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WOMEN EMPOWERED

For Leadership
and Development

SIERRA LEONE



A Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Promising Practice

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WOMEN EMPOWERED FOR LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT

This document presents a promising practice on integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) to empower women and advance their socio-economic and political leadership in Sierra Leone. Funded by USAID (2014 to 2019), the goal of the project entitled Women Empowered for Leadership and Development (WELD) was to increase women's social, political, and economic rights. The project applied World Vision's Savings for Transformation (S4T) approach and worked to address social and cultural barriers to women's civic engagement and economic advancement. Working collaboratively with multi-sectoral partners and with the government of Sierra Leone, the project promoted gender sensitive planning and monitoring, and mobilized women-led civil society organizations (CSOs). The project involved women, including women with disabilities, at the city, district, and national levels. It was implemented by a consortium of four organizations led by World Vision Sierra Leone, alongside Action Aid International Sierra Leone, Advocacy Movement Network, and Network Movement for Justice and Development, across seven districts.

The evidence suggests that WELD project supported, empowered, and helped promote women's social, political, and economic rights and equal and inclusive engagement.

THE CONTEXT

Sierra Leone is a tropical country located in West Africa on the Atlantic coast between Guinea and Liberia. It is one of the least developed countries in the world, and has a population of nearly 8 million people where 58 % of them live in rural areas and 53 % living below the income poverty line (US\$1.25 per day). Maternal mortality rates in Sierra Leone are amongst the highest in the world, at 1,360 per 100,000 live births.¹ Early marriages and teenage pregnancies are common with 13 % of girls married by age 15, and 39 % by age 18², and with 28 % of girls aged 15-19 years pregnant or already having at least one birth.³

1 Figuroa, C.A., Linhart, C.L., Beckley, W. et al. 2018. "Maternal mortality in Sierra Leone: from civil war to Ebola and the Sustainable Development Goals." Int J Public Health 63: 431–432

2 Save the Children. 2017. Child Marriage in Sierra Leone. resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13235/pdf/child-marriage-sierra-leone.pdf

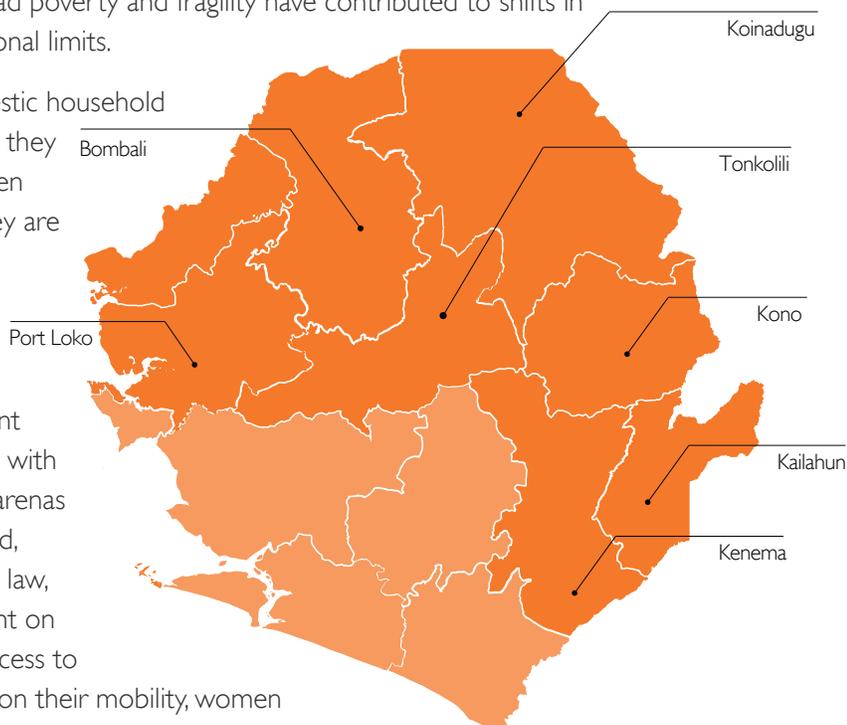
3 UNFPA. 2016. 'Rapid Assessment of Pregnant Adolescent Girls in Sierra Leone,' Unpublished Report, Freetown: United Nations Population Fund.

In 2020, the fragile states index for Sierra Leone was 84.4, indicating a ‘high warning’ on state fragility.⁴ Contributing factors include conflict that seems to have pervaded most of the country’s history. This includes a number of military coups after independence and a history of social unrest, which resulted in a brutal civil war that lasted over a decade. The Ebola virus disease epidemic (2014 – 2018) and the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted Sierra Leone’s development trajectory. In times of complex humanitarian emergencies, women and children often face a higher risk of sexual exploitation, child labor and sexual and gender-based violence. The World Health Organization indicated that one in three women experience violence in their lives and this is exacerbated in crisis situations.⁵ Lessons learnt from Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone indicate a trend where women and girls faced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), unintended pregnancies and social stigma which in some cases, led to eviction from their homes, loss of employment and other social cultural abuses.⁶

Women in Sierra Leone have endured political, social, and economic marginalization. Negative gender and social norms have drastically hampered their participation in governance and socio-economic development. Women also are disproportionately affected by poverty and lack of decision-making power. In addition, there is an unequal burden of socio-economic hardships borne by women and girls. This emanates from the increasing role of women as providers of basic needs for their households. The situation is further exacerbated by religious and cultural limitations on the role and status of women in rural communities of Sierra Leone. As a result, deep-rooted gender inequality and social exclusion prevails, and rural women, including those with disabilities, are excluded from decision-making and asset ownership. Many women and girls in Sierra Leone also experience sexual and gender-based violence; suffer from a lack of access to formal health and justice mechanisms; and are marginalized and repressed under the traditional justice system. Widespread poverty and fragility have contributed to shifts in women’s roles beyond traditional or conventional limits.

Most women now play the main role in domestic household decision-making and working in whatever way they can to provide an income for their families, even where men are present in the household. They are in the forefront of emergency care and social recovery efforts, often playing active public roles to influence and mobilize support.

Customary laws and widely held cultural and social beliefs, however, still pose some significant barriers to integration of women and persons with disabilities into public, political, and economic arenas or in decision-making spheres at the household, community, and national levels. Based on tribal law, women lack property rights and are dependent on their husbands or a close male relatives, for access to land and related assets. Because of limitations on their mobility, women have limited access to the formal economy, and most of them must request permission from male decision makers to leave their home, further impeding their economic mobility.



4 Fund for Peace. 2020. Fragile States Index Annual report 2020. Washington, DC, USA.

5 World Health Organization (WHO). 2013. Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non partner Sexual Violence.,

6 UNDP. 2015. Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone.

World Vision has been working in the Sierra Leone since 1996 and currently works in various communities in the country. The USAID-funded WELD project was implemented in seven districts located in Eastern and Northern part of the Sierra Leone. These districts experienced extreme underrepresentation of women in the parliament or local council levels of government. These districts are Port Loko, Koinadugu, Bombali, Tonkolili, Kono, Kailahun, and Kenema.

OBJECTIVES OF WELD PROJECT



The objective of the WELD project was to increase women's social, political, and economic rights in Sierra Leone. The project promoted the savings group approach to economically empower women and increase their participation and representation in decision-making processes at individual, household, community, and societal levels.⁷

The project created an enabling environment for women's empowerment, leadership, and development. It increased women's participation and representation in decision-making processes, conducted planning and monitoring at council, community, and national levels, and strengthened women's civil society organizations to influence gender policies at the local and national levels. The project utilized the Savings for Transformation (S4T) approach, which is based on Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) methodology.

7 World Vision. 2019. WELD Project Final Performance Evaluation Report, Sierra Leone.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT



World Vision considers GESI evidence of impact as transformational along five domains of access decision making participation systems and wellbeing. Overall evidence suggests that WELD-related activities, including trainings, participation in savings groups, and exposure to messaging, were associated with enhanced empowerment of women and promotion of gender equality. Analysis of economic rights showed that the participation in WELD savings groups and management or leadership training were positively and significantly correlated with women's economic rights.

THE STRUCTURE OF WELD PROJECT

The WELD project was administered through a consortium of partner organizations with varying capacities to engage stakeholders at various levels and engaged in different interventions. The consortium worked with community-based and Civil Society Organizations (CSO) that had pre-existing presence in the project districts and were familiar with these communities. Engaging with CSO partners strengthened the message that allowed for community buy-in and ease of geographical coverage across all seven project districts. The CSOs engaged with local-level institutions to advocate around issues of concern such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).⁸ Partners shared ideas and experiences to learn from each other and maximize output. The project also worked with government of Sierra Leone ministries and departments to integrate gender and women's empowerment and leadership into their plans and structures.

The project implemented behavior change communication (BCC) activities and campaigns through radio discussion programs, theater performance by groups, radio jingles, and key messaging campaigns using banners, posters, stickers, or t-shirts. The messages ranged from women economic empowerment, gender equality, violence against women, early marriage, and children's rights. Animators and radio listener groups helped deliver these messages into their communities in WELD project districts. These listener groups were equipped with radios and phones, to be used during call-in sessions. Female political aspirants also used radio discussions to lobby for election into local council and parliamentary positions.⁹



8 USAID. 2019. USAID / Sierra Leone Women Empowered for Leadership and Development (WELD) Project Performance Evaluation. USAID.
 9 World Vision. 2019. WELD Project Final Performance Evaluation Report, Sierra Leone.

The WELD project conducted training to strengthen the prevention, management, and referral of GBV cases. Those trained included the civil society organizations, savings group members, councilors, gender desk officers, Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children Affairs (MSWGCA) and family support unit (FSU) staff.¹⁰

The WELD project promoted savings group approach to economically empower women in its area of operation and to extend basic financial services to the hard-to-reach marginalized groups of rural women living in poverty. As a local mechanism, the savings groups enabled community members to save money and to have access to funds year-round, especially in response to irregular income sources and household emergencies. The savings groups were also used as platforms to advance gender equality, social inclusion, and women's political empowerment. The project piloted mobile money technology for savings groups, in partnership with key mobile network operators (MNOs) such as Orange Money, which improved women's access to technological assets, and created job opportunities for some of the women who were able to work as Mobile Money Agents, facilitating transactions.

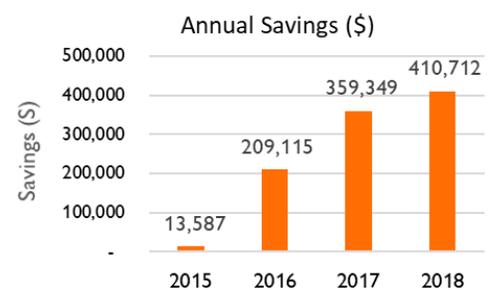
The WELD project utilized training, knowledge building, and skills strengthening approaches to enhance women's political and civic engagement and establish their confidence to run for office and serve as elected officials. Elected women were trained on their roles and responsibilities, communication and media relations, policy making and drafting of gender focused bills.¹¹

In addition, the project involved and trained male champions who occupied key positions such as parliamentarians, councilors, civil society leaders. These champions acted as mentors for female aspirants, helped them in their campaigns and advocated for them. They also supported women empowerment and gender equality efforts.¹²

Other efforts focused on transforming society through advocacy and enhancing the capacity of civil society organizations to effectively engage women, men, children, communities, government, and other actors. These organizations advocated for gender responsive plans and budgets at local and national level and lobbied for increased participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels.¹³

ACCESS

WELD demonstrated improvement in women's access to productive economic resources through savings groups, that increased their access to savings and loans. There were 361 savings groups in WELD project areas. Membership increased from 1,697 [1418 female, 279 male] in year one to 9,620 [8323 females, 1297 male] in the final year of implementation. These groups saved over \$410,000 in 2018, and the final performance report indicated that the savings groups were the main source of credit in the rural areas.¹⁴ The impact was higher for women with low socioeconomic status in terms of educational attainment and home ownership. Some women were widows and others did not have access to stable income to support their families, buy food, or pay for their children's school fees. Their access to savings groups improved their ability to contribute



10 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.

11 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.

12 World Vision. 2020. Women Empowered for Leadership and Development (WELD) Project. (Project Summary).

13 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.

14 World Vision. 2019. WELD Project Final Performance Evaluation Report, Sierra Leone.

to basic household expenses and this enhanced respect and cooperation from their partners and other household members. They used their savings to educate their children, pay school levies, start income generating activities, buy farm inputs and implements and enable caregivers to access medical care. A majority of the participants in the savings groups (80.3 %) reported that they used their loans to pay school fees and learning materials, such as books, pens, and school uniform for their children, and 52.5 % said they used the loans to buy food, especially during months when they are experiencing food scarcity.¹⁵ Some used the loans to procure productive assets such as farm tools, small stock, and motorbikes. Others used the savings group for loans and capital to start business as individuals or collectively. Here are some specific examples reported by various participants during qualitative interviews:¹⁶

A widow participant said:

“My late husband left me with four children, it was a difficult time for me and the children. I started by savings and loaning from the group to do my palm oil business in Kailahun I used the profit from my business to pay school fees.”

A participant engaged in individual and collective group small enterprise said:

“I run a successful business and we also have a general business as a group. We sell cassava, corn and cucumber.”

The primary outcomes of the savings groups included increasing knowledge of participants on financial management and allowing members to stabilize their incomes by saving money and accessing loans. The intervention also allowed members to better respond to emergencies and sudden costs. Women accessed training, and reported greater knowledge of saving, business management and how to diversify savings into more profitable products. The project promoted empowerment and entrepreneurship training for women who joined savings groups. The savings groups also served as a conduit for other interventions such as health services, agricultural training, advocacy campaigns, gender dialogues, and access to formal financial services.

The project increased women's access to mobile banking by piloting mobile money technology for savings groups. The mobile phone-based payment system enabled women to securely carry out simple banking operations and transactions without using a bank account. This use of innovative mobile money technology helped to digitalize the activities of the savings groups and provided a more secure means of saving money, gave savings groups an opportunity to generate more income through mobile money transfer services and sale of other Orange products and services, and provided job opportunities for women in savings groups who were mobile money agents.

The project increased women's access to literacy, expanding beyond numeracy and financial literacy targeting women participating in savings group, which helped address major barrier to women's social, economic, and political advancement. A total of 472 women participating in adult learning acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills.¹⁷ Participants had cited illiteracy as a major impediment to their engagement in business and politics. Some women had been reluctant to attend training or participate in civic and political activities because they were expected to write and sign their names, yet they did not know how to do so. They felt as if they would be judged for their inability to read or write. In response to these

15 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.

16 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.

17 World Vision. 2020. Women Empowered for Leadership and Development (WELD) Project. (Project Summary).

challenges, WELD project rolled out a comprehensive adult literacy training for selected participants of savings groups. Although both men and women participated in the literacy training, the majority (85 %) were women. The training helped improve their access to knowledge, writing and reading skills, and information, this in turn increased their confidence and self-esteem because they were not considered illiterate.¹⁸ They were able to identify letters of the alphabet, write their names, and count and sign their names. They also accessed financial literacy training and skills that enabled them to make better financial choices and access appropriate financial services. Savings groups members took loans and started small enterprises such as shops, groceries, cassava processing and fish farming.

One woman explained that,

“Being part of saving group has opened more doors for me. I am participating in adult literacy classes introduced by WELD. I can now read and write.”

Another female participant shared:

“Initially I would shy off from attending trainings and meetings because I could not write my name. I used to ask someone to write it for me. I am now proud to attend training since I know how to read, write, and sign and no longer fear training. I can confidently speak in front of people during community meetings because people no longer consider me an illiterate.”¹⁹

PARTICIPATION

The WELD project increased women's participation in leadership, and in civic and political engagement in positions of influence that determined development and life activities and outcomes. The project used training, mentorship, and capacity building as means to enhance women's confidence to run for political office, hold leadership positions, and be equipped with public speaking skills. The training and mentorship increased the number of female political aspirants in the 2018 elections who ran for political office from 184 women in 2012 to 289 in 2018. Out of the 289 female political aspirants that were trained at national and sub-national levels, 185 were nominated in March 2018 elections (20 for Parliament and 165 for local council). A total of 59 women were elected in the 2018 elections (7 members of parliament, 51 councilors, one district chairperson, and one mayor).²⁰

The project challenged negative social norms around women's participation in politics and leadership position, especially in the Northern Region. Women in the North historically were not allowed to hold traditional leadership positions such as paramount chief or section chief. WELD conducted a series of engagements and social norm change community sensitization activities through radio programs, radio jingles, and dialogues sessions with traditional authorities and community members (men, women, youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities, among others). These sessions increased community acceptance of women in politics and leadership. As a result, women in local communities, including those with disabilities were elected officials in various political positions in different capacities as section chiefs, members of parliament, councilors, mayor, deputy mayor, and district chairperson.²¹ Women were able to take up non-traditional leadership positions that were often dominated by men. For example, five

18 World Vision. 2019. WELD Project Final Performance Evaluation Report, Sierra Leone.

19 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.

20 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.

21 World Vision. 2020. Women Empowered for Leadership and Development (WELD) Project. (Project Summary).

women were appointed section chiefs for the first time in the history of their localities. As one participant reported,

“For a woman to become section chief, for a woman to become town chief, it has never happened, it is because of this mobilization.”²²

A woman with disability who was elected as Councilor explained how the project had facilitated her participation.

“They picked me up not only as a female but as a person with special needs. They trained us on leadership, how to campaign, how to write manifesto and how we should talk in public before and after election. They continued to train us after the elections on advocacy and how to raise revenue for our people. This was useful because councilors do not have a budget but rely on mobilization from external partners. . . There are women who are more capable than me, but they will not come out if not supported. If people did not encourage me, I couldn't have been where I am today.”²³

Another elected female explained:

“WELD trained us on public speaking, how to develop a manifesto, how to form a campaign team, fundraising for the campaigns and how to reach out to other partners for support.”

A representative of WELD partners from Civil Society Organizations emphasized the significance of increased women's participation in leadership: “You see now if you go to the councils, we have five women in the city council, six in the district council. . .” Staff also explained this was a big success because “In our work, before now, they did not have that number.”

WELD also facilitated dialogue between men, women, and traditional rulers to challenge deeply held values that excluded women from taking up leadership positions in their communities. These activities contributed in the gradual shift towards positive attitudes and acceptance of women's leadership initiatives, and both women and men were equipped to actively support women's participation. This also was one of the contributing factors to the appointment and election of women as section chiefs and political leaders. Madam Mariatu Kanu, who was elected as the first female Section Chief in Maforki Chiefdom and the first woman to hold that position in Port Loko District mentioned,

“Residents of this area have strong traditional and cultural beliefs that exclude women in leadership position. For a woman to be a leader is a great cultural transformation.”

Both female and male members of savings groups supported female political aspirants from their groups, including women with disabilities, by contributing money to support campaigns or undertaking door to door campaigns for them. Women's leadership and participation in savings groups was high, with 81 % of all executive positions held by women.

22 USAID. 2019. USAID/Sierra Leone Women Empowered for Leadership and Development (WELD) Project Performance Evaluation.
23 World Vision. 2019. WELD Project Final Performance Evaluation Report, Sierra Leone.

DECISION-MAKING

The WELD project strengthened women's decision-making particularly at the community level in large part through the engagement with saving groups, which also bolstered the status of women among members of their community. The majority of savings groups members (87 %) were women and 81 % of executive positions in the savings groups were held by women, which contributed to their engagement in decision making processes. Women's decision-making at the household level however was not significant. It was found that 15.4 % of the women were making decisions in their households in 2018 compared to 4.8 % reported in 2016.²⁴ Women participating in savings groups gave testimonies on how their husbands consulted them on decisions such as what size of land to put under agriculture.

Women felt that men respected them more when they had money. Some married women, single mothers and female-headed household reported that they made independent decisions. On decisions relating to utilization of share-out funds from savings groups, evidence indicated that there were slight differences among married women as some made independent decision, others made joint decisions with their partners, while others sought approval from their partners before making any decisions. Those who would request the approval of their partners said that sometimes their husbands paid the membership fees or provided funds to be saved in the savings group. In such cases, women could not make decisions without their husband's approval as it would be viewed as disrespectful, and lead to conflict, arguments, and even intimate partner violence.

Importantly, some of male members of savings groups became more gender-aware and supportive of women's decision making through their participation in savings groups. For example, one male savings group member said that following the training and sensitization he received from participating in a savings group and other WELD project activities, he consulted his wife on decisions, even though his wife was not a member of a savings group.

“ Before joining the group, only I would decide on issues at home. Since joining the savings group, I have changed the idea of making decision on my own. This is because I am the adviser [in his Savings Group], and I know how women feel when not allowed to participate in important decisions in the household.

SYSTEMS

The WELD project established and strengthened structures for coordination, working closely with the government of Sierra Leone. All seven districts in the WELD implementation area established gender desk officers and trained core staff from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs who provided technical support to other government ministries, departments, and agencies to ensure that development plans were gender-responsive. The gender staff and focal points were trained on how to prepare gender responsive budgets, plans and reports, how to prevent gender-based violence prevention, and how to manage savings groups. The project also trained key staff from Civil Society Organizations and community leaders on the importance of adopting gender-sensitive programming for their communities, and promoted the inclusion of gender issues in development plans and implementation.²⁵ Participants indicated that these establishment of coordination and gender focal points

24 World Vision. 2019. WELD Project Final Performance Evaluation Report, Sierra Leone.

25 World Vision. 2019. WELD Project Final Performance Evaluation Report, Sierra Leone.

at district and community level had made a difference.

“ It has made a difference in terms of the planning for the District. As a Finance Officer, it has helped me to look at the budget and to know whether it is going to have equal impact for females and males, or not.”

Gender-specific interventions were included in Koinadugu District Development Plan (2018-2020: 22) under gender and children’s affairs: to promote gender mainstreaming in the district.

WELD also strengthened community structures and coordination mechanisms with religious leaders, traditional chiefs, and community leaders and organizations. These structures served as a conduit for community awareness, advocacy, and dialogues with faith leaders and paramount chiefs and other community leaders, which helped to open up space for women and challenge religious and cultural barriers that exclude women in leadership positions. The project saw some success in shifting discriminatory norms especially in districts traditionally opposed to women becoming paramount chiefs such as Tonkolili, Port Loko and Koinadugu. These areas were able to elect women as chiefs, as already indicated.

WELD also established a network of Male champions, majority of whom were politicians, who served as great advocates of gender equality and supported female aspirants through mentorship and coaching. The project facilitated these male champions to participate in radio discussions and convince the electorate especially men to vote for women. They also advocated for women to be awarded nomination certificates and political party symbols that were often provided to male nominees to contest against other candidates in main election. Getting a symbol in areas where a political party is popular is almost a guarantee that a candidate will win the election. Male champions also hosted radio programs on SGBV and providing women with free airtime (slot) for women to go to the radio and air their manifesto. They also protected women from election violence by speaking to police and traditional leaders, to protect women from violence and prevent secret male-dominated societies from interfering with women while they were campaigning in public. They also conducted fundraising activities for women through planning a football gala. All these activities created an enabling environment for political participation and campaigning for female political aspirants.

Another system that the project mobilized was the radio network. WELD engaged 15 community radio stations to air jingles and hold discussion programs with the public on gender issues and women’s empowerment. The project facilitated the formation of 57 radio listener groups in the seven districts. Listeners helped to disseminate messages to other members of the society. During the radio discussion, people could phone in and ask questions as well as provide feedback. The community radio contributed to behavioral change as a Section Chief, Mabontor in Kafe Simiria Chiefdom Tonkolili district explained,

“ I have decided that we will review the bylaws that govern renting of houses to allow women to rent a room or house without being accompanied by their husband or boyfriend.”²⁶

Another critical system established by WELD was the gender-based violence reporting and referral system. World Vision report (2019) indicated that there was an increase in the number of GBV cases that were reported to family support unit (FSU) and prosecuted. However, the data did not quantify the actual increase of reports, compared to baseline.

WELL-BEING

WELD project engaged in a series of social behavior change communication activities to advance the overall wellbeing of women such as intense radio discussion programs, stakeholders' engagement, and intergenerational dialogue forums such as Men and Young Men, Women and Young Women forums. These social and behavior change activities enabled participants to build critical consciousness and constructive thinking around gender roles, transformative masculinity, women's, and men's roles in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, how to prevent sexual and gender-based violence, and men's attitudes towards women. WELD trained theatre group and media personnel on social and behavior changes messaging and how to ensure gender sensitive reporting. This helped to ensure that messages shared with the public transformed people's perceptions and attitudes towards women, and promoted respect, protection, and empowerment toward them.

The use of radio discussions, youth forums and training on gender-based violence (GBV) created and awareness on GBV and strengthened the prevention, management, and referral of GBV cases. This increased the safety and wellbeing of women and girls, and facilitated their greater engagement in income generating activities and political engagements.

The WELD project participants in the savings group set up a social fund—a non-interest-bearing fund that all members contributed to on a weekly basis to advance the overall well-being of members, particularly during medical emergencies, weddings, funerals, and other social events.²⁷

There was evidence of improvement in food security and overall well-being of households where females participated in WELD project savings groups. The WELD Research indicated that such households experienced an increase in dietary diversity score by 0.80 numbers of food groups relative to the control mean of 9.6. WELD research also showed that women participating in a savings group increased consumption of more balanced diets including carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables, eggs, sugar, and milk products. As one youth mentioned:

“Since the establishment of my mother's savings group and the gains she is making from it, my siblings and me have not gone to bed on an empty stomach. Before then, we reserved a portion of what had been cooked and that became our meal the next day. This became a normal routine for us. Even when we were not full, we rationed the food over a period of two days, so that we could have a reserve of something to eat the next day.”²⁸

Women reported increased self-confidence and self-esteem due to participating in savings groups, political spaces, and leadership trainings. Many talked about having been shy and soft-spoken before joining savings groups or political movements, but through the demands of active participation in regular meetings and public engagement, they learned to express themselves more clearly and confidently.

Participation in savings groups improved family relationship as women felt more valued and were able to contribute to household welfare. A female savings group participant explained:

“My husband was not treating me well because I had no source of income and was not doing much to support the family economically. The savings group came and helped me. He is treating me well now.”²⁹

Social capital increased because women came together to discuss mutual challenges, and they also had male champions. This created greater support for each other, which historically had been a challenge in many of the communities.

27 World Vision. 2019. The Evaluation of WELD's Savings Group Expansion Program in Sierra Leone.

28 World Vision. 2017. Women Empowered for Leadership and Development (WELD Project): Children Impacted Through Economic Empowerment www.wvi.org/sierra-leone/article/women-empowered-leadership-and-development-weld-project-children-impacted

29 World Vision. 2019. Women Rising: Pathways to Women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone.



LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS

WELD project took a multi-sectoral approach to empower women politically, socially, and economically. The project utilized a savings group approach to economically empower poor rural women and men to improve their livelihood and household economies, utilizing their own resources and agency. I promoted training and women's political leadership. The project focused on social behavior change, utilizing audio-visual communication strategies. It also innovatively engaged multiple actors for the empowerment of women, including faith leaders and their communities, radio infrastructure and its listeners, male champions, traditional chiefs, and the government of Sierra Leone ministries and staff. This multi-sector approach contributed to increasing access, participation, decision making, systems and well-being of women and their children, families, and communities.

FAITH AND DIALOGUE

Mobilizing faith for meaningful dialogue was essential to achieving project impact for the empowerment of women, and the community. In Sierra Leone, religious and cultural barriers combined to make it difficult for women to contest for leadership positions in political or traditional roles such as town, section, or paramount chiefs. For example, according to a female Member of Parliament from a predominantly Muslim area, the slogan of her male competitor stated,

“Have you ever seen a woman leading in the mosque? So why vote for her? She is a woman.”

Similar views were held by many Christians.

WELD project organized dialogue meetings with paramount chiefs, section chiefs, chiefdom speakers, youth chairpersons, mammy queen (head of the women in the chiefdom) and religious leaders from Christian and Muslim faiths. Participants discussed social and religious barriers to women participation in leadership. These opinion leaders disseminated the messages to their followers after the dialogue meetings. For example, pastors and sheikhs sensitized their congregants during sermons. These engagements helped to open space for women, at least at the lower levels.

EMPOWERING WOMEN AS A TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

One of the major lessons learned through this project is that empowering women is a transformational process that requires a multi-sectoral approach, and that takes time and resource. Economic empowerment is a crucial component to the promotion of overall women's empowerment, including their confidence and ability to run for political position and other leadership positions. Unsuccessful aspirants were, nonetheless, disappointed and will likely need future encouragement to run in elections again. Social and cultural barriers to participation and decision making can be broken. Constant engagements with key stakeholders such as Civil Society Organizations, the Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, and traditional leaders and local/district councils have given them the urge to incorporate gender issues in every sphere of the community development process.

The engagement of men and boys on gender equality and social inclusion efforts is very crucial to changing harmful social norms and eliminating discriminating and abusive practices at the household, community, and societal levels. Male champions supported and promoted women political aspirants by creating an enabling environment for them. They had a great role in reducing the risk of backlash to women's political and economic empowerment by engaging other males in the community to support women.

Community radio is a powerful tool for social transformation. Radio listener group members are also important, as they can discuss the issues aired on radio and disseminate messages to the members of the community. The WELD project final performance report revealed that radio discussions stimulated behavior change in the community and challenged some of the strongly beliefs such as women cannot hold leadership positions or cannot rent a house without showing proof of marital status. It contributed to a shift in social norms and expansion of space for women to participate in decision making at household, community, and national level.³⁰

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

An adaptive management approach was very beneficial for project implementation. Adaptations were made to the project plans based on the context, monitoring data and learning generated during implementation. For example, the project had envisioned the need for adult learning interventions, but interaction with women revealed that illiteracy was a major barrier to women's social, economic, and political advancement. This prompted the project to introduce adult literacy classes, targeting women in savings groups and female political aspirants.

Sustainability

The strategy adopted by World Vision Sierra Leone for WELD project is proven to be self-sustaining. WELD utilized multi-sector actors structures already in place in the community. The savings group model provided training to savings group promoters in each community, who then formed the groups in their respective communities. These groups were not reliant on WELD to continue and are able to generate their own funds and use mobile money for banking. Working with the government of Sierra Leone to help to establish technical capacity for gender integration beyond the project cycle. The community mobilization and support of religious groups, radio and listeners, and civil society organizations promoted through self-selection, established, and re-established relations, and provided opportunities for ongoing collaboration and coordination.

Replicability

This project has been implemented in the Eastern and Northern parts of the Sierra Leone across 57 chiefdoms. Although these geographic locations have some similarities, they also differ in terms of traditional, cultural, social, and economic activities, which provides nuances for contextualized replication. Approaches taken to increase women in political participation in different communities, including traditional chiefdoms, can provide nuances for promoting women's political participation and inclusive civic engagement. In addition, the initial groups formed by the WELD project have replicated into new areas and resulted in an increase in the number of groups and members have served as mentors to train them. Lessons from piloting the digital mobile money in Sierra Leone suggests the initiative creates jobs for women since women had the opportunity to serve as mobile money agents; this also formed another source of income for the group through commissions earned from mobile money operators. This approach has the potential to be even more scalable with the increase use of mobile money in Sierra Leone.

PANDEMICS – LESSONS FROM EBOLA AND COVID-19

As in the case of Ebola crisis, COVID-19 prevention measures have had a negative impact on women's livelihoods and economic security in Sierra Leone. The economic challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic pose significant threats to the income and livelihoods of women engaged in micro-level businesses such as farming, street hawking, retail trading and other domestic services. The implication to food security has raised regional concerns especially since women dominate 70 % of the subsistence agriculture in Sierra Leone.³¹

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