

Mohamed Sesay

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## Sierra Leone: From a war-torn country to a pathfinder for equitable and inclusive societies

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*Why is Sierra Leone, a low-income economy emerging from armed conflict and authoritarian rule less than two decades ago, assuming such a global leadership role? Mohamed Sesay, co-investigator with the Gender, Justice and Security Hub and Assistant Professor at the University of York looks at the nexus between gender, justice and development since the end of Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war to argue that the country offers unique insights into the complexity of intractable challenges which persist beyond the implementation of legal-technocratic reform programmes in postwar societies.*

On 21<sup>st</sup> September 2017, Sierra Leone, together with Brazil and Switzerland, convened a side meeting during the 72<sup>nd</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly which became the brainchild of the [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies](#). Sierra Leone also developed a country-specific investment framework with trackable and measurable targets, culminating in two Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) reviews in [July 2016](#) and [2019](#) under the auspices of the UN High-level Political Forum. Yet, while Sierra Leone assumes a global leadership role and is often cited as a model of successful postwar recovery, it also exemplifies how unresolved political and development dilemmas can complicate efforts to achieve gender justice on the ground, a significant lesson for SDG promoters.

### **Protecting the rights of women**

All post-war national development plans in Sierra Leone – from the [National Recovery Strategy \(2002/3\)](#), [Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper \(2005\)](#), [Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper I \(2005-07\)](#), the [Agenda for Change \(2008-12\)](#), to the [Agenda for Prosperity \(2013-18\)](#) – recognised the need for positive steps to ensure full participation of women in all political, social and economic processes. Moreover, various laws to protect the rights of women have been enacted, such as the [Sexual Offences Act \(2012\)](#) which criminalises all sexual activity without consent and three gender justice laws on [domestic violence \(2007\)](#), [devolution of estates \(2007\)](#), and [customary marriages and divorces \(2009\)](#). At the institutional level, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) is responsible for mainstreaming women's issues in governance, while the Ministry of Justice has introduced three integrated Justice Sector Reform Strategy and Investment Plans (2008 – 2018) which include the protection of women's rights. Earlier, transitional justice mechanisms included the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which dedicated a whole [chapter](#) of its report to women and armed conflict, and the [Special](#)

[Court for Sierra Leone which became the first international tribunal to prosecute “forced marriage” as a crime against humanity.](#)

Despite these commendable progressive steps to deal with what the TRC report describes as entrenched discriminatory practices against women, there are significant gender gaps to overcome according to various reports, including the recent [UNDP Gender Inequality Index \(2017\)](#), the [Global Gender Gap report \(2018\)](#), and [Statistics Sierra Leone report \(2013\)](#). It is against this backdrop that Sierra Leone has sought to strongly align its development strategy with the SDGs, learning from its experiences with adaptation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Following the development of a national integrated framework designed to synchronise the SDGs with the 2016 national budget, Agenda for Prosperity, and the [National Ebola Recovery Strategy \(2015-17\)](#), Sierra Leone underwent a voluntary SDG review convened by the UN High-level Political Forum in July 2016 and 2019. More significantly, Sierra Leone is prioritising SDG 16, which focuses on the creation of a peaceful and just society as a catalytic goal for achieving the entire 2030 SDG agenda. It is a pioneering member of the [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies](#), a global platform working on three transformative strategies (violence prevention, institutional renewal, and increasing inclusivity) and nine areas of catalytic actions to implement SDG 16 and related goals.

### **Advancing gender equity**

At the core of these efforts is an ambitious agenda to advance gender equity and women’s empowerment, an agenda which has apparently received a boost by the government of Rtd, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, elected in May 2018. In his [first State Opening of Parliament](#), President Bio promised to transform the Gender Directorate at the MSWGCA into a National Commission for Gender Affairs, promote female access to

land and other strategic resources, provide training and educational opportunities for women, ensure more women in leadership positions, reduce the number of gender-based violence, and establish a national Women's Development Fund.

These commitments were reiterated in his [second address of May 2019](#). Consistent with these pronouncements, Cluster 5 of the country's [Medium-term National Development Plan \(2019-2023\)](#) is Empowering Women, Children, and Persons with Disability. The preceding [Cluster 4](#), which is Governance and Accountability for Results, also aims, amongst other things, to "overhaul the judiciary and justice delivery system with a view to restoring public confidence in its independence and impartiality and making justice accessible to all."

### **Building the political will for change**

Although one might be tempted to anticipate similar pre-SDG results, there should be caution around such optimism and if policymakers and their international partners are willing to learn from and deal with three stubborn problems. Firstly, Sierra Leone's postwar gender reforms have illustrated how central and local actors, who personally benefit from pre-existing patriarchal structures, are likely to receive legal and policy changes perceived as a threat to their authority and welfare. It is therefore not surprising that the [Medium-term Development Plan](#) notes that "for national laws and policies to be translated into positive outcomes, they must be implemented and enforced, which requires concerted political will as well as financing." The question is how to build effective institutions and incentivise power holders to embrace transformative change that prioritises the interests and aspirations of women.

Secondly, Sierra Leone does not need to be told about the disconnect between legal and policy frameworks and everyday realities on the ground. As the gender statistics which followed the first set of reform

efforts indicate, attitudinal change does not take place at the same pace as legislative and policy reforms—in fact, it often lags considerably. What this means is that transformation requires sustained institutional and socio-political efforts beyond quick techno-legal fixes.

The good news for Sierra Leone is that the gender justice debate is not ideologically polarising and, even though commitments to female empowerment vary, no ruling party is fundamentally opposed to the idea and elite resistance is largely based on political calculations. But since everyday justice needs cannot wait until institutions are strengthened, we must balance legislative and policy reforms with creative initiatives such as [Timap for Justice](#) to respond to the concrete and practical issues confronting women and other groups in the meantime.



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Lastly, the Sierra Leone experience illustrates that good things do not necessarily and / or straightforwardly converge. Specifically, while the goals of development and justice may seem mutually complementary in conceptual terms, there are significant tensions between them at the policy and operational levels of reform. For example, as a low-income country, a bold agenda to promote gender equality requires massive social programmes which can only be paid for by donor aid and revenues generated from exports. Dependency on donor assistance, even where they are well-meaning, tend to undermine local ownership particularly if donors are ideologically committed to global frameworks. Neoliberal economics, the dominant model adopted by Sierra Leone, appeals to transnational corporate actors who have the capital to invest in emerging economies, but they are often more interested in monetary returns on their investment than in gender justice.

In this context, whether gender equality is a matter of justice or matter of development remains a fundamental question to resolve. On this point, even Dr Sheka Bangura, the National SDGs Focal Point at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, admits that whereas justice and development can be integrated within a broader conceptualisation of human transformation, the country is yet to find an effective pathway to inclusive change – a dilemma that explains why Sierra Leone is a core case in the UKRI GCRF [Gender Justice and Security Hub](#).

*The author would like to thank Simeon Koroma for his contribution to this blog. Simeon Koroma is a lawyer and co-founder of Timap for Justice – a pioneering organisation in Sierra Leone that provides legal aid services, develops strategies for institutional reform, and collects comprehensive data on access to justice. Timap is well known for its ground-breaking work in support of communities' (especially women's) rights to legally own, access and utilise land. Simeon spearheaded the campaign for the formal recognition of paralegals in Sierra Leone and*

*plays a pivotal role in leading civil society's dialogue with government on the provision of primary justice services. He is presently a PhD Candidate at the University of Edinburgh.*

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Environments” appeared in the European Journal of International Security (2019).

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