



Advancing Gender Equality in Sierra Leone: A Case Study

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With grateful thanks for the input and gracious assistance of the Hon. Manty Tarawalli

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Despite seemingly insurmountable odds, on November 15, 2022, the Parliament of Sierra Leone passed the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (GEWE). Passage of this historic legislation was the culmination of two years of indefatigable effort and astute political strategy by the Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs, Manty Tarawalli.

Background

Even though women in Sierra Leone are 52% of the population, they face many discriminatory practices related to customary law in areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and family relations, highlighting unequal rights, roles, and socio-economic outcomes². When President Julius Maada Bio was elected in 2018, only 11% of parliamentary seats were held by women. Moreover, Sierra Leonean women were disproportionately less likely to access post-secondary education and to own assets such as radios, mobile phones, and bank accounts, and the country was ranked 114th out of 149 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index³.

The historical context of Sierra Leone, tainted by colonialism and further exacerbated by the brutal civil war of 1991-2002², contributed to the entrenched gender inequalities in the country. Emerging from the ashes of the 11-year civil war that wreaked havoc on every facet of the nation's well-being, Sierra Leone confronted the colossal task of rebuilding its social, economic, and physical infrastructure.

Despite various non-government initiatives and efforts by the few women in Parliament, women in Sierra Leone still grappled with deeply entrenched historical challenges, including limited access to education and economic opportunities, as well as gender-based violence^{4,5}. To tackle issues adversely affecting women and children, President Bio, in 2019, established the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs. At its head, he nominated Manty Tarawalli, whose well known commitment to sustainable and gender-equitable development became priorities.

As head of the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, Manty Tarawalli's efforts to help rebuild gender equity in the nation were multi-dimensional, encompassing the collaboration of various governmental sectors and civil society. This case study examines the trajectory of her leadership, beginning with the inception and extending to the coordination of national and regional entities culminating in the successful enactment of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act.

The Minister's Goal

Upon assuming office in 2020, Manty set her ministry's goal to improve gender equality in Sierra Leone by increasing women's representation in the public and private sectors to 30%. She believed that by doing so, women would be empowered to live their rights and socio-economically support themselves, their families, and the country.

Manty's goal to increase women's representation in both the public and private sectors to 30% was rooted in President Bio's 2018 election manifesto. During the election campaign this

manifesto garnered widespread support, signifying a desire for a positive transformation in the status of women within the country.

A Bill to be Introduced: A Controversial Endeavor

Prior to Manty's appointment as Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs, various initiatives focused on women's empowerment were already underway in Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, the perception of women's empowerment initiatives was unfavorable to many due to misconceptions held by both men and women that gender equality efforts aimed for a strict 50/50 arrangement of power, potentially resulting in women assuming total control.

Historically, Sierra Leone had a prevailing male dominance in all key positions and every facet of its society. When President Bio was elected, the percentage of women Members of Parliament stood at a mere 11%. Aspiring to promote women's participation in the public and private sectors to 30%, especially in Parliament, was complicated by the limited overall seats available. This initiative meant reshaping the composition of Parliament, as well as other sectors. Men who predominantly held executive, governmental, and leadership positions were unwilling to relinquish their place at the table in order to reserve 30% for women, making the prospect of a GEWE Act controversial.

A Leader's Support as the First Step: The President of the Republic

Because of the far-reaching implications of the initiative under discussion, the Minister recognized that her goal could only be realized through legislation. The Minister also recognized that this goal required full support from the President of the Republic. She said:

"I needed to hear 'I support your goal' from the President. That is all I needed. I knew the road would not be easy, but I knew I could make it with support from the first man in the country."

Seeking the President's support, Manty met with him to deliberate on her objective, underscoring its alignment with the President's manifesto. Unequivocally, the President endorsed the Minister's goal and strategy.

From the President's perspective: *"Structural and cultural limitations had hindered women's involvement in various areas in Sierra Leone, including education and development."* His perspectives on the issue were shaped by the formative role in his life of his mother and sister. Therefore, during his presidency, he was committed to dismantling ingrained societal biases and demonstrating unequivocally that women possess equal abilities and may even surpass men in certain aspects. In President Bio's words:

"I firmly believe that involving women in decision-making brings diverse perspectives. Their participation leads to well-rounded decisions, which is crucial at the national level. Now, I trusted the Minister to lead us toward that."

"After receiving the 'I support this goal' from the President," Minister Manty said, "my ministry decided to put a GEWE Bill together."

Strategic Key Collaborators

Alongside the backing of the President, Manty strategically identified and enlisted vital collaborators to champion the enactment of the GEWE. She extended her outreach to engage prominent female politicians, lawmakers, gender activists, and the UN Women, among others. In Sierra Leone's context, these key collaborators wielded significant influence that extended across the country. They were pivotal in providing counsel, outreach, and financial support for the logistics involved in lobbying and motivating public support for the proposed GEWE Bill.

Steps to Making a Law in Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, when a Bill originates from the executive branch of the government, it is referred to as a government Bill. This Bill must then be presented in Parliament by the Minister who holds jurisdiction over the subject matter. The following are the steps of how a Bill becomes a Law in Sierra Leone:

Table 1: How a Bill Becomes a Law in Sierra Leone⁶

Initiation of a Bill to be introduced from the executive arm of government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encapsulate the policy of the government • Introduce the policy to the Cabinet for deliberation
The cabinet approves the government Bill after deliberation, and it goes to Parliament for the legislative stages	
Stage 1: Notice regarding the Bill being introduced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bill is published in at least two issues of the gazette 9 days before first reading • Minister or Members of Parliament (MPs) sends a memo explaining the objects and reasons for the Bill • Parliament holds pre-legislative consultation with the Minister or MP in charge of the Bill
Stage 2: Introduction and first reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Minister or MP moves the motion for the first reading • The Clerk reads short title of the Bill to Parliament
Stage 3: Second reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clerk reads long title of the Bill to Parliament • MPs debate the merits and principles of Bill
Stage 4: Committee stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed discussion of Bill • Sittings may include public hearings • Relevant amendments are made • Bill is reported to the Committee of the Whole House
Stage 5: Third reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parliament amends errors and review Bill • Bill is read for the third time, including any amendments • Bill passed to law in parliament
Stage 6: President's assent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The president of Sierra Leone signs the Bill
Stage 7: Publication in gazette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bill becomes law on the day it is published in the government Gazette

A Government Bill Policy: No Backing from Your Own Political Party

"So, how do we meticulously construct the Bill?" Manty said, "The process involved a collaborative effort, bringing various partners together." Manty diligently engaged legal practitioners and lawyers. Through comprehensive meetings and thorough studies, they endeavored to gain insights from countries that had already embarked on similar initiatives,

mainly learning from their strategies for garnering significant female participation in their Parliament. According to Neneh Lebbie, the President of the Parliamentary Female Caucus:

"This investigative approach proved highly valuable, leading to uncovering methods that were instrumental in increasing the involvement of women in politics."

These learnings helped further inform discussions about the proposed Bill. However, when the draft Bill was presented to the Cabinet for initial deliberation, Cabinet Ministers, for the first time, voiced their concerns about the transformative implications of the proposed legislation. Manty said:

"The preceding work happened behind the scenes within the ministry, while here is where I was showing my head. Now, having assumed my role in the Cabinet as a new Minister, I presented the proposal with enthusiasm. However, to my dismay, it faced a severe setback. It was met with opposition, leading to its thorough dissection and eventual rejection."

In a disheartening testimony to resistance to the legislation, the Cabinet deemed reserving a 30% quota for women unattainable. At this first deliberation, the resounding message from Cabinet Ministers was that a transformative approach for women should not merely involve slotting them into existing positions; this would mean removing some men from their seats. Instead, the focus should be cultivating opportunities that defy traditional gender roles. Manty said:

"No man was willing to leave and give their seat to a woman. The Cabinet chopped this Bill to death. This was my own Party, and they chopped it out. They said absolutely no to 30%. I was down, and I took two weeks to recover. Then I got up again. And then, we started with a different approach. Now, I went to speak to each Cabinet Minister independently."

Communicating the Vision to Cabinet Members: A One-on-One Approach

Following initial rejection by the Cabinet, Manty recognized the necessity for a fresh approach to securing Ministers' support for the Bill. With this objective in mind, she embarked on individualized discussions, engaging in one-on-one conversations with each Cabinet Minister. She meticulously presented her case to every Minister, articulating compelling arguments tailored to their perspectives and concerns. In Manty's words, she told every Cabinet member that:

"As Cabinet members, our goal is clear—we aspire to elevate our nation to a middle-income country. In this pursuit, the integration of women in leadership positions is indispensable. It is imperative to recognize and harness women's diverse skill sets. Women have unique perspectives and contributions that are distinct from traditional male leadership. This assertion about women in leadership positions is substantiated by data that indicate that such an approach is beneficial and integral to our country's growth trajectory. Nations that have successfully transitioned to middle-income status have actively integrated women into leadership roles."

Subsequently, the proposed legislation underwent a second presentation in the Cabinet. Now, there was a palpable sense of optimism regarding the potential for the policy to earn the Cabinet's endorsement. As the second deliberations commenced, the first Minister to speak expressed his support for the proposed legislation and set the stage for a productive discourse. Manty elaborated:

"An eminent figure, formerly Minister of Information and now serving as the Minister of Labor, was first to respond and comment on the Bill. I recall engaging in a thoughtful exchange when we convened in his office. Now, he was in full support of the Bill. There, he told Cabinet members that Minister Manty presented comprehensive information and data that unveiled a compelling growth narrative if we were to bring more women into leadership positions. Witnessing what she presented, I experienced a profound shift in perspective. It was an introspective moment, and while I recognize that the decision might personally impact me, the overarching impact of a GEWE Act would propel our nation forward. I support this Bill. "

This was a pivotal moment, and in response to this powerful first statement, Manty said: *"His Excellency (the President) smiled."*

Consequently, more Ministers voiced support for the proposed legislation, and a government Bill came out of the Cabinet. To tell the population what had happened on that day, Minister Manty explains:

"It was phenomenal. I do not usually go to social media, but I went there and informed the population of what had happened that day. A wave of endorsement of the Bill surged across social media platforms. The resonance was palpable as individuals from all walks of life enthusiastically rallied around this triumphant moment."

From the Cabinet to the Parliament: Parliamentarians Decide

The next step involved presenting the government Bill to Parliamentarians. In Sierra Leone, the Parliament operates independently from other decision-making bodies. With the submission complete, the Bill's fate lay in the hands of the Parliament. Considering that the Minister's political Party did not hold the majority in the Assembly, support from some opposition members would be needed. At the outset, opponents in Parliament were categorized as follows:

- A surprising fraction of women, although a minority, embarked on opposing the initiative. Their stance pivoted on the notion that making the path easier for other women would undermine the essence of strength and perseverance that define female leadership. Their perspective advocated that if a woman aspires to lead, she should earnestly strive and demonstrate her merit. No one should give her a seat at the table.
- With a pointed reminder of their historical commitment to this cause, some women in Parliament were opposed to Manty's leadership, especially as a new Minister. They asserted that their contributions over the years rendered them the rightful torchbearers of this movement.

- Many men in Parliament and members of opposing political Parties were unwilling to give up their seats for women nor let their political opponents win.
- Others said they could not oppose their esteemed political elders, even when personal convictions diverged.

Using Human Rights Arguments: Partners Needed Everywhere

At the beginning stages of the legislative process in Parliament, Minister Manty and her key collaborators advocated for the Bill by highlighting human rights arguments. These arguments underscored the fundamental principle that every woman has the inherent right to determine her identity and aspirations and that gender equality and women's empowerment would positively impact Sierra Leone society.

However, using human rights arguments, the Bill encountered resistance. Counterarguments against the human rights notion were rooted in skepticism, suggesting Minister Manty was injecting personal viewpoints into her political objectives. A factor in these negative perspectives was subjective perceptions such as the Minister's foreign education and accent, portraying them as evidence of the foreign influence she was bringing to her ministerial ambitions. They posited that she was trying to impose Western ideals onto Sierra Leone's cultural fabric, implying a potential disruption to their traditional norms. For many parliamentarians, it was a no for the GEWE Bill.

At this stage, continuing to use human rights arguments meant failure in Parliament. Consequently, Manty began considering the multifaceted dynamics at play and the differing viewpoints in the private and public sectors regarding women's empowerment. Switching tactics, the Minister began advocating for her goals using economic instead of human rights arguments.

Using Economic Arguments: Partners Needed Everywhere

Manty and her key collaborators leveraged economic arguments to garner more support, highlighting that the GEWE, if enacted, would elevate Sierra Leone into the ranks of a middle-income country. They argued that this transformative Bill would echo within every household in Sierra Leone by increasing income, potentially improving every aspect of life in the country. Using economic arguments, the conversation began to change, and more were willing to engage in favorable conversations about the Bill.

According to the Vice President, Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh, the economic discourse struck a chord with many. They envisioned households flourishing as women contributed more substantially to their communities' development. The economic message was a compelling call to action that appealed to everyone across genders. In the Vice President's words:

"Empowerment is not representation; it is economic uplifting. People understood they could reduce their dependence and vulnerability if more women were empowered."

From Vice President Mohamed's standpoint, the economic discourse developed a movement for women and girls in the country, mainly supported by President Bio's Manifesto and commitment to women's equality. Vice President Mohamed said:

"The President wanted to bring gender in all aspects of the country, and that is what we began to work on. We were set to create conditions for women to suffer less."

While parliamentarians were still deliberating the Bill, President Bio's administration increased the budget for girls' education to 22%, STEM education became free for every girl in the country, energy access was brought to many women's markets, an ambulance to primarily serve pregnant women was made available in every district, and budget allocation to decrease maternal mortality in the country increased from 6% to 11%. From President Bio's perspective, working on resolving issues faced by women, as communicated in his manifesto, even without the GEWE Act, was a way to show the populace what more could be possible if the GEWE was enacted. In Vice President Mohamed's words:

"We created the noise. Politics must be noise. Strategically understand public opinion and reflect the needs of the people."

From the opposition standpoint, Emerson Lamina, an opposition leader in the Parliament of Sierra Leone, elaborated that:

"This approach underscored the need for collective action to support national goals. Two key values that emerged from the President's initiatives were empathy and equality. His efforts included reducing school fees for girls, addressing sexual violence, and declaring a state of emergency to combat rape. These actions resonated with my 23-year journey advocating for women's rights."

Emerson further explained that to support the President's vision, he transitioned from an opposition position to a supporting one. According to him, dialogue, consensus-building, negotiation, and partnership were crucial strategies employed by Minister Manty and proponents of the Bill. They recognized the need for representation from various Parties and beliefs, facilitating a more inclusive approach to supporting women.

Parliamentarians Still Not Supporting the GEWE Bill: What Next?

Despite positive momentum, the Bill hit another roadblock when parliamentarians raised concerns that the GEWE Bill was discriminatory. They argued, mandating a 30% quota for women raised concerns about the Bill's constitutionality because the legal framework in Sierra Leone strongly opposes any form of discriminatory legislation. Consequently, according to them, the call for men to abstain from contesting all available seats by reserving 30% to women, especially within the Parliament, was discrimination.

However, according to the Parliament's Speaker Abass Bundu:

“Not every aspect of the Bill was considered discriminatory. The argument arose whether preferential treatment should be given to either sex. This issue prompted discussion on the practicality and fairness of such provisions, and we realized that specific conditions were needed to address concerns about fairness.”

In this context, the insights of the Parliament's Speaker emerged as pivotal. His counsel to the proponents of the Bill consisted of the following key points:

1. Conduct a comprehensive analysis of Sierra Leone's laws to identify potential ambiguities that could be leveraged.
2. Engage directly with the people who elect the parliamentarians, bypassing the need for solely parliamentary deliberation.
3. Undertake a thorough rewording and revision of the Bill to ensure alignment with the principles of fairness and equality.

In response to the Speaker's advice, the Bill underwent further revisions. The process also involved more comprehensive public consultation to gather perspectives and address concerns. This process intensified over 13 months, during which the Bill was being revised and deliberated in Parliament.

Comprehensive Analysis of Sierra Leone's Laws: Ambiguities to Leverage

While conducting an extensive review of Sierra Leone Constitution, proponents of the Bill discovered a pivotal clause within the Constitution of Sierra Leone (Amendment) Act of 2001. This clause made provision for a District Block System, a form of Proportional Representation Elections System, which served as the foundation for several key provisions outlined as follows:

(1) A candidate shall be nominated in writing by 3 voters of the electoral area for which he intends to contest an election and shall not be in more than one electoral area

(2) For every 3 candidates nominated under subsection (1), one of them shall be female

(7) On the delivery of the nomination paper together with prescribed nomination fee, the returning Officer for the electoral area shall for with acknowledge receipt of the nomination paper and nomination fee:

Provided that the returning officer shall reject the Nomination of Candidate made in contraction of subsection (2)

Consequently, the Bill shifted from asking for a strict 30% quota for females to proportional representation. The change in terminology effectively addressed the concerns about discrimination that some parliamentarians had. The revised Bill stated that for every two male candidates nominated in any given district, the third nominee should be female. Similarly, in any public or private sector, the third appointee should be female for every two males appointed.

This shift marked a departure from an inflexible quota system to a more proportional representation approach. Nonetheless, while employing the proportional approach, the Bill, if enacted, would still ensure at least 30% female representation across all sectors.

Simultaneous with the legislative process, comprehensive public consultation was underway to incorporate diverse viewpoints, and address concerns regarding the Bill.

Consulting with the Population: A Bill by Them and for Them

While advocating for the enactment of the GEWE Bill, Minister Manty and her key collaborators used various platforms, including print, social media, radio, and television, to disseminate positive messages regarding the proposed Bill. Their approach involved sharing educative content through impactful infographics via social media, as well as information snippets through the radio. Neneh Lebbie, the President of the Parliamentary Female Caucus, said:

"Radio, in particular, emerged as an invaluable tool due to its widespread popularity among villagers, who attentively tuned in and frequently discussed broadcast contents with peers."

In this way, proponents of the Bill initiated a national dialogue that rippled through society. Manty went to every district in Sierra Leone to meet with the population. She also went to remote villages and communities and visited schools throughout the country to comprehensively address people's issues and improve the proposed Bill based on their input. Where needed, she relied on village leaders to convey her message to their peers.

Everywhere Manty went, she first introduced herself as a wife to address issues regarding her foreign influence and reassure those arguing that women would no longer want to assume their roles as wives and mothers if empowered. She told everyone:

"A man is a household's sole breadwinner, responsible for feeding ten mouths. However, if his wife starts working in income-generating activities, their household will have more money to subsist."

To appease husbands' fears, she told their wives:

"Do not misappropriate my advocacy to justify disrespecting your partner."

Manty underscored the Bill's importance to households and Sierra Leone's economic growth everywhere she went. This Bill, she explained: *"meant a thriving home and a thriving nation."*

Cross-Collaboration

According to UN Women Country Director, Setcheme Mongbo, collaboration between UN Women and Manty's ministry aimed at mainstreaming the GEWE Bill within ministries was crucial. The role of UN Women extended beyond public visibility and included crucial behind-the-scenes interactions such as connecting Minister Manty with opportunities for grants for

logistical support or meeting with stakeholders who had questions about indicators around gender equality or women's status in society. In Setcheme Mongbo, the UN Women Country Director, words:

"This required patience, negotiation, and dialogue to facilitate collective understanding and ensure all stakeholders aligned with the goal."

Another collaborator, Nicky Spencer-Coker, a radio host, practicing barrister, and solicitor of the High Court of Sierra Leone, explained that this Bill presented a window for many gender equality advocates to advance the position of women and girls in Sierra Leone. In her words:

"This Bill served as a blueprint for advancing girls' and women's development and promoting a feminist perspective in all aspects of life. Women organizations, women rights activists, and feminists had worked tirelessly for these advancements. However, it required significant political will and leadership to unify these efforts into a coherent vision for the country."

With Minister Manty leading the movement, Nicky and other collaborators such as Neneh Lebbie, the President of the Parliamentary Female Caucus, joined in by providing legal counsel and other logistical and technical support throughout the legislative process.

Gradually, collaboration between the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, other Ministries, prominent female politicians, lawmakers, gender activists, the UN Women, and others brought the country together to improve Sierra Leonean women's lives. Manty and her collaborators met with the opposition when needed, answered questions from the population, and worked to bridge communication gaps between opponents and proponents of the Bill, garnering more support for the enactment of the GEWE Bill.

The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act of 2022

By engaging every corner of the country, navigating complex negotiations, and cultivating alliances, the GEWE Bill, step by step, garnered greater support among citizens and parliamentarians. In Manty's words: *"It was an arduous path that embodied challenges and resilience."*

Despite initial resistance, the GEWE Bill was ultimately enacted in parliament with 100% support from parliamentarians. After President Bio had signed, it was published in the Government Gazette on December 30, 2022 and finally became law.

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