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Sierra Leoneans welcome government efforts to address gender inequalities, call for more

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 580 | Fredline M'Cormack-Hale and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

Believers in equal rights for women are celebrating Sierra Leone's just-passed Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act, which mandates equal pay for equal work, maternity leave, financial inclusion, and a 30% quota of women in government appointments and private institutions with more than 25 employees (AYV News, 2022).

The act is a major step for Sierra Leone, where women make up only 12.3% of parliamentarians (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022), and complements the Public Elections Act passed in September (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022a), which requires one-third of political party nominations for elective positions to be women. Noting that nominations do not necessarily translate into elected positions, advocacy organisations are calling for the country to adopt a "zipper" or "zebra" system of party lists alternating by gender (Institute for Governance Reform, 50/50 Group, and Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law, 2022).

Another law passed in November, the Political Parties Act, replaces the Political Parties Registration Commission with the Political Parties Regulation Commission, whose enhanced regulatory powers includes enforcement of political inclusion mechanisms; parties that fail to comply with quota provisions can be penalised (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022b).

These acts are the latest in a series of government efforts since Julius Maada Bio made gender equality a priority when he became president in 2018. His Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) campaign promise of free quality school education became policy in 2018. The government revoked a ban on pregnant girls' attending school in 2020 (BBC, 2020) and developed a radical inclusion policy designed to increase education access to the most vulnerable and marginalised. These efforts are yielding fruit: Gender disparities in education access have been eliminated at the primary level, though inequities remain at the secondary and tertiary levels (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022c). And since 2020, the country has consistently passed the Millennium Challenge Corporation (2022) indicator on investing in people in terms of primary education expenditures and girls' primary education completion rate.

The revised Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of 2019 strengthened penalties for crimes against women and girls (Mitchell, 2020; M'Cormack-Hale & Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, 2021). A new Customary Land Rights Act, passed in August 2022, contains a dedicated gender equality section that eliminates discrimination in customary land acquisition, providing women equal rights with men to "hold, use, inherit, succeed to or deal with land" (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022d).

Despite these achievements, Sierra Leone still lags when it comes to gender equality, placing 109th out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2022). Attention has focused on the Constitution. Although it enshrines gender equality, critics argue that its recognition of customary law also has the effect of protecting discriminatory practices in marriage/divorce, land tenure, and inheritance. Recommendations by the

government-commissioned Constitutional Review Committee (2016) included components addressing gender inequality, but beyond a government white paper in January 2022, little progress has been made toward implementing them.

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2022) questionnaire to explore Sierra Leoneans' experiences and perceptions related to gender. (For findings on gender-based violence, see M'Cormack-Hale & Twum, 2022.)

Findings show that women continue to trail men in education and control of assets. Most citizens say women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land and to be elected to public office, but support for gender equality in hiring is weaker, particularly among men.

While the government gets high marks for its efforts to promote equal rights and opportunities for women, a majority of Sierra Leoneans want it to do more.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999, and Round 9 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone between 13 June and 9 July 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

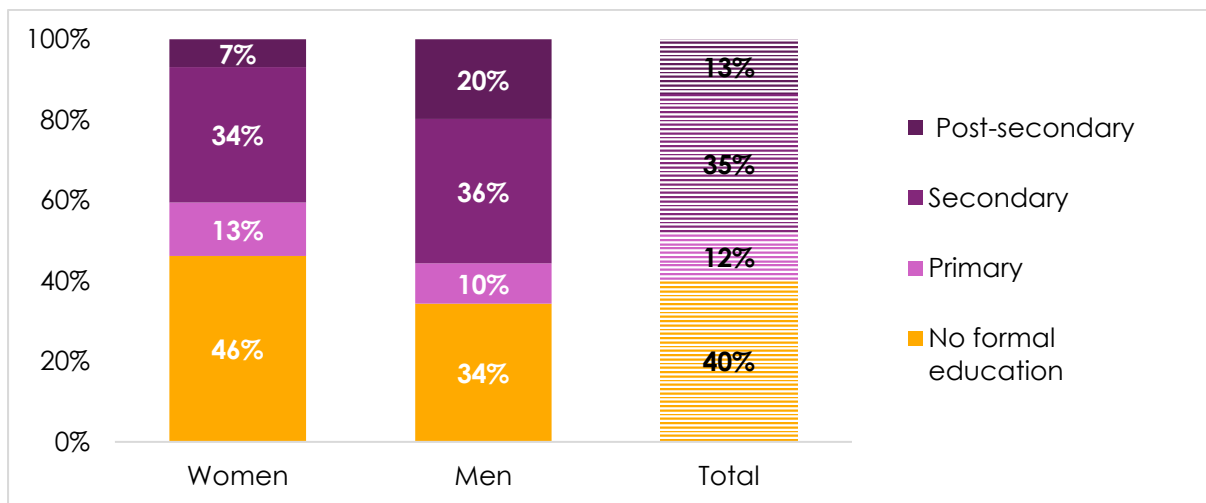
- In Sierra Leone, women are less likely than men to have post-secondary education (7% vs. 20%) and more likely to have no formal schooling at all (46% vs. 34%).
- Women are less likely than men to own assets such as a radio (38% vs. 70%), a mobile phone (58% vs. 78%), and a bank account (9% vs. 25%).
 - But the data indicate no major gender gap when it comes to control over how household money is spent.
- More than three-fourths (78%) of Sierra Leoneans say women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land.
 - Support for equal rights to a job is considerably weaker – 56% for, 39% against.
- More than seven in 10 citizens (71%) say women should have the same chance as men of being elected to public office.
 - Eight in 10 respondents (82%) think a woman will gain standing in the community if she runs for office. But more than four in 10 (42%) consider it likely that others in the community will criticise or harass her, and 21% think she will probably face problems with her family.
- Three-fourths (76%) of Sierra Leoneans say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women, but almost two-thirds (64%) want it to do more.

Education and control of assets

In Sierra Leone, women and men obtain secondary schooling at roughly equal rates (34% of women vs. 36% of men), but women trail men significantly when it comes to post-secondary education (7% vs. 20%). Women are also more likely than men to lack formal schooling altogether (46% vs. 34%) (Figure 1).

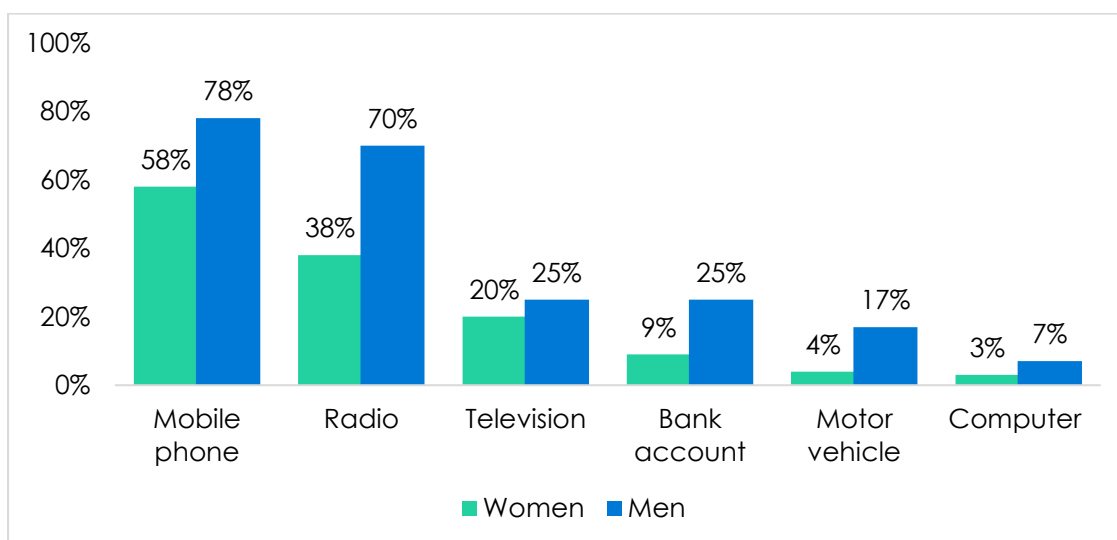
Women also lag behind men when it comes to ownership of assets. Fewer women than men say they own a mobile phone (58% vs. 78%), a radio (38% vs. 70%), a television set (20% vs. 25%), a bank account (9% vs. 25%), and a computer (3% vs. 7%) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Educational attainment | by gender | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

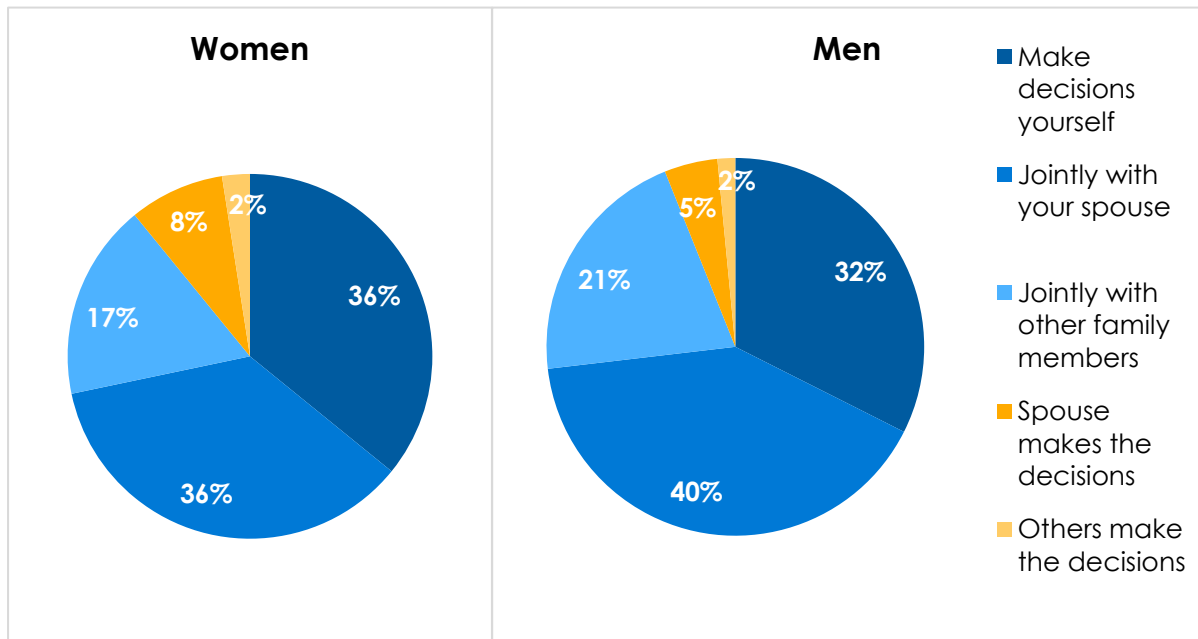
Figure 2: Asset ownership | by gender | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own?

But in decisions about how household money is spent, women are slightly more likely than men to say they make the decisions themselves (36% vs. 32%) (Figure 3). Fewer women than men say they make decisions jointly with their spouse (36% vs. 40%) or with other family members (17% vs. 21%).

Figure 3: Who decides how money is used? | by gender | Sierra Leone | 2022



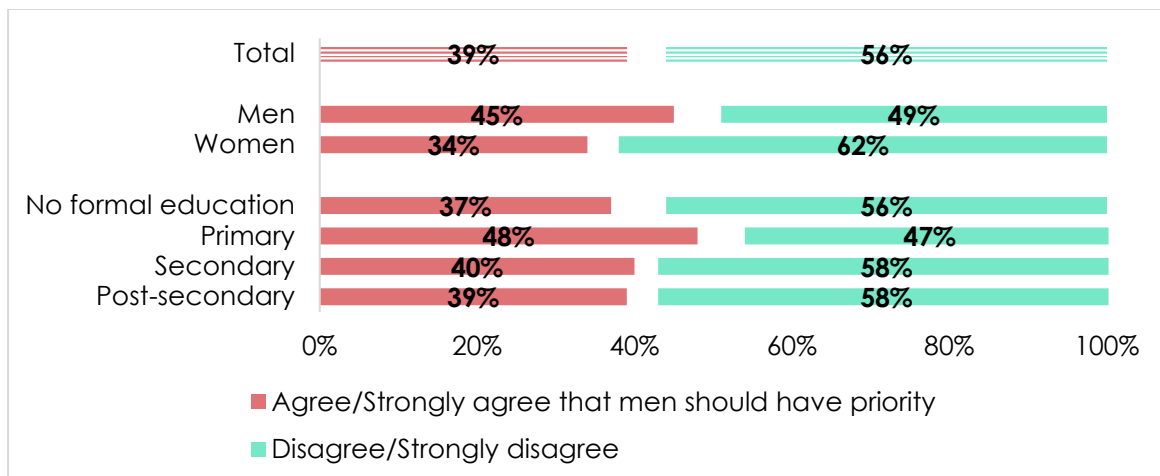
Respondents were asked: What is the main way that decisions are made about how to use any money that you have or earn, for example from a job, a business, selling things, or other activities?

Rights to a job and land

The ability to claim certain rights can be a tool to promote gender equality – or to maintain inequality. Do Sierra Leoneans want gender equality when it comes to jobs and land? And if so, how close to equality are they?

Almost four in 10 citizens (39%) endorse the idea that men should be given priority over women in hiring when jobs are scarce, while a majority (56%) reject this form of discrimination (Figure 4). Men (49%) trail women (62%) in insisting on equality when it comes to jobs, as do citizens with primary schooling (47%) compared to other education levels (56%-58%).

Figure 4: Should men have priority for scarce jobs? | by gender and education | Sierra Leone | 2022

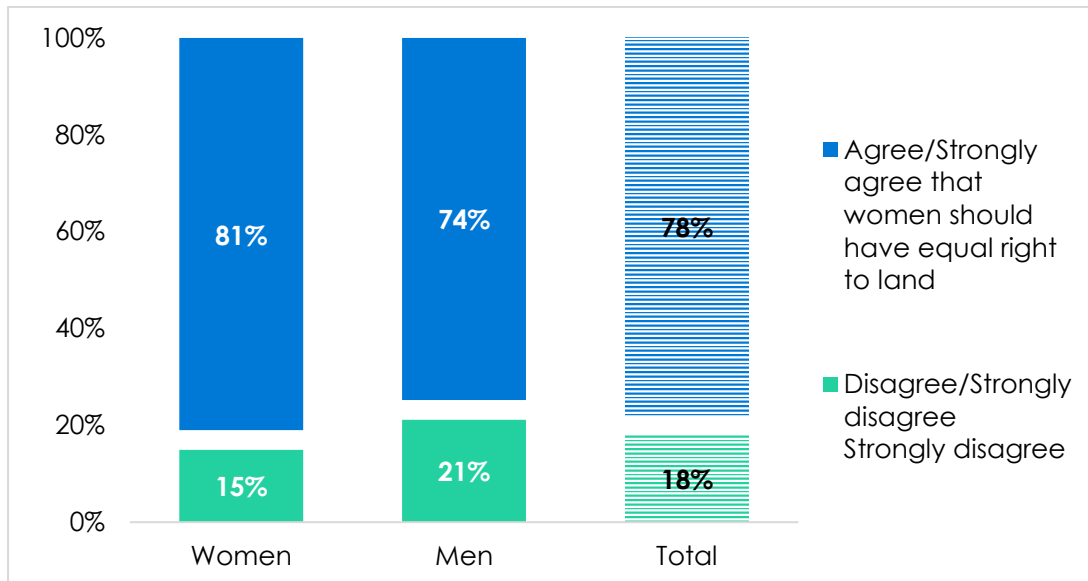


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women.

More than three-fourths (78%) of citizens endorse equal rights for both genders to own and inherit land. Here, too, men are less supportive of equality than women (74% vs. 81%) (Figure 5).

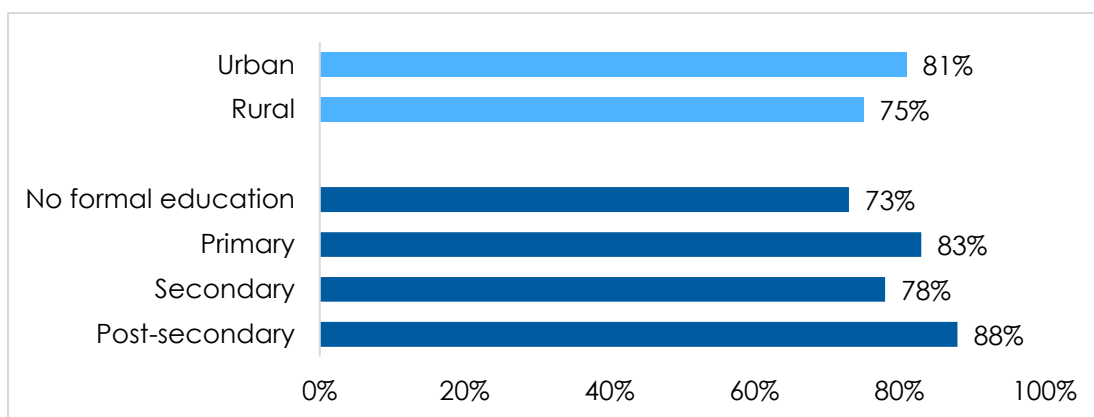
Support for equality in land ownership is somewhat weaker in rural areas (75%, vs. 81% in cities) and among respondents with no formal education (73%, vs. 78%-88% among more educated citizens) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Should women have equal rights to land? | by gender | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land.

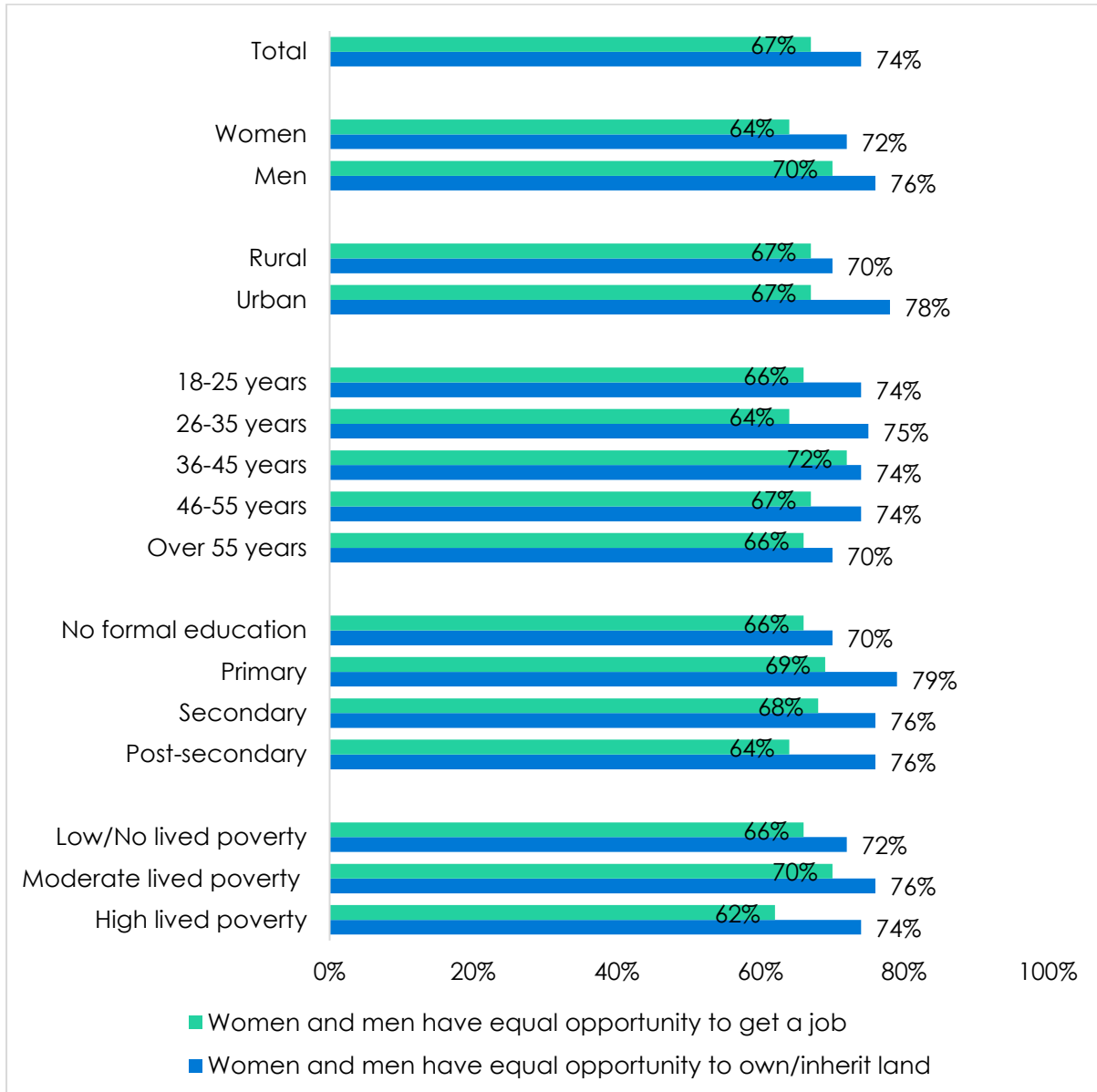
Figure 6: Women should have equal rights to land | by urban-rural location and education | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

While large majorities say women should have equal rights to jobs and land, have they achieved equality? More than two-thirds of Sierra Leoneans say women do have the same opportunities as men to get a paying job (67%) and to own and inherit land (74%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Do women and men have equal opportunities to get a job and to own/inherit land? | by socio-demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to get a job that pays a wage or salary.

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to own and inherit land.

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Women are less likely than men to report equal opportunities in hiring (64% vs. 70%) and land ownership and inheritance (72% vs. 76%). While rural and urban residents hold identical views on hiring, rural respondents are less likely to perceive gender equality in land ownership and inheritance than urbanites (70% vs. 78%), which suggests a potential role for the recently passed Customary Land Rights Act governing land acquisition in rural areas.

Respondents with no formal schooling are less likely to perceive gender equality in land ownership (70%) than their more educated counterparts (76%-79%). And citizens

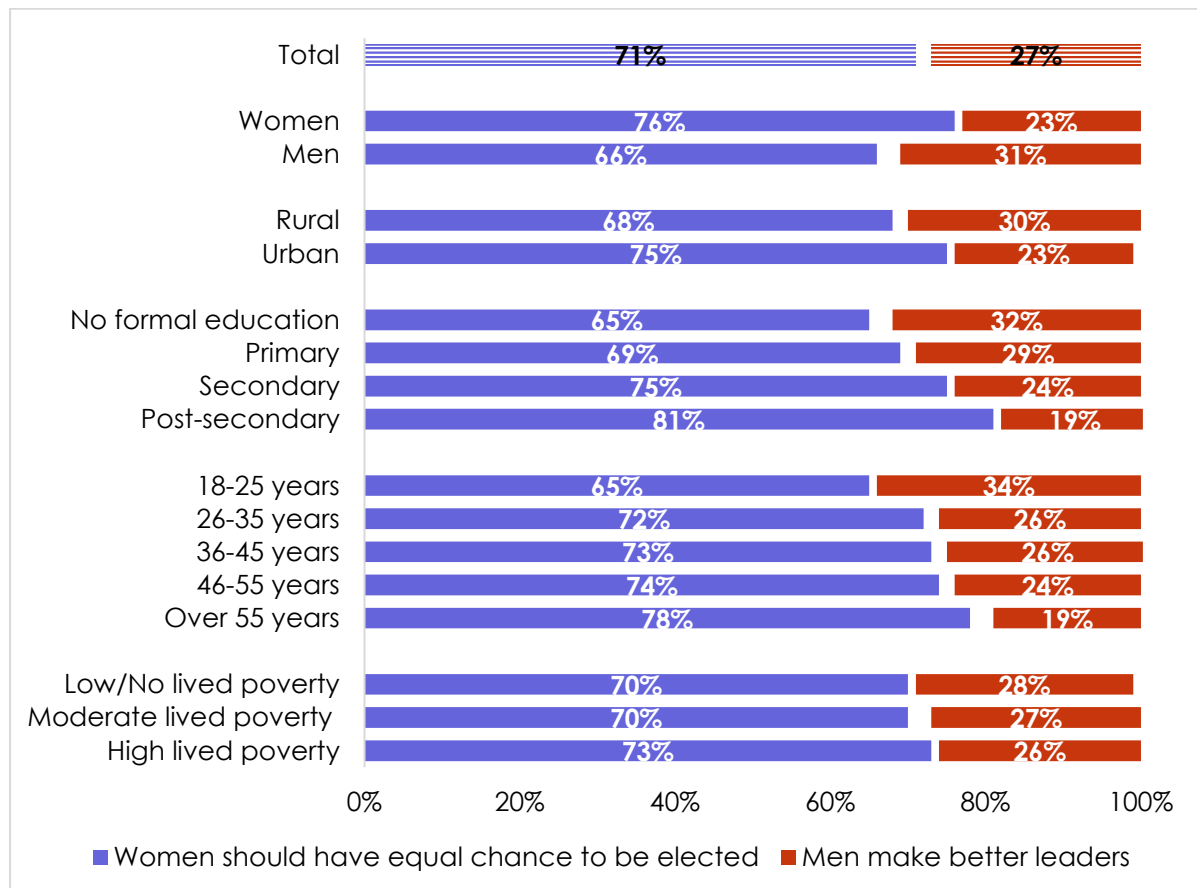
experiencing high lived poverty are less likely to think women enjoy equal opportunities to get a job (62%) than their better-off counterparts (66%-70%).¹

Gender equality in political participation

A crucial component of gender equality is women's engagement in political leadership. In Sierra Leone, more than seven in 10 citizens (71%) say women should have the same chance as men of being elected to political office, rejecting the idea that men make better political leaders and should thus be given priority as candidates (Figure 8).

More women (76%) than men (66%) endorse equality in politics, and support for equality increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 65% among those with no formal schooling to 81% among those with post-secondary qualifications. It also increases with respondents' age, meaning the youngest citizens are least supportive of a fair chance for female candidates (65%).

Figure 8: Should women have an equal chance to be elected? | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women and should be elected rather than women.
 Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

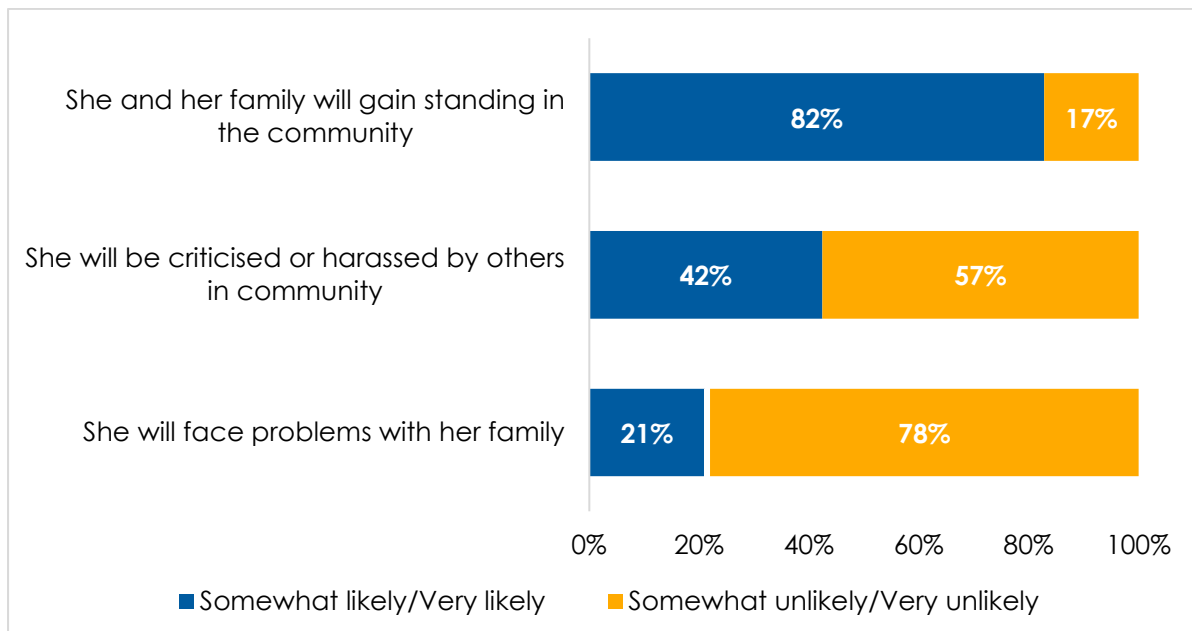
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Even if she believes that voters will give her the same consideration as a male candidate, a woman may be encouraged to run for public office – or discouraged from doing so – by other consequences she expects to result from her candidacy.

On an encouraging note, a large majority (82%) of Sierra Leoneans say it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that a woman and her family will gain standing in the community if she runs for elective office (Figure 9).

But more than four in 10 (42%) consider it likely that others in the community will criticise her, call her names, or harass her for seeking public office, while 21% think she will probably face problems with her family. Women are somewhat more likely than men to expect these negative consequences (45% vs. 40% regarding community disapproval, 23% vs. 19% regarding family problems). The fact that majorities consider these consequences unlikely may or may not be enough to overcome some women’s reservations about throwing their hats into the ring.

Figure 9: For better or for worse: How running for elected office might affect women’s lives | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community runs for elected office, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur?*

She and her family will gain standing in the community?

She will be criticised, called names, or harassed by others in the community?

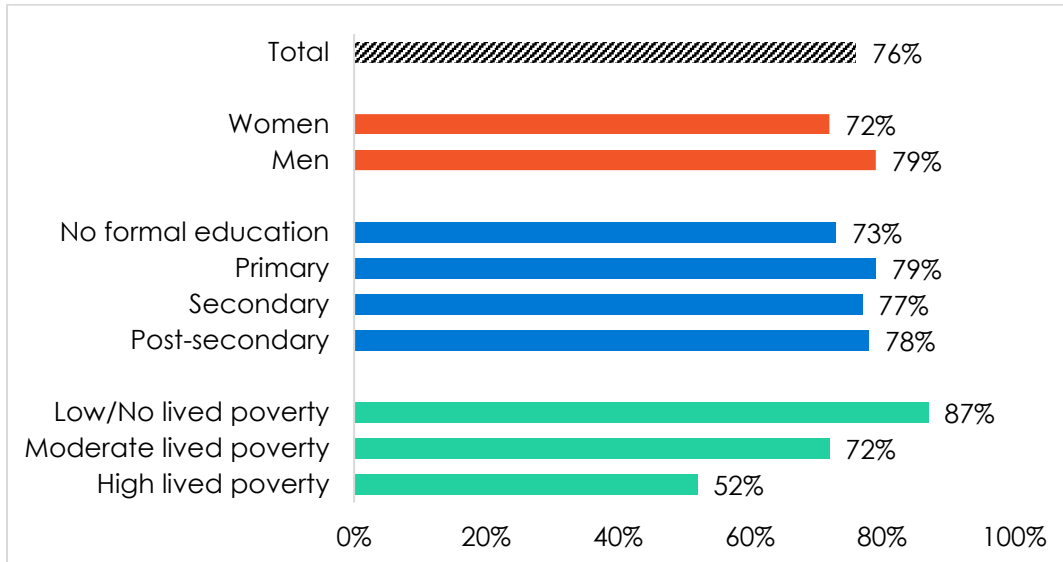
She will face problems with her family?

Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities

Overall, three-fourths (76%) of Sierra Leoneans say their government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of promoting equal rights and opportunities for women (Figure 10), while 23% disapprove of the government’s performance. Women (72%) are less likely than men (79%) to give the government a positive grade on gender equality.

Approval ratings are far lower among poor citizens (52%) than among their better-off counterparts (72%-87%). Respondents with no formal schooling (73%) are somewhat less satisfied with the government’s efforts than those with primary or higher education (77%-79%). These findings suggest that some of the benefits of growing gender equality may not be reaching less educated and poorer populations.

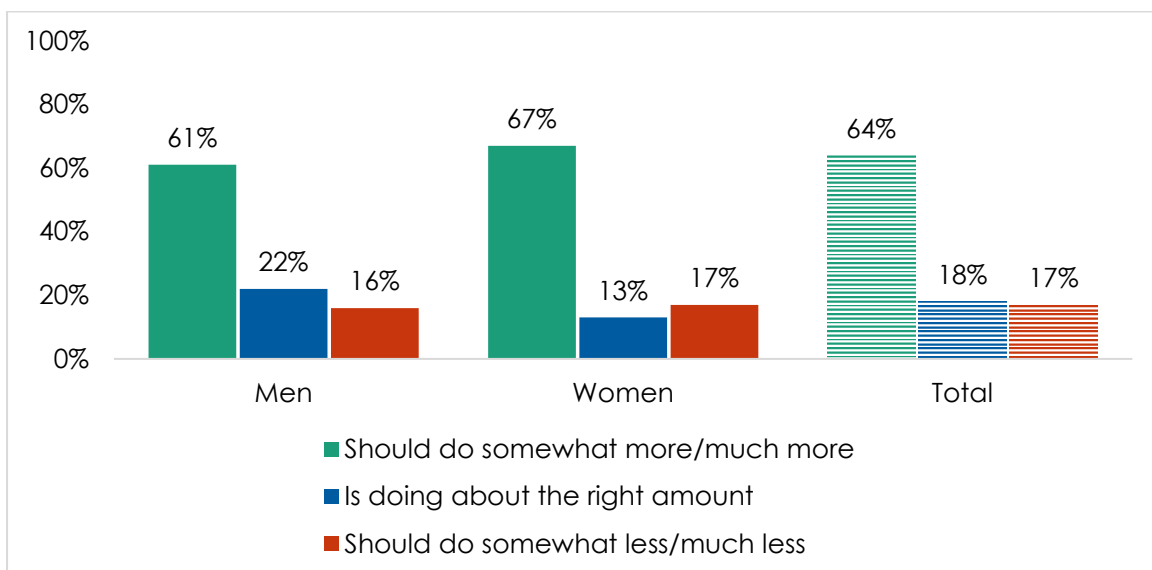
Figure 10: Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Promoting equal rights and opportunities for women? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Even if the government's performance ratings are generally positive, almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens think it could do "somewhat more" or "much more" to promote equal rights and opportunities for women. About two in 10 (18%) say it is doing about the right amount, while a similar proportion (17%) think it should reduce its gender-equality efforts. More women (67%) than men (61%) want to see greater government action in this area (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Should the government do more or less to promote equal rights and opportunities for women? | by gender | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, should government and elected officials be doing more than they are doing now to advance the rights and equality of women, or should they be doing less, or are they doing about the right amount?

Conclusion

Sierra Leoneans reveal mixed attitudes toward gender equality, endorsing it strongly in land ownership and politics but far less forcefully when it comes to scarce jobs. Women are less satisfied with current progress toward equality than men. New laws that promote gender equity in all areas of life, including women's political participation, finance, and land ownership, align with citizens' calls for further government action. However, given elements in the Constitution that seem to acquiesce in entrenched patriarchal practices, believers in women's rights will likely prioritise constitutional reform, alongside attitudinal change and robust implementation of the new laws, to translate reforms on paper into reforms in practice.

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