tanzania, where "[r]eserved seats have taken the pressure off political parties to nominate women to stand in constituency seats. This implies that special seats have eroded the competitive 'power' of women in regard to what is constructed as the 'normal' way of entering parliament and other representative organs of the state."<sup>28</sup> The effect of this practice in Tanzania is that "powerful" women are losing constituency seats and resorting to reserved seats. In effect, this is a "message to most women that they had been given special seats, and that they should not dare to intrude into the male domain."<sup>29</sup> Expert knowledge on the part of the WSSG can ensure that advocacy for a reserved seat quota system is accompanied by advocacy for introducing mechanisms to ensure that political parties nominate more women and have them contesting winnable seats. This approach will involve effecting change within political

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

parties and public institutions and establishing institutional practices that allow women to secure strategic gender interests.

The second form in the mixed quota or “Salone salad” system reflects the continued salience of traditional authority in Sierra Leone. This model suggests that “50% of reserved chief seats in Parliament are to be allocated to women by rotation among the district female chiefs and women in traditional leadership.”<sup>30</sup> Currently, the national council of paramount chiefs votes for 12 paramount chiefs, representing the 12 districts in the country, to take up the 12 seats reserved for paramount chiefs in Parliament. Allocating 50% of these reserved paramount chief seats would be a profound move for women in traditional authority. Its implementation would be tricky, because a clause in the *Paramount Chieftaincy Act*, with the condition “if culture and traditions permit,” has been persistently used to bar women from contesting these elections. Currently, all four districts in the Southern Province permit women chiefs, as do two out of three districts in the East, but all five districts in the North refuse women this right. It is clear that some women in the East and all women in the North, who are denied access in these traditional spaces, are unlikely to benefit from this change. On the other hand, such a model could create the desired space, because it could “force the council of Paramount chiefs to choose more women if they wanted to be represented in Parliament, and would probably lead to the removal of the ban on female candidates in the North.”<sup>31</sup> Conceiving such a change should, however, start by expunging discriminatory clauses from the *Paramount Chieftaincy Act*.

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<sup>30</sup> WSSG report, 2010

<sup>31</sup> Drude Dahlerup. “Gender Quotas in Sierra Leone: How to make electoral gender quotas work.” Position paper presented at the Kimbima conference in Freetown on 16-17 December 2009.

The third suggestion in the “Salone salad” is to make it mandatory for political parties to nominate 20% of women in winnable seats. This is a laudable goal, but “those who have the power to make things happen,”<sup>32</sup> predominantly male elites, who also happen to be the majority in Parliament and in political party structures, have yet to manifest the needed will. Past experiences, in the form of all three post-war elections, have shown that the political elites have not been committed to women’s increased representation. As a large number of women who were interviewed noted, “For many men, the idea of a quota system is that women will take power from them. This is why they resist supporting it.” Responses from interviews indicate that the majority of elite males do not support any form of quota. The following response from a leader of one of the main political parties expresses the sentiments of many elite males in Sierra Leone:

I believe that in Sierra Leone, unlike other countries, women have always been given an opportunity to be the best they can be. I certainly do not subscribe to the idea that any law has to be passed or there has to be a constitutional amendment for women to participate in greater numbers. As far as I am concerned, the sky is the limit for women. Thirty percent is very paternalistic; they could definitely be whatever they want. They could have 90%; they could have a 100%, but they have to prove it; they have to go out there and fight with the men for the seats. Since independence there has been no barrier—no barrier, I will repeat—that makes it difficult for women to participate in our national politics. Quotas come in when you want to definitely correct an error that was sanctioned by society, by the government. In this case, the government and preceding governments in Sierra Leone have never at any time made it either a practice or by law that women should not participate in the body politic of Sierra Leone.

This argument fails to acknowledge the experiences of women and the barriers they face in a patriarchal and patronage-entrenched society. Moreover, it shows that even as many

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<sup>32</sup> WSSG report, 2010.

elite men publicly claim to recognize women's capabilities and support women's empowerment, these men resist meaningful institutional transformations that will create the enabling environment for the economic and political empowerment of women. This reaction by some male elites in Sierra Leone should not be difficult to understand. The empowerment of more women will erode the power base of elite men, who have been able to maintain such a position because they are in the majority. In a society such as Sierra Leone, with a strong patronage system, an increase in elite women as political actors may mean an increase in the pool of patrons and the eventual disintegration of the current monopoly held by elite men. The country has already begun to see such a dent at the local government level, where some female councillors are emerging as legitimate political actors and are building a political and constituency base that their male colleagues may have to reckon with in subsequent elections. In light of these realities, elite/political women are now, more than ever, viewed not as partners but as rivals for social political space.

It is amid this sense of competition and the need to keep women in their "proper place" that the country has seen a surge in the use of traditional societies to bar women from the public sphere. Many elite men belong to organizations such as the *Porro*, an all-male secret society where many important decisions are made. Though elite men may not openly protest against women's political participation, many of them nonetheless do so indirectly through the *Porro* and other traditional institutions. These groups are often represented by rural men, who have already been emasculated through a patronage

system. Rural men therefore become the face and symbol of oppression, while the real culprits, elite men, are seen to be advocating for gender parity.

Secret societies may disrupt the election process for female candidates. For example, women are not allowed to see the *Porro* masquerade, and therefore cannot be outdoors when the *Porro* and its members are out in the community. Often, the *porro* masquerade is held on the dates that political women plan campaign rallies or meetings.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, women, political or otherwise, who attempt to transgress traditional “male spaces” are often threatened with forced initiation into the *Porro* society. Initiation for women in such a society does not necessarily translate into access to power or decision-making processes, but is an act of social ostracism. An initiated woman becomes alienated in her community because she will not be fully accepted by men and will be completely shunned by women. A *Porro*-initiated woman thus has no social standing in her community, which makes the threat of initiation the highest form of intimidation for women during elections.

In addition, questions such as “Where are the qualified women?” and “Are women really interested or willing to participate in politics?”—questions posed by male elites in Sierra Leone whenever they are confronted with the absence of women in decision-making positions—manifests another form of men’s resistance to women’s participation in the public sphere. A male parliamentarian stated,

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<sup>33</sup> As recently as December 2009, Madam Simbiwa Sogbo-Torto, a paramount chieftaincy candidate for Niminyama Chiefdom in Kono District, was barred from contesting the elections because it was claimed that she was not a member of the *Porro* society. She went to the high court in Freetown to challenge the decision. When she wanted to return to her chiefdom, she was refused entry because they brought out the *Porro* masquerade.

I am not saying that men and women have had equal opportunities; no, they haven't. My view is that women have every right to be represented. What I don't share is what we call affirmative action or having a 30% quota. Only the elites seem to be talking too much about this; the market women and farmers have not been reached, in my view. And you say okay, every political party should have 30% of its candidates as women. That, to me, will make competition a little stilted, because if we the electorate vote on the basis of equality, if you talk about 50-50, women walking side by side with men in all areas of development and all its opportunities, then I think there should be no quota systems. Education seems to be the best option for women to catch up with men. And I also believe that they can start at the lower levels of representation; I mean, chieftdom councils, district councils and party representatives at the lower level. These offices can become a training ground for women before they come to Parliament. That would be, for me, a more positive way of doing it, rather than legislating or imposing affirmative action. That's my view. I'm sure over time there would be more women eligible for competition than there are men. I think all of this will square up over time.

Such an analysis manifests the ways in which discourses around democratic principles are used to marginalize women. The MP fails to recognize that electoral democracy does not necessarily translate into an equal distribution of power, or even access to power, for some groups of people, or that democracy is also based on gender equality and an egalitarian distribution of power between men and women. Like the Constitution Review Commission, the dismissal of the request for a quota system as elitist and the focus on the low educational level of women in Sierra Leone continues the marginalization of Sierra Leonean women by elite men. These men are threatened not only by the boldness and surge of elite women, but also by the increased activism of so-called grassroots women.

Another issue raised by some respondents was that the women leading the gender quota campaign lack agency and are part of a ploy by a Western imperialist agenda to disrupt African traditional institutions. According to a four-term member of Parliament,

This whole issue of women's rights, 30% representation in Parliament, came from ideology or feminists in the United States, Britain and Western Europe, to be specific. I also want to know if their own legislations, like Congress, the British Parliament, I would like to know what percentages are attributed to their women. I want to believe that their representations are not based on quota systems or gender quota systems. So, why are they imposing it on us; are their women better than our women, that they have to create or buy opportunities for them? Our women in Sierra Leone and Africa in general are achievers. They don't need handouts. I'm not in Parliament because I am a man; I'm in Parliament because I'm competent. As far as I am concerned, I believe that all of us should be given equal opportunities. I do not believe in quota set aside. When you do that, then you are not looking for value.

The arguments for competitive equality and claims of Eurocentric bias always surface when African women make certain demands on the state and on male colleagues. Such arguments, often made by elite males, are meant to discredit women's activists and delegitimize their causes. When the public domain becomes a site of contestation, elite males are often quick to evoke democratic tenets, but they ignore the fact that democracy comes with expanded political spaces that should enable women to make certain demands on the state.

### **Conclusion**

Responses from interviews conducted in both Freetown and the provinces reveal that though many of those leading the 30% gender quota campaign are unsure of the specific quota system they are advocating for, and do not fully understand the intricacies of quota systems, the majority of the women I interviewed indicated a strong support for a quota system or for the introduction of mechanisms that would increase the number of women in elected and selected decision-making positions in the country. Many of them are convinced that women's participation in all decision-making processes will change the

position of women and enhance the political, social, cultural and economic development of the country.

If a referendum on the adoption of a gender quota were conducted today, based on the dedication and determination of the WSSG and the support of most Sierra Leonean women, it would, without a doubt, be adopted by an overwhelming majority. The question, however, is whether the elite class has the will to put the issue to the test. Responses from interviews conducted shed light on the fact that Sierra Leonean women continue to be denied access to participation in decision-making structures because of a lack of will by the political elite. The institutions set up to aid democratic governance since the civil war are neither gender neutral nor devoid of culturally entrenched beliefs about the role of women in the public sphere. For those leading the campaign, creating the space for women's participation in institutions that are dominated by an elite class—whose mantra is that women should be patient because change will come in due time—might include the following activities: tapping into the overwhelming support from women, both urban and rural; narrowing the gap between elite and grassroots women; forming a legitimate women's movement; and extending the campaign to include other civil society groups, such as human rights groups. The involvement of other civil society groups will bring some legitimacy to the demand and show that gender imbalance is a societal problem that should be rectified by all, and not solely by women.

The 30% gender quota campaign has unwittingly focused on a female rather than a feminist presence and on centring women's representation in Parliament rather than in all

decision-making positions. The struggle for gender parity in politics and public life cannot and should not end with the implementation of a quota, because numerically increasing women's participation is only the beginning. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for women's full, equal and informed participation in political, social and economic decision-making processes. Attaining a critical mass should translate into raising the profile of women's needs and interests in policy making. This result can be achieved only through empowering female legislators and women in other decision-making positions with the tools to understand how these institutions work, how and why it is important to read through a gender lens, and how they can come to see themselves as legitimate political actors. This work can be done through building a feminist consciousness but without necessarily expecting people to identify themselves as feminists in a society in which even the most vocal of gender activists refuses to do so. Moreover, making women understand the disjuncture between constitutionally guaranteed formal gender equality and the realities of women's lived experiences requires some element of feminist analysis that does not seem present in the campaign. If women's numeric presence is to make a dent in the pervasive and patriarchal cultures and practices that prevail in Sierra Leone, then a well-thought-out feminist or women's rights agenda is needed. This process might involve building an expertise that can persistently and methodically organize, mobilize and conscientize Sierra Leonean women to understand the complexities of gender equality and to grow into awareness of their right to participate in decisions that affect them. The more aware women are, the more they will demand accountability and responsiveness, challenge institutional and other barriers

that inhibit their participation, and make it possible overcome such barriers to participate fully in all spheres of life in Sierra Leone.