

Applying Rwanda's Post-Conflict Development Model to Sierra Leone: The Case of Gender Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper explores the extent to which Rwanda's post-genocide development model can be adapted to Sierra Leone, paying particular attention to women's empowerment as both a developmental goal and a mechanism for wider participation. The two countries were marked by catastrophic violence—the genocide of 1994 in Rwanda and Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war, that left governance systems fragile, economic activity paralyzed, and interpersonal trust largely destroyed. Although both faced devastation, Rwanda is celebrated for its rapid transformation, but Sierra Leone remains challenged by ineffective governance and systemic discrimination against women. Using a comparative analysis, this study identifies three pillars of Rwanda's reconstruction model: embedding gender equality in legal frameworks, political reforms expanding women's participation, and socio-economic programs integrating women into development agendas. In contrast, Sierra Leone's gains are minimal, women suffer from political exclusion, land tenure discrimination, and exposed to poverty, violence, and practices such as female genital cutting. The study highlights several lessons that could be adapted elsewhere, including enshrined constitutional protections, mechanisms for overseeing gender equity, grassroots accountability frameworks modeled like Rwanda's Imihigo contracts, and the proactive inclusion of women in both fiscal decision-making and reform processes. Despite the lessons, straightforward transfer is restricted, Sierra Leone struggles with weaker governance capacity, a politically diverse particularly due to its reduced institutional capability, plural political order, and deeply rooted gender hierarchies. The study emphasizes that in post-war Sierra Leone, cannot afford to see gender empowerment only through the lens of rights; and becomes a core instrument for advancing meaningful, post-conflict change. The article suggests that meaningful integration of women in

governance, law, and economic structures is the most effective route to building sustainable peace, societal cohesion, and equitable development.

Keywords: Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Gender empowerment, Inclusive development, Post-conflict reconstruction, Governance reforms

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1. Introduction

Once wars end, societies are challenged with restoring destroyed institutions alongside tackling long-standing inequities. Both Rwanda and Sierra Leone provide critical lessons on recovery after the war. The genocide in Rwanda and the civil conflict in Sierra Leone had left lasting scars. Here we have to understand that the large gaps in governance combined with poverty created and deepened social divisions. Therefore the results of their reconstruction efforts were starkly different for both the countries. The World saw Rwanda as a country that became a model of reconstruction, whereas Sierra Leone lagged with institutional weakness. Something that is evident about Rwanda and that stands out globally for how it prioritizes women's well-being. The country's development strategies embed economic development that includes the level of women's participation. So far, the outcomes have been that, Rwanda records the world's highest proportion with about 60% women in parliament and hold leadership positions in multiple sectors. However the point drawn from all these information show Rwanda's development policies is socially rooted.

Gender empowerment advances slowly in Sierra Leone, thus slower progress is characteristic of gender empowerment in Sierra Leone. Only 12% of Sierra Leone's parliament are women, women underrepresentation in politics is concerning. Barriers to women's progress come from Limited education and poor enforcement of laws. With the new 2022 Act, ensure women hold a significant share of leadership. Marking the progress as a country, these reforms will position Sierra Leone as a leader in gender equality progress. Rwanda and Sierra Leone present a clear divergence. What lessons does Rwanda offer Sierra Leone on gender inclusion? Can vastly different countries function coexist under shared laws? Beyond gender, Sierra Leone may adopt Rwanda's emphasis on orderliness. Gender equality is important both social and economic value. The paper demonstrates that real empowerment through inclusion supports peace and development.

Methodology of the Study

This research adopts a comparative qualitative, multi-case methodology, integrating diverse evidence streams to analyze the mechanisms and explores the dynamics of gender empowerment in two post-conflict nations: Rwanda and Sierra Leone, to reveal patterns of institutional and social change. The analysis integrates both primary and secondary evidence, the study draws on a blend of primary and secondary materials such as government texts and legislation with secondary materials including global policy reports, and established academic research. Analytical attention is directed toward three core areas of post-conflict gender empowerment: legal and institutional reform, participation in political decision-making, and the advancement of socio-economic inclusion.

This study anchors its analysis in lived realities, drawing evidence from key informant narratives reported in previous qualitative research. These narratives reveal subtle dynamics that statistical data alone cannot show. These accounts shed light on women's daily yet critical political and economic struggles, while also making notable advances. Quantitative measures—including women's representation in parliament, enrolment in secondary and tertiary education, and participation in the

labor force—using datasets from reputable bodies including the Inter-Parliamentary Union, UN agencies, the World Bank, and national statistics offices.

Triangulation enhances the credibility of findings by checking the consistency of claims through varied datasets and sources. It reduces the risk of bias that may arise from relying on a single form of data. It reduces the risk of bias that may arise from relying on a single form of data. Such an approach ensures that institutional comparisons become anchored in rigorously validated, multi-perspective data not just one source's narrative. It creates a more nuanced understanding of institutional dynamics. Comparative reasoning is guided by policy transfer and institutional adaptation theories, focusing on how gender empowerment policies spread, evolve, or encounter resistance in diverse post-conflict environments. Dependence on documented sources presents a limitation because these often exclude unrecorded grassroots empowerment efforts occurring outside formal academic or policy networks. Further on-the-ground research could provide a more complete picture offering a richer understanding of community-driven change.

Literature Review

Research on post-conflict gender empowerment in post-conflict societies often highlights Rwanda as a leading example of accelerated, government-orchestrated gender transformation, frequently characterized by an unprecedented rise in women's political representation and the systematic integration of gender concerns into public policy (Burnet 2011). Multiple studies identify constitutional mandates, gender quota systems, and strong monitoring bodies as key to Rwanda's gender gains, stressing how carefully crafted legal frameworks and institutional structures solidified women's rights in the post-genocide state (Berry, 2015).

Global bodies, including UN Women and the World Bank, commend Rwanda's approach to gender reform, but academic studies argue that these initiatives might function more as genuine empowerment or simply legitimize a tightly centralized regime. In contrast, studies on Sierra Leone highlight how long-lasting conflict, institutional weakness, and patriarchal norms have combined to women's advancement and autonomy (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013). Academic and policy analyses document reveal that efforts to broaden political participation advance only gradually, and socio-economic inequities persist; as reform agendas are undermined by poor institutional follow-through and widespread cultural resistance to transformation. The passage of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (2022), drawn notable scholarly focus as a possible watershed moment, although analyses caution that its success hinges on closing implementation gaps through stronger institutional capacity (Government of Sierra Leone 2022). Comparative scholarship suggests that passing reformist laws is an incomplete solution; long-term gender equity requires robust institutional backing, public participation, and an approach rooted in local socio-cultural frameworks. Transnational analyses highlight the uncritical adoption of foreign models, emphasizing that gender empowerment strategies must integrate arguing that both institutional structures and cultural norms must inform reform in fragile, post-war states (Okunade, Adediran, Balogun, Maduka, Adegoke, & Daraojimba, 2023).

Gender Empowerment in Rwanda

Rwanda's recovery after the genocide is widely recognized an international benchmark for women's empowerment. Hence the government integrated gender considerations into its laws, politics, and development policies, ensuring women played a central role in rebuilding. Thus this chapter highlights Rwanda's approach to gender empowerment.

Legal and Institutional Frameworks

After the genocide of 1994, Rwanda's gender empowerment efforts were shaped by a systematic constitutional and legislative overhaul. At the heart of this framework rests the 2003 Constitution, thereupon enshrines gender equality as a foundational principle of state governance. According to Article 9, the state must ensure "equality of all Rwandans without discrimination," whereas Article 54 directs political organizations to maintain both unity and gender inclusion. Importantly, Article 82 secures women's political participation by guaranteeing least 30 percent of all decision-making roles in government institutions, embedding women's political participation in state institutions. Scholars frequently regard this as a leading example of progressive gender equality legislation internationally (Burnet, 2008). Constitutional reforms were further reinforced by laws intended to break down patriarchal barriers. The 1999 legislation on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions marked a historic shift, for the first time in Rwanda's history, granting women equal rights to inherit and own property. Given the centrality of land to Rwanda's socio-economic hierarchy, the reform was profoundly significant. Subsequent measures, particularly the 2008 Law on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence, which institutionalized protections against abuse and discrimination (Brown, 2016).

In order to give effect to its reform strategies, strikingly Rwanda translated its reform agenda into practice by setting up a range of specialized institutions. The Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) plays a central role ensuring that gender equality is systematically embedded into policymaking and implementation. The creation of the Gender Monitoring Office in 2007 marked a key step in institutionalizing accountability, ensures transparency by monitoring implementation of gender frameworks and sharing findings with local and external stakeholders. The National Women's Council ensures that women's participation demonstrates how women's lived experiences are institutionalized within national governance, preventing exclusion from decision-making processes. As a whole, they create an interconnected system of enforcement ensure that gender equality is enforced as a systemic principle rather than left as aspirational rhetoric (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013).

Rwanda's framework gains legitimacy from being both internally coherent and strong enforcement mechanisms. On the contrary many post-conflict countries introduced gender reforms largely to appease external actors, Rwanda structurally incorporated gender equality into its national governance system. The constitution enshrined gender quotas, supported by specialized institutions that oversaw compliance and maintained continuity. This combination of legal safeguards and institutional oversight accounts for Rwanda's success in gender indicators can be attributed to the interplay between legal frameworks and institutionalized enforcement. Yet this framework mirrors Rwanda's highly centralized governance, with gender policies enforced from above rather than through broad participatory processes. Researchers

contend that Rwanda's institutionalization of gender equality is embedded in institutions but simultaneously constrained by an environment that suppresses political pluralism (Ortiz, 2020). The dilemma centers on whether women's representation stems from substantive empowerment or a form of engineered compliance within the state's political project. This comparison underlines how legislative raises concerns about the sustainability of its gender reforms progress, without comparable monitoring bodies. This experience highlights the effectiveness of coupling constitutional commitments and dedicated institutions can produce swift and visible change in gender dynamics. At the same time, this dynamic brings into focus the ambiguity of whether gender equality is pursued for its intrinsic democratic value or as a strategic state project. Any attempt to transfer Rwanda's model shapes debates about the applicability of Rwanda's model beyond its borders.

Political Participation

Rwanda is widely acknowledged as a global leader in women's political inclusion, hence, a change grounded in systemic reforms designed in the post-genocide context. After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda's 2003 Constitution required that women must occupy no less than 30 percent of posts in governance structures, from parliament to local government. Rather than serving as a token gesture, this implies the quota system went beyond symbolism, thus functioning as a pivotal mechanism for reshaping Rwanda's governance. The quota's impact is visible in the Chamber of Deputies, given that the women surpassing 60 percent of parliamentary seats. Rwanda's gender reforms reached the executive branch, holding more than half of ministerial seats and exerting broad influence across levels of governance. Women's role in parliament extends beyond symbolic representation; it has brought about substantive reforms in governance and lawmaking. This indicates female members of parliament were central to the legal reforms related to family law, gender protection, and child safeguarding. Women lawmakers have foregrounded social concerns like maternal health and community well-being receive the policy attention they previously lacked. These advances demonstrate that women's involvement ensures that development agendas are inclusive and more responsive to social needs. Women's leadership has extended into peacebuilding, underscoring their contribution to national stability (Devlin & Elgie, 2008).

The strides made in women's representation have not been immune from critique, this progress, while celebrated globally, has also sparked debate and critical reflection. The political context of Rwanda, heavily shaped by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), highlight that women's increased visibility occurs in a tightly managed political order, where women's presence in politics does not equate to full political agency (Burnet, 2008). The appearance of empowerment, yet its practical impact is limited by the regime's tight control. Women in rural communities remain marginalized; expose the gap between formal gender equality frameworks and lived realities. Such contradictions complicate the international praise, disparity between image and reality forces a critical reflection on how deep and long-lasting empowerment truly is. Rwanda serves as a revealing case study highlights how post-conflict reforms can deliver symbolic inclusion while constraining substantive change. Hence the Rwandan system demonstrates how designed tools such as quotas show that formal frameworks can swiftly elevate women into politics. Though the numbers may impress globally, but under centralization their participation often lacks transformative substance. Structural frameworks must be paired with cultural and and legal reforms, while vital, are insufficient on their own according to the key lesson, for Sierra

Leone. Real empowerment occurs when women influence decisions directly, not just symbolically, sustained by democratic freedoms.

Socio-Economic Inclusion in Rwanda

Rwanda's recovery after the 1994 genocide has been anchored in socio-economic empowerment, where women were intentionally placed by the government at the heart of social and economic transformation. We can see Rwanda's flagship development blueprints, with Vision 2020 and Vision 2050 clearly associating women's empowerment with long-term human development. Denotes access to financial resources for women, to foster inclusive growth, women were integrated into agriculture and entrepreneurial activities, was expanded via microfinance and Umurenge SACCOs, strengthening their participation in agriculture, small enterprises, and cooperatives. Therefore the outcome of these interventions was twofold: these initiatives repositioned women within the economy, moving them from marginal survival activities to growth-oriented sectors. While legislation such as the 1999 inheritance law represented a milestone codified women's rights to property, but rural realities still reflect gendered exclusions rooted in customary norms (Liliane & Mbabazi, 2015).

Furthermore initiatives within the education sector have functioned as a key mechanism for fostering inclusive development. Universal free access to primary education, curricula that addressed gender biases, and launching programs aimed at girls bringing Rwanda close to parity in primary schooling and steadily improving female enrollment in secondary schools. The reforms opened professional opportunities in fields traditionally dominated by men, occupational sectors including education, medicine, and public administration, while gender disparities remain visible in university-level education, particularly in STEM fields. Alongside educational changes, what's more are the health policy innovations, most notably the Mutuelles de Santé a community-based health insurance model that by 2011 provided coverage to over 90 percent of Rwandans (Niyonzima & Bayu, 2023). This health coverage produced tangible outcomes: reduced maternal deaths advanced reproductive health, and women were better positioned to take part in wider social and economic spheres. The Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme, among other protection schemes, offered relief to vulnerable households, large proportion female-headed, positioning women as central actors in poverty reduction policies.

Thereby, Rwanda's policy framework demonstrates Rwanda's deliberate effort to integrate gender considerations into its broader developmental agenda. This reflects women are now active participants across farming, the business sphere, and professional sectors, as well as in family provision and community governance. Nevertheless, women's empowerment in Rwanda cannot yet be considered comprehensive. Although persistent structural barriers exist; women continue to face inequality in land tenure, participation in advanced industries, and leadership in the private sector. While effective in policy rollout, Rwanda's policy achievements cannot be separated from its governance structure, facilitated by centralized governance, a system that ensures efficient directive-driven policies but discourages independent scrutiny and dissent (Burnet, 2008). Analytically, this contradiction shows two sides of Rwanda's progress: socio-economic inclusion has undeniably elevated women's status and national growth, nonetheless sustainability hinges on whether reforms evolve into systemic change rather than remain state-imposed. For Sierra Leone, the value lies in contextual adaptation—policies

must be tailored to resonate with the country's distinct governance structures and cultural setting. To replicate Rwanda's benefits, Sierra Leone must prioritize structural reforms, embedding women's economic opportunities, safeguarding property rights, and reinforcing accountability at the community level.

Sierra Leone's Gender Landscape

The gender relations in Sierra Leone continue to be influenced by the enduring consequences of war, this illustrates the weakness of its political and social institutions, and the persistence of patriarchal values. Even with two decades of recovery, we still see that women persistently struggle against barriers that limit their full engagement in public decision-making, access to education, healthcare services, and economic opportunities. If we see the legislative reforms, particularly the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2022, represent progress, but implementation and deeper structural issues continue to pose challenges. The complexity of Sierra Leone's gender relations can only be understood that includes historical legacies, political context, economic factors, and the persistent presence of violence and cultural practices that restrict women.

Historical and Political Context

The Sierra Leonean civil war (1991–2002) altered the nation's political institutions and balance of social system, with significant and ongoing effects on the roles and status of women. Women bore a disproportionate share of the conflict's burdens, often suffering sexual assault, involuntary marriages, stripped of stability, and displaced. By deliberately using women as weaponized as markers of collective identity and systematically violated to inflict broader communal trauma. Women engaged in multiple wartime roles, contributing as mobilizers and even combatants, their voices and labour were marginalized in transitional justice and rebuilding efforts (MacKenzie, 2009). The TRC, created in 2002 under the Lomé Peace Accord, highlighted the unique forms of suffering endured by women and girls in the war. Recognizing the scale of sexual and gender-based harms, The TRC's final findings revealed the scope of organized violence directed at women and urged authorities to implement gender-sensitive policies, including reparations and legal change. Despite the comprehensive vision, the process of converting these recommendations into effective policy was inconsistent and fragmented. Despite the TRC's recommendations, the structural marginalization of women continued in Sierra Leone's post-war society (Cullen, 2020).

Structural patriarchy within politics continues to marginalize women that normalize male dominance in decision-making. The adoption of CEDAW in 1988, Sierra Leone's political system failed to prioritize gender mainstreaming, which struggled to incorporate women's rights frameworks into governance. The underrepresentation persisted over time, women comprised just 12.3 percent of parliament, reflecting prolonged stagnation in gender equality efforts. Falling short of both regional and global averages, resulted in institutionalized exclusion of women from political power structures. A turning point emerged in January 2022 represents a pivotal effort to legally anchor gender equality within the national

framework (Cohen, 2013). Under the GEWE Act, The legislation sets a binding quota of 30 percent for women in governance roles and make gender inclusion non-negotiable. This legislative move indicates that political acknowledgment that sustainable national progress requires dismantling gender-based barriers. However, its success will depend on implementation, as cultural resistance to women in politics persists.

Sierra Leone's historical and political evolution exposes tensions that appear paradoxical. War revealed the fragility of women's vulnerabilities visible, emphasizing the call for gender-aware recovery efforts. Yet, post-conflict structures often overlooked women's agency, portraying them as recipients of aid instead of shapers of policy. The GEWE Act is a significant legislative step, but without accountability and cultural shifts, it risks losing substance. Global standards often clash with entrenched local norms, highlight difficulties in translating global norms locally (Coulter, 2008). Experience in Sierra Leone reveals that meaningful gender equality that dismantling patriarchy requires more than statutes—it requires societal transformation. For inclusive governance, Sierra Leone must move beyond legal reform, ensuring empowerment is visible in policies, budgeting, and communities.

Socio-Economic Status

Sierra Leone continues to experience entrenched gender inequalities draws attention to the ongoing disparities between men and women, which act as barriers to women's effective contribution to national growth. Gender gaps remain pronounced in Sierra Leone's schools, depicted by as girls continue to experience disadvantages relative to boys in attendance, underscoring persistent inequality. Factors such as poverty, child marriage, and adolescent pregnancy remain central in driving school dropouts, with UNICEF (2019) reporting that girls face a greater risk of leaving school before secondary completion than boys. A cultural preference for investing in boys' education in rural households schooling over girls' contribute to intergenerational cycles of female subordination. The implementation of the Free Quality School Education Programme in 2018 endeavored to expand access, UNESCO (2020) data show that literacy among women remains at 33 percent compared to 53 percent among men still far less, indicating deep disparities. The health sector provides additional evidence extends beyond education into the healthcare system, as reflected in critical health statistics. With maternal mortality at 717 per 100,000 live births in 2019, Sierra Leone's rate remains among the most severe worldwide (World Bank, 2020). Moreover, weak institutional structures, inadequate health infrastructure, cultural barriers, and persistent cultural obstacles to healthcare access continue to aggravate maternal mortality. The Ebola outbreak (2014–2016) devastated Sierra Leone's health system, showing how the women bearing the brunt as caregivers and primary health service users (Kposowa & Johnson, 2021). Although global and national initiatives have aimed to improve the health sector, persistent gender inequalities limit effectiveness in access and delivery.

Women are the backbone of Sierra Leone's survival economy, yet their participation in profitable domains such as mining or commercial agriculture is minimal. Their work is concentrated in smallholder farming and petty commerce, occupations that sustain households but limit prospects for broader prosperity. Findings highlight entrenched inequalities: credit constraints, patriarchal land systems, and exclusion from commercial markets. Donor programs, especially microfinance, provide temporary relief

but lack the scope to dismantle entrenched structural barriers. Weak enforcement of property ownership and discriminatory inheritance norms gave privilege men in resource control (Koroma, 2014). The intersection of these factors points to the systemic nature of gender inequality that permeates Sierra Leone's development framework. If we see keenly the poor educational attainment keeps women economically marginalized, healthcare shortages trap women in cycles of weakness, is compounded by structural exclusion from economic power. Though emerging initiatives provide some gains but most interventions remain surface-level, neglecting deeper institutional reforms. Without structural reforms in governance, law, and planning, Sierra Leone's developmental trajectory risks fragility. The absence of structural change means women's contributions will continue to be overlooked, and inclusive development will remain unattained.

Gender-Based Violence and Cultural Norms

Gender-based violence continues to persist over time as a central challenge undermining women's security and rights. If we see, in the context of the civil war, sexual violence was a form of military strategy, resulting in intergenerational scars and trauma that lingers to this day. Even long after the conflict ended, the transition from war to peace has not eradicated violence against women; instead, studies show that the conflict entrenched abusive practices that persist across Sierra Leonean households and communities. Survivors remain reluctant to seek justice, silenced due to entrenched stigma, lack of effective access to courts, and the risks associated with confronting perpetrators.

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) stands as one of the most persistent cultural customs through which gender inequality is maintained. In Sierra Leone, almost nine in ten women have undergone FGM, highlighting its role in shaping ideals of femininity and acceptance within society. Campaigns at local and international levels have highlighted the damaging physical and psychological consequences of FGM, but cultural attachment and the desire for community inclusion sustain its persistence. Government action has developed various legislative tools to respond to gender-based violence. Landmark measures included the Domestic Violence Act (2007), the Devolution of Estates Act (2007), and the Sexual Offences Act—reflected important milestones in granting women formal protections. The reality is that enforcement remains weak and inconsistent. Weak institutional capacity and the judiciary, combined with deep-rooted patriarchal mindsets, limits the practical reach of these legal protections (Williams & Opdam, 2017).

The continued prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful traditions reveals how difficult it is to secure gender equality within the Sierra Leonean context. Though policy and legal adjustments highlight the state's acceptance of the issue, but without practical enforcement and deep cultural change, their effect is minimal. These practices reveal that structural gender inequality is anchored within social traditions, making them resistant to policy change alone. We see how Rwanda's achievements in female representation show that meaningful empowerment requires not only legal reforms but also institutional backing and a redefinition of social roles. While as in the Sierra Leonean case, the lack of strong community-based engagement, alongside reliance on donor agendas, has constrained reform outcomes (Smet, 2009). This indicates that legislative reform is insufficient; —political will, institutional mechanisms, and grassroots involvement are all necessary.

Transferable Lessons from Rwanda

Academic analyses often cite Rwanda's experience after the genocide not just as a country that rebuilt, but as one that intentionally restructured through social engineering and institutional reform, where women's empowerment was strategically central to recovery strategies (Burnet, 2008). Rwanda's post-genocide strategies do not directly mirror Sierra Leone's post-war environment is distinct, it can still extract meaningful and adaptable lessons from Rwanda's inclusive development strategy. Rwanda's model provides three central domains of transferable practice: transforming legal and constitutional systems, enhancing local agency, and embedding citizens more firmly in economic life.

Constitutional and Legal Frameworks

Evidence show that Rwanda's commitment to institutionalizing gender equality secured through constitutional and legislative measures; stands out as one of the country's most significant post-genocide achievements. By enshrining a 30 percent female quota across all organs of governance in 2003, place Rwanda at the forefront of constitutional innovation in women's representation. Far from being a token gesture, it was undoubtedly a transformative tool to reorganize Rwanda's political order, who accounted for more than 70 percent of the post-genocide population, had to be central to governance. Upon examination beyond constitutional guarantees, female participation in governance has been reinforced through enabling statutes, which have paved the way for targeted policy initiatives. To ensure that these legislative commitments were effectively implemented, Rwanda created dedicated bodies, among them the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion and the Gender Monitoring Office. Beyond enforcing quotas, these bodies play a crucial role in embedding gender perspectives into Rwanda's policies and long-term development strategies (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013). Alongside its legal provisions, Rwanda implemented affirmative measures such as seat reservation and proportional representation systems, Rwanda has secured the highest rate of women's political participation worldwide, reflected in the current 61.3 percent female occupancy of lower house seats. While Sierra Leone has been slow in achieving gender-related reforms faced challenges in promoting gender inclusion, but the 2022 GEWE Act marks a turning point toward greater institutional commitment. By law, Sierra Leone now requires a minimum 30 percent female presence in leadership roles in both the public and private sectors, while also obliging political parties to nominate no less than 30 percent female candidates. The enactment of the GEWE Act positions Sierra Leone demonstrates tangible efforts to implement CEDAW and similar international obligations, enhancing its standing within the global community (Kagaba, 2015). Unlike Rwanda, Sierra Leone does not have robust institutions in place to oversee or enforce adherence to these legal provisions. Unlike Rwanda, which relies on a dedicated Gender Monitoring Office, Sierra Leone lacks an independent structure to systematically supervise compliance.

Rwanda's trajectory underscores that legal safeguards alone are insufficient, reinforced through institutional mechanisms, can reshape social and political structures in significant ways. If we see in post-genocide Rwanda, gender reforms were adopted both as tools for national recovery and as mechanisms to reinforce state legitimacy (Burnet, 2008). Critics contend that the ruling elite strategically use women's empowerment to showcase a progressive image abroad, but they nonetheless

produced real institutional shifts. Now if we observe The Sierra Leonean context it highlights the need for constitutional and statutory changes cannot remain at the level of symbolic declarations; they must translate into enforceable measures. While the GEWE Act represents a vital first step, but in the absence of enforcement structures and political determination, otherwise, it will remain largely rhetorical. Establishing a Gender Equality Commission with autonomy from executive control, institutionally separate yet connected to the state, could serve as a safeguard for transparency and oversight. Moving gender quotas from statutory law into its constitution, instead of limiting them to ordinary legislation, would provide Sierra Leone with stronger protection against political reversals. The key takeaway is that legal reforms without institutions do not guarantee progress unless they are tied to practical enforcement. The Rwandan experience illustrates that legal changes must operate alongside institutional mechanisms, continuous capacity-building, and political incentives to integrate gender equality into governance. Sierra Leone faces the task of contextualizing Rwanda's approach, embedding gender reforms deeply instead of framing them as future ambitions (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013).

Local-Level Empowerment and Governance

Rwanda's post-genocide rebuilding process is marked by the prioritization of decentralization, intended to heal and strengthen state-society interactions. The National Decentralization Policy, launched in 2000, Rwanda formally institutionalized its commitment to decentralization, was a structural reform aimed at empowering local governance by reallocating responsibilities and resources away from Kigali's central authority. The reform's objectives went beyond strengthening service provision; Rwanda aimed not just to enhance public services and deeper societal wounds, namely the collapse of state-society trust in 1994. Women were intentionally brought into the center of the process, with mechanisms established to elevate women into political and community leadership positions (Pgde, 2023). One of the most distinctive innovations was Imihigo, a groundbreaking mechanism compelling local leaders to pledge developmental goals and face evaluations in the public eye. By embedding gender-related measures, gender mainstreaming within Imihigo was operationalized through indicators tied to women's political participation, financial inclusion, and anti-violence initiatives. The emphasis on gender resulted in women's integration as visible leaders but agenda-setters in local political and developmental decision-making. Evidence suggests that women's growing involvement in governance structures fostered greater accountability, better alignment with community needs, and shifted perceptions of gender roles in leadership (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013).

The decentralization agenda in Sierra Leone, reinitiated its decentralization reforms in 2004, has struggled to overcome significant hurdles. While the 2004 Local Government Act sought to democratize governance through elected local councils, but its execution has been undermined by persistent financial shortfalls, elite manipulation, and state-level intervention. Women occupy a limited presence within council structures, with gender rarely embedded in accountability mechanisms or local planning processes. The existence of local organizations offers a platform for women; structural gaps in resources and support prevent their engagement from shifting power dynamics. Experience from Rwanda highlights that decentralization is inadequate on its own; that ensure gender equality becomes a foundational element of governance. Through innovations such as Imihigo, Rwanda ensured that gender-sensitive development became an obligatory priority for local leadership (Lahai, 2023). To strengthen

gender equity, Sierra Leone's councils could adopt mechanisms similar to Rwanda's, trying fiscal transfers from the central state to gender-focused outcomes, including quotas for female leadership, dedicated funding for women's cooperatives, and regular monitoring of gender-based violence.

Rwanda offers instructive governance lessons, yet applying it to Sierra Leone must be approached with care. Rwanda's integration of gender in local governance depended on the state's centralized authority and its capacity to regulate local structures. Such a centralized, top-down approach results in compliance but restricted the space for plural political participation. Unlike Rwanda, Sierra Leone's political landscape is characterized by pluralism and fragmentation, with paramount chiefs and other traditional leaders continuing to shape rural political life (Smet, 2009). Ignoring customary structures while engaging traditional systems, top-down frameworks may provoke resistance and undermine empowerment efforts. Implementation could take the form of partnerships with chiefs to recognize women's authority, involving women's cooperatives in planning processes, and supporting CSOs to evaluate gender policies. Merging Rwanda's accountability principles with Sierra Leone's plural governance could yield sustainable and inclusive empowerment in Sierra Leone.

Economic Integration and Women's Livelihoods

Rwanda's national recovery framework integrated women into the core of its economic agenda, recognizing that stability and long-term transformation were inseparable from their participation in economic and financial activities. Since women represented most of the surviving population in 1994, the Rwandan state pursued targeted reforms aimed at reconfiguring access to economic and social resources. A key element of the reform process was the recognition that women required improved access to financial services in Rwanda's post-genocide recovery. Through mechanisms like the Women's Guarantee Fund and gender-focused microfinance schemes, created pathways for women to secure financing, develop entrepreneurial ventures, and join cooperative banking networks (Meador & O'Brien, 2019). By lowering systemic barriers in banking, These policies addressed entrenched exclusion from formal finance while opening opportunities for women to participate as economic stakeholders in diverse contexts. Evidence highlights that women were more inclined to channel their resources in family welfare sectors such as education and health, producing ripple effects that strengthened the national recovery trajectory. Alongside policies that expanded financial inclusion, Rwanda advanced gender parity in land rights, a measure that fundamentally altered the dynamics of rural agriculture. The 1999 legislation on inheritance codified women's right to land ownership, disrupting centuries of male-dominated inheritance norms. The guarantee of land rights not only secured women's tenure the reform enabled women to fully participate in agricultural cooperatives, producing measurable improvements in rural productivity and food security. Its influence transcended domestic spaces, shaping Rwanda's agricultural economy by positioning women—the reform modernized agriculture nationwide, institutionalizing women farmers' role as legitimate landowners and agricultural decision-makers (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013).

A central aspect of Rwanda's policy was its strategy to shift women's involvement from subsistence farming into more diverse and higher-value sectors. The government not only encouraged women to engage in ICT and services while simultaneously connecting them to high-value global supply chains

into export-driven sectors such as horticulture and coffee (Burnet, 2011). The widened scope of women's involvement underscored that gender empowerment was embedded in, rather than added to, its development agenda. Embedding gender in core economic sectors allowed Rwanda created a framework where women became drivers of both national and international integration. Sierra Leone's experience offers a markedly different picture. Even though women represent the majority in agriculture and petty commerce, are sidelined in the formal economy (Conteh & Macarthy, 2021). Credit access is blocked by discriminatory inheritance norms that exclude women from land ownership, severely limiting their ability to obtain financing (Sesay, 2020). Male dominance in land tenure, force women to depend on men or chiefs for farming rights. As a direct effect, women cannot engage meaningfully to export-oriented or high-value agriculture remains marginal. These fragmented microfinance schemes fail to lack the scale and coherence to deliver genuine empowerment.

The trajectory of Rwanda's recovery highlights that it can be adapted to other post-conflict contexts. Without accompanying legal safeguards and strong institutional backing, Sierra Leone's policy ambitions to ensure women's equal participation remain largely aspirational. Unless Sierra Leone secures women's land rights, agricultural transformation when legal access to land is denied, despite their central role as producers. Rather than relying solely on scattered microfinance projects, depends on state-led financial structures that are gender-sensitive and part of the broader economic plan. Diversification requires a gendered lens that equips women with skills, access to technology, and pathways into new industries. Such inclusion demands a reorientation of Sierra Leone's economic focus to move beyond extractive industries and subsistence cultivation. Rwanda highlights that gender empowerment was an explicit state was deliberately engineered through reform and diversification rather than left to chance. The case reveals that economic inclusivity is long-term recovery are mutually reinforcing, as shown by Rwanda's trajectory. Unlike Rwanda, Sierra Leone faces weaker governance structures and deeply rooted traditions present obstacles. Rather than discouraging reform, institutional and cultural barriers faces heighten the necessity of gender integration in development. Long-term peace and development will be compromised if women undermine equality and destabilizes post-conflict transformation. Sierra Leone must learn that empowering women is central not just morally necessary but strategically vital for transformation.

Conclusion

Rwanda's post-genocide recovery demonstrates that development rooted in inclusivity extends far beyond mere representation but requires deeper systemic transformation. It is not enough to reform policies; both cultural change inside institutions and modifications in their operational architecture. Attitudinal reform is as critical as structural reform. By embedding gender equality in its Constitution, guarantees of gender equality, quota enforcement, and systemic support for women's leadership across all sectors. These measures produced tangible outcomes: governance legitimacy rose, social harmony deepened, and the economy diversified. Drawing partially from Rwanda's lessons, Sierra Leone pursued similar reforms in the aftermath of its conflict. The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act embodies Sierra Leone's move toward institutionalized inclusivity. However, caution is necessary when juxtaposing Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Rwanda's transformation appears sustainable only because reforms rested heavily on the centralization of political power. One could argue that centralization

masked systemic weaknesses, lacking the foundations of real transformation. Sierra Leone's plural political culture requires community-driven solutions. The lesson embraced is not Rwanda's centralized model but its core idea—governance rooted in inclusion fosters long-term resilience. Women's empowerment must form the driving force for Sierra Leone's transformation. The empowerment of women extends past moral obligation; it redirects the trajectory of political and economic engagement. If women are empowered as equal stakeholders, Sierra Leone's path to sustainable resilience depends on integrating women equally into governance, strategy, and reform.

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