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# *Political Parties, COVID-19 and Women's Political Participation*

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**For**
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# 1.Introduction

Across the world, COVID-19 has been seen to impact women and girls disproportionately (Connor et al., 2020; Salas, 2020). The epidemic could potentially delay the realization of many women empowerment targets at the country and global levels (Parsitau, 2021). In Sierra Leone, women have been vulnerable to the disease as primary caregivers within their families, and frontline health workers. Moreover concerns have been raised about the rise of sexual gender based violence as has been observed in countries worldwide particularly during lockdowns (UNHCR, 2020). These concerns are particularly salient in Sierra Leone, where the Ebola outbreak exacerbated women and girls vulnerabilities; teenage pregnancy increased as did sexual gender based violence, while maternal mortality rates rose as the outbreak had an impact on access to reproductive health care services (Muriithi, 2020). These concerns have resurfaced during the COVID-19 outbreak. Women's triple burden[1] has also increased as they juggle childcare, paid work, and unpaid community service (McLaren et al., 2020). In addition, COVID-19 has deepened women's economic vulnerabilities given their prevalence in the informal sector and overall weaker economic standing (Cuccaro et al., 2021).

Yet, women are often absent from decision making roles in the fight against COVID. There are concerns that this marginalisation contributes to the continued implementation of gender-blind policies that exacerbate inequalities reinforced by patriarchal structures, norms and values (UNWomen, 2020). For many, effectively addressing the gendered impacts of COVID-19 requires women at the table equally involved in leadership and policymaking. This report takes Sierra Leone as a case study, assessing women's current levels of leadership. Further, it examines at the effects of the pandemic on the country's chances to increase representation of women and reduce exclusion and vulnerabilities at the household and national levels. Through a close study of the existing power structures that create leaders at the community level and through the voices of women politicians from multiple interest groups across the country, the report sounds an alarm that women's representation might reduce from its current dismal 12% in governance with continued implications on other areas of vulnerability. Already the numbers of women in key institutions at the forefront of the outbreak such as the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre (NaCOVERC) and the District COVID-19 Emergency Response Centres (DiCOVERCs) is very low (Lahai, 2021), mirroring global data that shows that men outnumber women 1 to 3 in COVID-taskforces worldwide (UNDP 2021). Just one of the 16 District Coordinators of the DICOVERCS is a woman. Similarly, only one of the District Medical Officers, the technical leads for the COVID-19 response in the districts, is a woman. Although there are women represented at lower levels, within the response teams, this low representation of women at the top continues to limit the capacity of frontline

[1]Women's triple burden (Moser, 1993) refers to three spheres of women's work: productive, associated with paid labour; reproductive, concerning women's largely unpaid care giving roles, such as caring for the family, including childbearing, rearing, cooking and cleaning; and finally, women's voluntary community work geared toward serving and improving their larger community.

responders to address the specific priorities of women and girls and can reverse the few gains that have been made in this area.

# 2.Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach: a nationwide survey was implemented and key informant interviews conducted in select districts. Data was collected between May and June 2021. The survey was administered to 1,936 citizens across Sierra Leone with an even split between men and women; 59% of respondents were rural-based and 41% urban. The surveys were administered face to face, with responses recorded through electronic data capture on tablets. The margin of error was +/- 2.3%.

Survey questions focused on women's vulnerability during COVID-19 with emphasis on SGBV and human rights. Within this context, women's leadership was examined, given the correlation often made between women's inclusion in decision-making bodies and gender sensitive policies. Questions sought to elicit the roles that women have played during the Covid-19 outbreak, and to examine women's political participation at community and national levels, noting opportunities, constraints and recommendations to improve women's participation.

To triangulate the data, we collected three rounds of key informant interviews (KIIs), totalling 150 respondents. Open-ended questions enabled greater discussion and deeper understanding of the challenges women face in entering the political space at all levels, from the zone or chiefdom level right through to the national level. We interviewed female and male party leaders, including secretary generals, chairpersons, female parliamentarians and unsuccessful female candidates for a variety of positions. Data was again recorded using electronic data capture. Interviews were transcribed and coded for primary themes that emerged from the responses to the questions. Survey data and key informant interviews confirmed women's increased vulnerabilities due to COVID-19. For example, for the policing and human rights module, women (50%) were more likely to say that they were treated poorly for COVID-19 violations compared to men (39%).

The first set of KIIs were conducted in four districts identified as strongholds of the two oldest parties: Kenema, Bo, (strongholds of the Sierra Leone People's Party, or SLPP), Port Loko and Tonkolili (strongholds of the All People's Congress, or APC). A total of 44 key informants were interviewed on four main questions: women's leadership during the COVID outbreak, the constraints women face in delegate selection processes, women's constraints in general elections, and policy recommendations to address issues raised, with focus on PPRC, NEC and the political parties. Women represented 64% of the key informants compared to 36% men.

The second set of KIIs sought to probe a little more deeply, the differences in selection/election processes for party delegates, in addition to the other questions. Interviews were conducted in Kenema, Moyamba, Port Loko and Tonkolili at all three levels, zonal, constituency and district. Key informants included members of the executive (women's

leader, chair and organizing secretary), unsuccessful candidates and influential women in the party where no female executive leader outside of the women's leader was available. These KIIs targeted more women (92%) than men (7.8%) given the emphasis on women's experiences. The final set of KIIs were held with 14 of the 18 female parliamentarians (six APC parliamentarians, six SLPP parliamentarians, one C4C parliamentarian and an independent parliamentarian).

The report proceeds in four parts. First we examine women's vulnerabilities during COVID-19. Second we look at how women have led during the outbreak and the challenges they have faced in taking a leadership role. Third, we use the delegate recruitment process as a prism to understand the constraints that women in leadership face. We look at women's ability to access these positions and constraints faced. We conclude with policy recommendations to help ensure that in the next elections, Sierra Leone women's participation does not continue to decline. We suggest ways to address the challenges of getting more women into politics, given that this absence is often seen as a contributing factor to the prevalence of gender-blind policies that do little to ameliorate women's unique vulnerabilities, particularly during the COVID-10 outbreak (UNDP, 2021). AS UNDP has shared, "Without women in decision-making roles, COVID-19 measures taken by governments are more likely to ignore women's needs and it could further exacerbate the unequal recovery opportunities from the pandemic." (UNDP 2020).

# 3.FINDINGS

## 3.1. SGBV and COVID-19 in Sierra Leone

Links have been made between COVID-10 and increased incidences of sexual gender based violence to COVID-19, or what the UN has termed, a "Shadow Pandemic" (UN News, 2020). Similar fears emerged early on in Sierra Leone, where the country's history of increased vulnerabilities of women and girls during and after the Ebola outbreak reinforced these concerns. Lockdown measures then, along with the closure of schools and decline in the use of health care facilities not only contributed to increased pregnancy rates among school girls, but also contributed to rising maternal and infant mortality rates as women were unable to receive routine prenatal and antenatal care in an overstretched health care system (Muriithi, 2020). Moreover, outside of COVID-19, Sierra Leone has historically high rates of Sexual Gender Based violence (SGBV), which some have attributed to the atrocities of the civil war, reinforced by patriarchal attitudes and beliefs that marginalise women (Mills et al., 2015). Concern over these rates, and particularly, the sexual abuse of minors in Sierra Leone contributed to the President's Declaration of rape as a national emergency in February 2019 (Kardas-Nelson & Inveen, 2019). Later that year, the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act was passed, providing more stringent punishment for perpetrators of gender based violence, including expanding the maximum punishment to life in prison and criminalising compromise. An Afrobarometer report found that knowledge and awareness of this new law is high: 86% of respondents said they had heard about its passage, while 89% believed that it would help to reduce the occurrence of rape and sexual assault (F. M'Cormack-Hale & Appiah-Nyameke Sanny, 2021)

Since the implementation of the law, a number of additional steps have been taken. This includes the establishment of several one-stop centres country-wide to provide services for survivors, along with a model Sexual Offences Court to fast track cases. Victims can also report sexual assault incidents through a free hotline (Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, 2020).

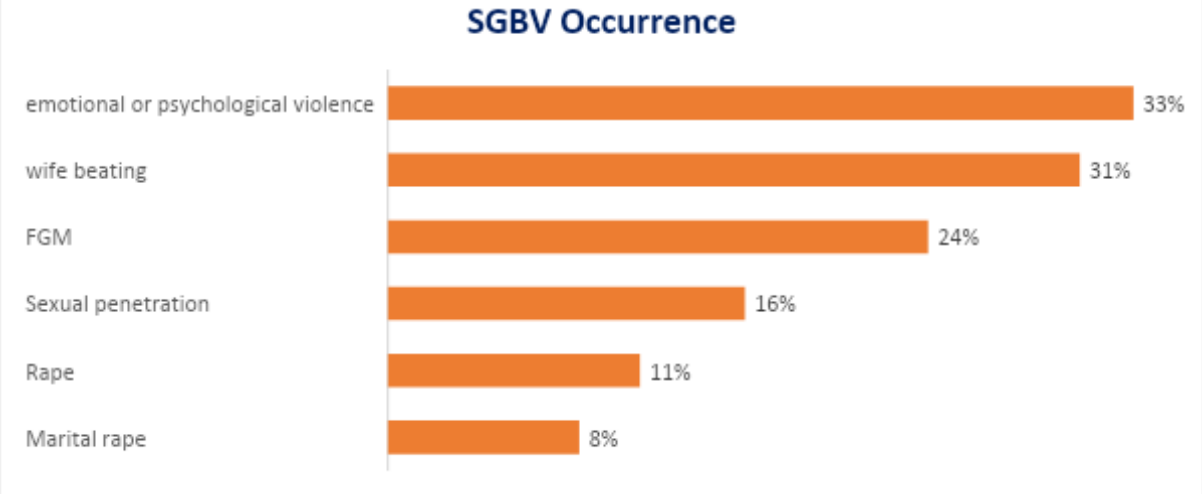
The 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS) notes that around 62% of women report experience with physical or sexual violence with fears that this would rise with the lockdowns implemented to curb covid cases (Muriithi, 2020). Cases reported at the Rainbo Centres showed a rise from 2,900 in 2018, to 3,701 in 2019 (Mitchell, 2020). However, in 2020, Rainbo reported 3,226 cases, a slight decline. Further research is required to understand these figures. Questions have always been raised as to whether higher numbers of SGBV reflected increases in occurrence or simply higher reporting, particularly with greater sensitisation. Another possible explanation is with the increase in one-stop-centres nationwide, attendance at Rainbo has declined given that victims now have additional options for help seeking. Others have expressed fears that the more stringent laws might discourage reporting, particularly as SGBV is often a crime where victims know perpetrators, including family members. Further, the new laws on compromise might discourage people from coming forward. It is also possible that lockdowns made it more difficult for women to seek assistance for SGBV crimes. In addition, the majority of crimes reported to Rainbo is sexual penetration of minors, and not women. Thus, these figures would need to be further triangulated with data from other institutions that monitor SGBV like the Family Support Unit (FSU) and Legal Aid Board.

### 3.1.1. Survey Responses on COVID-19 and SGBV

To understand COVID-19's impact on SGBV rates, survey respondents were asked a series of questions about their perception of incidences of SGBV in their communities, as well as whether crimes were reported and prosecuted.

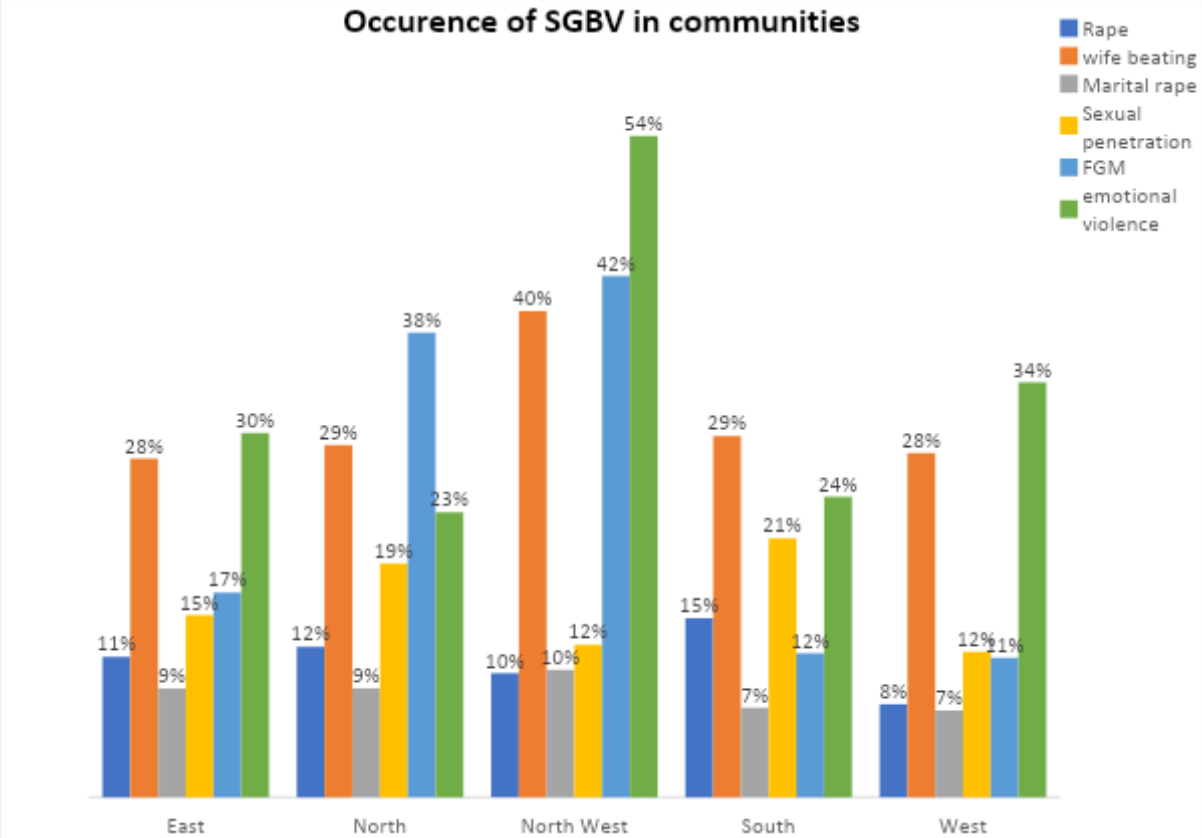
SGBV was reported in all communities. Emotional violence (33%), wife beatings (31%) and FGM/C (24%) were the most frequently reported cases of SGBV. The latter was most prevalent in the North (38%) and North West (42%) in the country (Figure 1).

*Figure 1: Occurrence of SGBV During COVID-19*




***Respondents were asked**:* In your community do you know whether the following take place?

*Figure 2*: *Occurrence of SGBV by District*

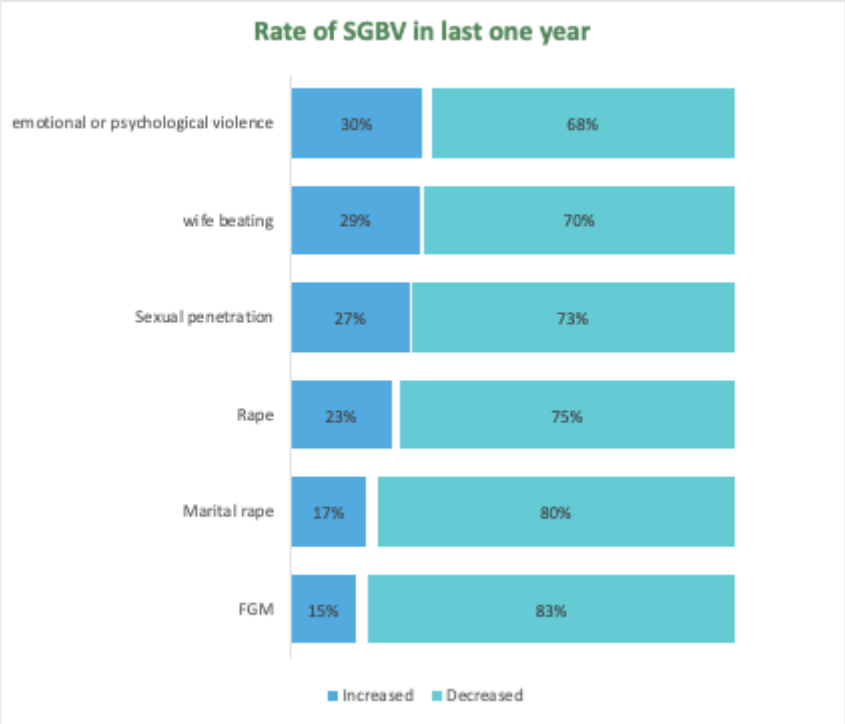



***Respondents were asked**: In your community do you know whether the following take place? Rape, wife beating, marital rape, sexual penetration, FGM, emotional violence*

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which SGBV had increased in local communities. Interestingly, the majority appeared to believe that violence against women has decreased over the past one year ( Figure 3). However, similar to the decline in reports of

abuse by the Rainbo Centre, it is important to conduct additional research to understand and contextualise these findings. Potential explanation of these findings include the fact that this is a perception survey, rather than observations based on objective findings, or it could be that with the new law people are afraid to commit SGBV offences because of the more stringent punishments. It would be useful to triangulate this data with actual records of cases reported from sources such as the Rainbo Centres, Legal Aid Board and the police.

*Figure 3: Rates of SGBV in the Past One Year*

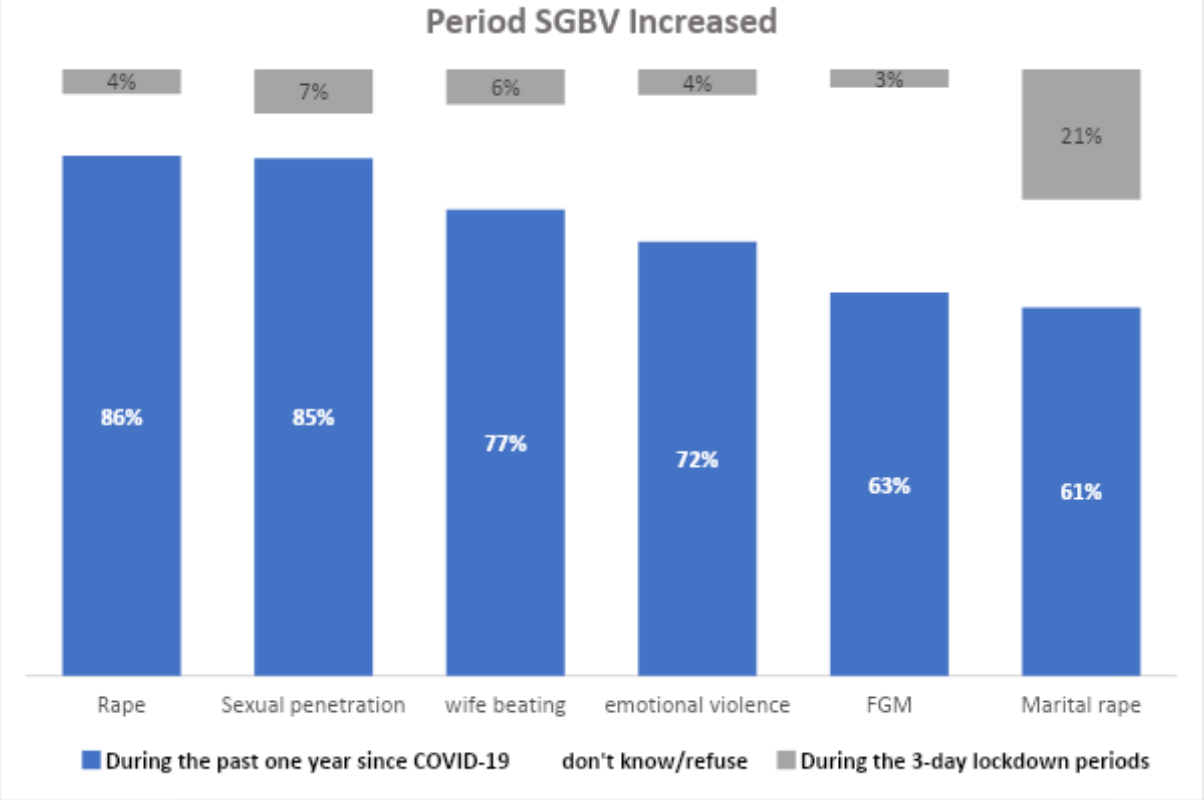



***Respondents were asked:*** *In your opinion, for each of the issues above, do you think they increased or decreased in the last one year? Increased, decreased, don't know*

a. *Rape/sexual penetration*
b. *wife beating*
c. *Marital rape (husbands forcing wives to have sex)*
d. *Sexual penetration (sex with children under 17)*
e. *Female genital mutilation*
f. *emotional or psychological violence*

For those that said SGBV had increased, the three most prevalent forms mentioned were: emotional violence (30%), wife beating (29%) and sexual penetration (27%) (Figure 3). When asked to specify if incidences of SGBV had increased overall generally during the past one year or specifically during one of the three day lock down periods, marital rape was most frequently cited as increasing during the lockdown by just over 2 in 10 respondents (21%) (Figure 4).

*Figure 4: The Period During which SGBV Increased*

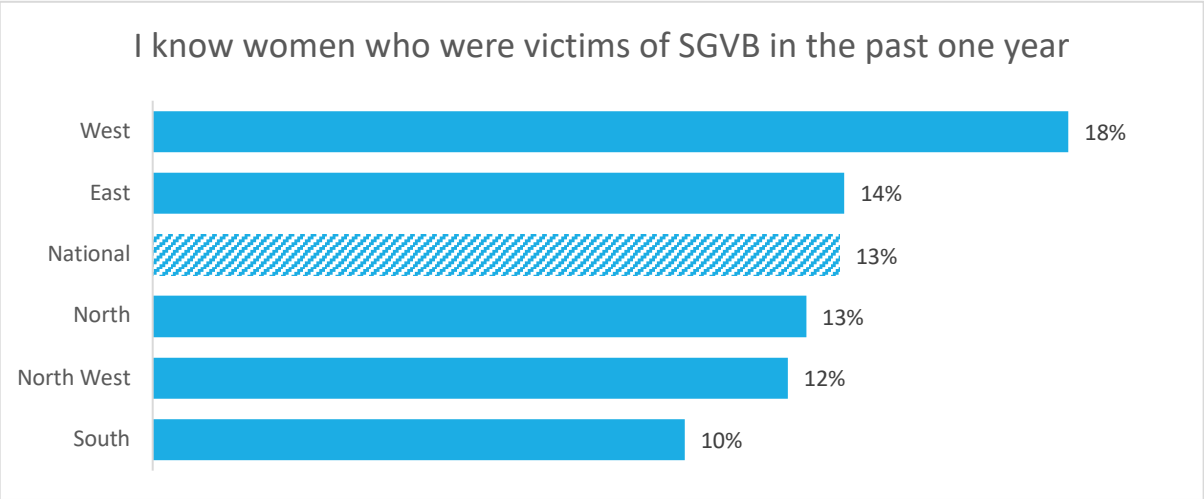



***Respondents were asked:*** *For the incidences mentioned above, during which period do you think they increased? a. During the 3-day lockdown periods; b. During the past one year since COVID-19 generally; c. I don't remember/Don't know*

Respondents were also asked about whether they knew of any woman who experienced SGBV in the past one year. On average, 13% of citizens reported knowing female victims of SGBV in the past year. Knowledge was highest in the Western Area (Figure 5). Four in 10 (41%) of respondents said that the cases they knew of had been charged to court; while 70% said those charged led to a jail conviction (Figure 6). This seems to imply higher rates of accountability for SGBV crimes than what current data shows. Again, it is important to treat this information with some caution, as we are asking about second-hand information. It bears further study and triangulation with independent bodies that record actual cases such as the FSU and the Legal Aid Board.

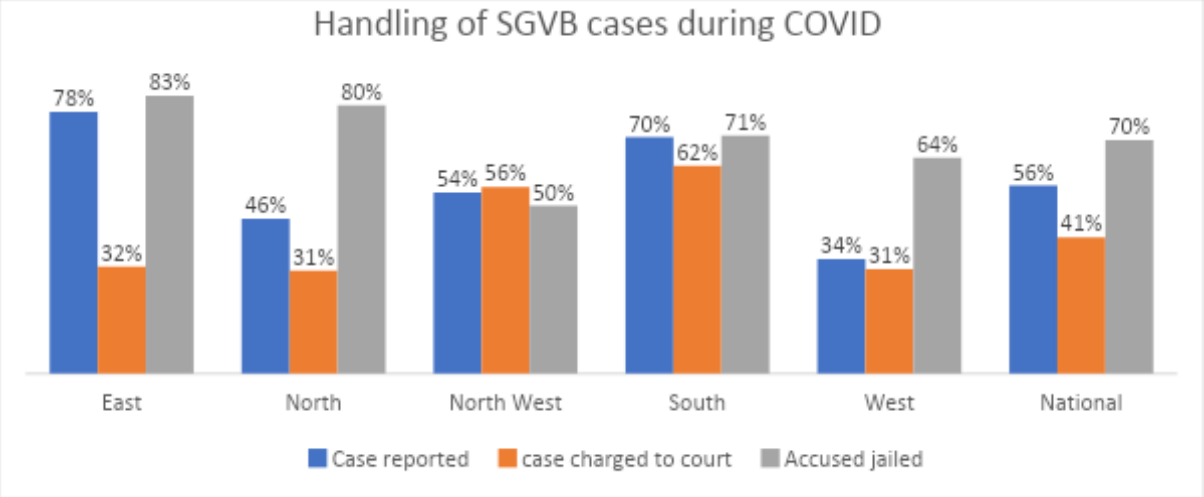
The survey also asked about awareness of the toll line established by the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs with support from UNFPA to provide referral services as well as counselling for women who had experienced SGBV. Unlike the widespread knowledge of the Sexual Offences Amendment Act of 2019 (F. M'Cormack-Hale & Appiah-Nyameke Sanny, 2021) few knew about the toll free line: only 15% of respondents had heard about it. Awareness of the telephone line was highest among educated and wealthier households, as well as in the Northwest (25%) (Figure 7).

*Figure 5: Knowledge of women who were victims of SGBV in the past year*




***Respondents were asked**: Do you know of any woman who was a victim of any of the issues mentioned above during the past one year? (Percentage that say yes).*

*Figure 6: Justice for SGBV Cases during the Past One Year*




***Respondents were asked:** For each woman mentioned please let us know the following: Was she able to report the case?; If yes, was the case charged to court?; Was there a conviction?*

*Figure 7*: *Knowledge of Where to Call to Receive Support for SGBV*

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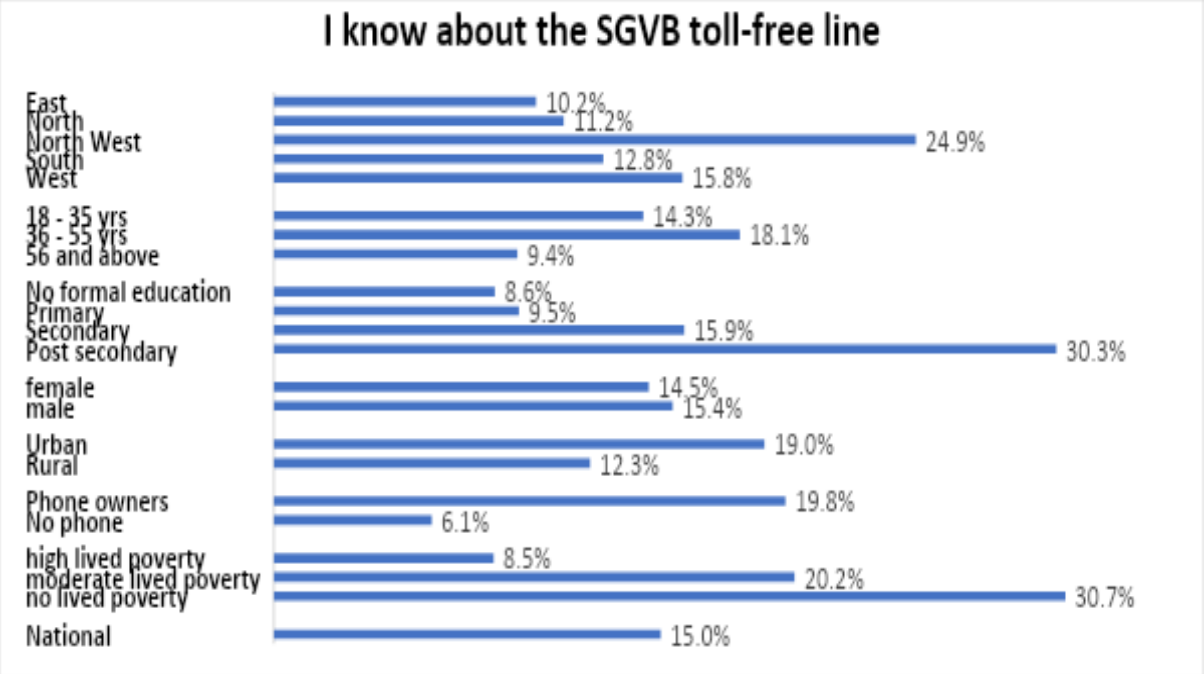



***Respondents were asked****: Do you know that there is a toll free number now for women to call and report domestic or sexual violence? (Percentage that say yes)*

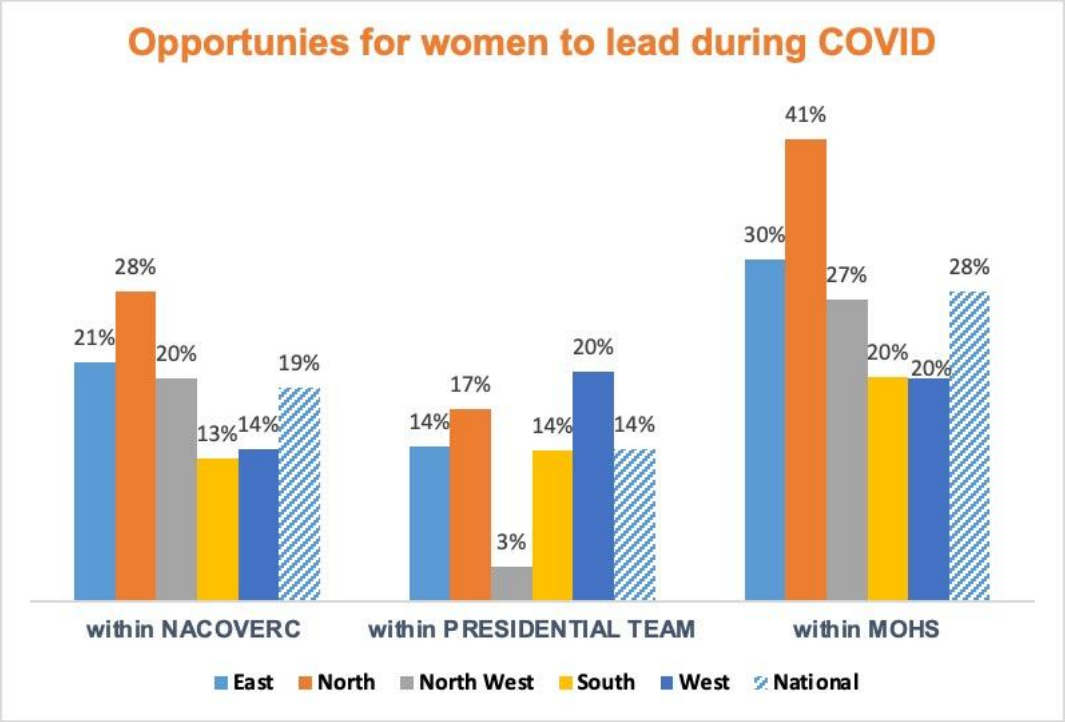
In sum, it would appear that while a majority of respondents believe that SGBV incidences have decreased overall, there are concerns over emotional or psychological violence, wife beating and sexual penetration. FGC/M was also mentioned as still taking place within local communities. Given the restricted mobility during COVID-19 and in particular during lockdown periods, it is important to expand awareness of the phone line for victims to receive help. It would also be good to triangulate the information on cases that are charged to court and successfully resolved, particularly for 2021. According to 2020 data from Rainbo, only 123 cases were successfully prosecuted out of the 3,339 cases (Rainbo Intiative, 2020). Similarly, data from the FSU shows that of the 3,226 cases received in 2020, 582 were charged to court, while 64 have been closed.

## 3.2. Women and Leadership in the COVID-19 Response

As the discussion above shows, it is clear that women are facing unique vulnerabilities during COVID-19. At the same time, there is an extensive body of literature that tells us that despite these challenges, policy responses tend to be gender blind and women are absent from positions of leadership in the institutions charged with leading the response (Mantouvalou, 2020; UNDP, 2021). Nevertheless, while women have not necessarily been formally included in the response, examples abound of women at the forefront of the response, volunteering, even without formal support.

This finding was echoed by respondents in the survey. Respondents were asked about whether the government provided sufficient opportunities for women to lead, with a focus on three main bodies working on the response: NACOVERC, the Presidential team and the MoHS. In all three, respondents perceived women to be severely under-represented, although MoHS had the greatest level of representation comparatively (28% of respondents said MoHS provided opportunities for women to lead, compared to 19% in NACOVERC and 14% in the Presidential Team) (Figure 8). Again, it is important to note that these are citizens' perceptions; NACOVERC and MoHS are the more public facing institutions of the three. However, the Technical Advisory Group for Emergencies to support the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (STAGE C-19) is less well known publicly. While women's presence in NACOVERC and MoHS is indeed low, five of the 12 members of the Technical Advisory Group for Emergencies to support the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (STAGE C-19) are women, making for 42% female representation.

*Figure 8: Women's Presence in COVID Leadership Institutions*




***Respondents were asked**: In your community, do you think government provided enough opportunities for women to lead in the following positions during the pandemic? Within the NaCOVERC/DiCOVERCs ,the MoHS and the presidential team (percentage that say yes).*

Nevertheless, the overall sense of women's limited presence in the official response was echoed by key informants. Respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions about women's leadership during the outbreak, to understand the ways in which women have contributed to addressing the crisis.

The majority of key informants said that while they had not been formally included in response initiatives, they had conducted sensitization around COVID infection, prevention and awareness, social mobilization and advocacy, and generally spreading awareness about the disease, largely in a voluntary capacity. Both SLPP and APC respondents reported working

on sensitization. In addition to general sensitization, women leaders shared that their activities included the distribution of hand sanitizers to schools, the buying of buckets, facemasks and soap, etc.

An APC respondent said, *"We showed leadership in so many ways, we were going in and out of this constituency to talk to women as to how to prevent themselves from getting the sickness, we were even going into the Bondo bushes to talk to the Soweis to stop their FGM practices because it can undermine the fight against the Corona sickness. We used to supply Veronica Buckets, face masks, hand sanitizers, and soap backed up with sensitization." (APC female party member).*

When asked what, if anything, women did better than men in the response to the pandemic, a majority of respondents said that women played greater roles in community sensitization than men; a few spoke of the double burden of carrying out community sensitization while also ensuring the wellbeing of their families and taking care of the home:

*"We used to abandon our busy schedules to go out to talk to people, which was extra work for us looking at the fact that we have to take care of our homes" (SLPP female party member);*

*"We make sure that we protect our children and our family than the men, because we are the ones who were in charge of controlling the homes, while the men were busy with their own businesses and we are stuck with the children and the rest of the family at home (SLPP female party member);*

*"We the women came together and carried out community sensitization, which men did not do. We contributed and bought face masks and distributed it to our community people. Men did not do that at all. " (APC female party member).*

While some received assistance to facilitate their work, others did not, and like Ebola, there were concerns about the politicisation of the response. More SLPP respondents than APC respondents said they received some assistance from government. Concerns about the politicisation of the response echo similar findings by Babawo et. al (2020) and Amara et. al. (2021). For example, social commentators have noted that the SLPP women's leader has been at the heart of the leadership of the social mobilisation pillar. It would appear that similar to the Ebola response, support to women has taken a partisan coloration with more women in SLPP party structures being supported and others left out.

*"No! [government did not provide enough opportunities] When government took over the fight against COVID-19 in the district [by setting up DICOVERC etc.] the composition of all these bodies became political. As a result, a lot of women who were on the side were left out. Women should have more leadership roles. This is so because they have stronger voice and [are] charismatic." (APC male party member).*

*"Yes, the government was giving us transport allowance, soap, face masks, and hand sanitizer at party level. Our district women leader also was part of that work. Women are good at nursing anything. We the women can carry out any responsibility given to us better than men,*

*therefore we are supposed to be in leadership positions in every aspect of life, not only in the Corona fight." (SLPP female party member);*

For another SLPP respondent, "*We were going out to sensitize people on how to take care of themselves during the Corona outbreak on our own. We used to go to the churches and mosques to talk to people. We were doing it at party level because the national women's leader came here and talked to us [and provided us] with some logistical support to carry out the sensitization*" *(SLPP female party member).*

Nevertheless, the overarching message was that insufficient opportunities and support had been given to women's leadership, even among some SLPP respondents, and that women had largely mobilised on their own to meet this challenge. This is similar to what happened during Ebola.

*"From my end I did not see much from the government in providing opportunities for us to lead in the fight." (SLPP female party member).*

*"We were not given opportunities to lead, however some of us decided to lead in the fight in order to prevent what happened during Ebola. More women should be involved as they can handle things better, and if they fail as the men are used to failing they will suffer more." (APC female party member);*

*"Nobody appointed us to help with the Corona fight, but we as women gathered together and contributed some amount of money. From there we bought Veronica buckets, hand sanitizer and soap, going further we were going around to do community sensitization." (APC female party member).*

Reasons women gave for wanting to be involved in the fight were often grounded in essentialist perceptions of women as more caring, as having maternal instincts as well as the perception that they suffered more. Respondents talked about traits they felt were unique to women, such as their levels of integrity, transparency, and loyalty alongside the view of their greater vulnerability in the face of the disease. The perception that these qualities enabled them to address the issues better than men further underscored to reasons they gave for believing that women should be given more opportunity to lead. This is in line with global narratives that have put a spotlight on women leaders' better handling of the COVID-19 response, like New Zealand's Jacinda Arden and Germany's Angela Merkel, grounding this in narratives that leverage their roles as mothers, and caregivers (Johnson & Williams, 2021).

*"…we have found out that women can lead better in other countries, we have soft hearted people, we can easily [feel] sorry for everybody including men, if we are in a leadership position we can do better than men." (APC female party member);*

*"As the saying goes, he who feels it, knows it. Women are mostly a sect of the deprived group hence they should be in front targeting these problems. When they escalate they will suffer more." (SLPP female party member).*

## 3.3. Women in Formal Political Leadership

Although the data suggests that women are playing prominent roles in the response, particularly around social mobilisation, sensitisation and enforcement of COVID-19 regulations, these activities are largely voluntary, without much formal support from the State. Party women in the community were active, as were female parliamentarians, the bulk of whom did receive some support, particularly from the 50/50 Group, with funding from the EU and in partnership with Search from Common Ground, to engage in sensitisation and provide tools such as hand sanitisers, Veronica buckets and masks to constituents. However, overall, women did not feel adequately included and supported in the efforts to combat the COVID-19 outbreak as the KIIs indicate. These findings support Amara et. al. (2021) who also found that women felt underutilised in the response. To what extent can we understand these limitations as an illustration of women's under-representation in formal avenues of leadership? In this section, we review women's political participation in Sierra Leone, generally, before focusing on delegate elections to help us understand the barriers that women face in accessing political positions.

Women's political participation has long been identified as an issue of concern in Sierra Leone and recommendations to boost women's political participation is a recurrent theme in numerous election observer reports by actors such as the EU, USAID and the Commonwealth Secretariat. Sierra Leone is signatory to a host of treaties and policies Government has committed to address in its Medium Term National Development Framework (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019). In the most recent elections, women represented just 12% of parliamentarians (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2018).

Women's representation has steadily declined since a high of 14.5% in 2002 (Pathways of Women's Empowerment, 2011) immediately after the war when a proportional representation system was used. This dropped to 14% in 2007, and declined even further to 13% in 2012 (NEC 2018). Numerous studies and reports have examined challenges to women's political participation in Sierra Leone (Abdullah & Fofana-Ibrahim, 2010; Fofana Ibrahim, 2015; F. A. O. M'Cormack-Hale & Beoku-Betts, 2015; Trocaire, 2018). Studies have sought to understand reasons behind this steady decline, and proffer recommendations to reverse it. However, the focus is often on the parliamentary elections, after women have received their party symbol to contest.

Yet, before women can compete for parliamentary positions, they first have to receive their party's nomination, securing votes by delegates who through various processes are elected or selected by the party. Less studied has been the delegate recruitment process: how party delegates are themselves selected and the extent in which women are able to attain these positions, given the critical role they play in determining their party's parliamentary aspirants. We turn now to the political party nomination processes by the two main political parties, the SLPP and the APC to understand what constraints women face at this level. As the first line of access for political candidates to attain political positions, understanding the extent in which

women are in leadership positions within the party executives at all levels (zonal, constituency, regional and national) is key. Examining the processes of nomination to these posts, and the obstacles that women face at this level, will help to inform the activities of organisations seeking to increase women's political participation. It can also inform policy prescriptions geared at increasing women's political participation, and ultimately, ensure that more women are in leadership positions where they can contribute more formally to the development of gender sensitive policies that can reduce women's vulnerabilities during COVID-19.

### 3.3.1. Party Requirements for Delegate Elections

Party standard bearers are determined through votes by the various parties among competing applicants through primaries. The process is enshrined in the party constitution, and for the SLPP, the Conduct of Symbol Manual. The SLPP recently completed delegate elections at the zonal, constituency and district levels (in April 2021), although some of the SLPP election results were cancelled due to a series of irregularities. The APC has yet to hold constituency elections; the last election was in 2018, according to respondents. Moreover, the party is in transition; some party members have taken the party to court, and a ruling has not yet been announced. Although the party has plans to revise the constitution, moving to an election process for delegates rather than the "selection," and election process that many APC respondents described as being the norm, this has yet to be adopted given the court case.

To become a party delegate, respondents described a variety of approaches. For the SLPP, most respondents said that "election" is the official policy according to the Constitution. Eligible party members vote for the executive, several of whom form delegates. Delegates are elected by party members at every level, from the zonal/sectional, to the constituency, to the district and finally, to the national level. Zonal level delegates are responsible for electing constituency level executives, some of whom become the delegates that elect the MP candidate: constituency level delegates elect district executives, some of whom become delegates for the districts. District delegates elect regional executives whom again form some of the delegates. Within the executives of every level, the four main positions that confer delegate status are Chairperson, Secretary General, Women's Leader and Young Generation Leader.

In APC on the other hand, the majority of respondents pointed to a mix of selection and election process. Also, the APC does not have zonal executives. Instead, respondents spoke of chiefdom or section level organisation, followed by constituency, district and then national structures. Twelve executive members are selected, five of which have voting rights as delegates: The Chair, the Secretary General, Women's Leader, Youth Leader and Veteran. Other executive members include the treasurer, financial secretary, organising secretary, PRO, chaplain and Imam. Constituency executive members select/elect the District level members who in turn select the national level representatives. Selection generally involves senior party members with authority in the party.

However, while these might be the dominant patterns, members also pointed to other approaches. Within SLPP, while the majority of respondents pointed to elections as the primary mechanism, a few stated that selection was also used. It would appear that this was more in the areas that were not the party strong hold, and/or took place only at the zonal level:

*"...For my own part, which is the SLPP, we start from the zonal/sectional (for some areas they don't have zones) they go round to get their sectional elections either by consensus or voting or you agree and choose people who are there, but criteria has been set wherein the chairman of the constituency conducts those elections, supervises those elections and for the zonal to the sections then go to the chiefdom, from the chiefdom to the constituency, constituencies to districts and to regional before they go to national." SLPP Female Parliamentarian.*

*"Election and selection. Before elections, party executives ask party members to recommend any strong party member in their area that they think is fit to lead them. If there is, then no need for election. This is normally done in order to give preference to loyal party members." (SLPP Female Party Member, Women's Leader, Tonkolili)*

Similarly, while APC respondents noted that both selection and election were practiced, it appeared that selection was more frequent, although this depended on the level of election being held as well as the particular nature of the election, including the number of candidates. However, there are plans to change the APC constitution to formalise election as the principal standard; the process is pending as the party is currently in court.

*"First it was selection but we see it fit to change it to election because it always favoured the men and made the election free and fair, and the men are always protecting themselves, you must be an active member of the party, you must have a party card." APC Female Party Member*

*"Elders use selection, but if the people they select are many they will conduct an election though we trying to put an end to the selection process (APC, Influential Party Member, Port Loko)*

*"Apply and go through [the] voting process. Before it was selection/appointment by minister or deputy or zonal executives (APC Female Party Member)"*

*"Election and selection. People are mostly chosen to hold positions by consensus. Here, the incumbent chiefdom executive members in consultation with the constituency chairperson, [Name withheld] reached a consensus on who to select to hold certain positions at this level. People are normally selected for positions based on their hard work, commitment and qualities that fit such positions. In a situation where there is an opposition, then election comes in. Election is normally done by raising hands in approval or disapproval of a candidate. I was elected by the 'raising-hand' method.....Also at the constituency level, the constituency executives are responsible for voting and selecting members of this level. All of these are overseen by the district chairperson (APC Women's Leader, Tonkolili).*

*"First of all our party has no zonal level executive. The party only has mandated to have constituency and district level executives. However, here we have a chiefdom executive added to the list. Selection and sometimes election. We use both selection and election method. But mostly, we do select through consensus. The district chairperson oversees every selection process whether at the chiefdom/zonal level or at the constituency level. Incumbent executives at the constituency level select incoming members while at the same time incumbent executives at the chiefdom level do the selection for incoming members at this level." (APC Female Party Member).*

*"It could be by election or selection. I was selected based on popular request by the constituents." (APC Female Party Member)*

For the most part, respondents said that the processes for executive member recruitment were clear and largely abided by.

### 3.3.2. Candidate requirements to compete for delegate positions

In light of the above mentioned criteria, respondents were asked about the criteria that determined eligibility to run for these positions. A majority of key informants responded positively to the question of whether formal guidelines existed that governed selection of executive members. However, when asked what the criteria were, responses differed. There was largely consensus around the following: being a paid up, card carrying party member; have a strong track record of service to the party (where service included recruitment, representation, and, or, defense of the party) and the community; and being resident within the community. Emphasis was also placed on community popularity; and the ability to mobilise support. Other mentioned criteria but by fewer respondents, included being married and educated. While these were the stated rules, anecdotally, another unwritten or hidden reason that has been heard is that parties want someone who is able to defend the party in the face of violence from other political parties. Thus, they want a candidate who is both able to mobilise against this violence and if needed, return it as well.

*"At the constituency level an aspirant must be a registered member of APC party and pay his or her membership contributions. They should also be active members, not passive. Paid members can contest for any position and those voting should also be paid members of the APC party. We conduct elections and if there is a draw we either elect or select based on the party constitution. The winner gets the position." (APC Women's Secretary General, Port Loko).*

At least one respondent questioned the residency requirement: She found that the requirement for women to live in a particular locality for a specific time prior to running for a party symbol could be challenging for female aspirants who as a result of marriage, move to their husband's locale. Nevertheless, overall, respondents articulated largely the same criteria for selection at all levels, from the zonal, and constituency to district levels, although at the zonal level, more emphasis appeared to be placed on community work and being well known in the community .

### 3.3.3. Do women run?

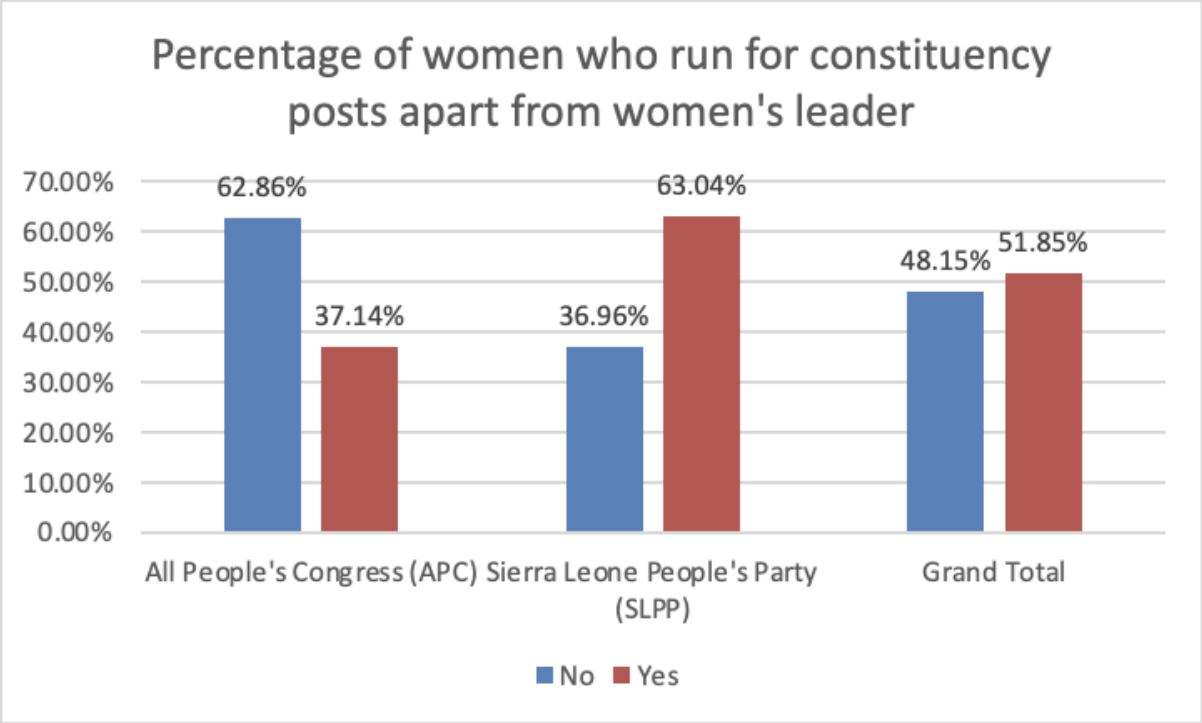
In light of the above criteria, we asked women and male party leaders in the target districts about women's ability to contest for delegate positions with the power to elect candidates. We asked respondents if they knew of any women who ran for positions (apart from women's leader) at the constituency and district levels respectively.

According to respondents, women did run for positions, (Figures 9 and 10), although not in great numbers. They also faced challenges when running. Nearly half of respondents noted that women ran for positions outside of the women's leader at both constituency and district levels. However, the ability to run varied by political party, rural/urban divide, district, and whether women were contesting in their party strongholds.

SLPP respondents (63%) at the constituency level were more than one and half times more likely to know women who had run for positions outside of the women's leader than APC respondents (37.1%). However, overall, responses indicate that women in urban communities were more likely to run for executive positions (outside of women's leader) than women in rural communities (Figure 10) where patriarchal barriers are stronger. It also appeared that women were more likely to run for executive positions in non-party strongholds. For example, in rural areas, APC respondents noted they knew of APC women who ran for executive positions in Kenema and Moyamba (a non-APC party strong hold). Conversely, they did not report any woman running for these positions in Port Loko and Tonkolili, which are APC strongholds. The same was noted in urban communities in Kenema and Moyamba. However, APC women did run for executive positions in the party stronghold as well, in Port Loko. Only Tonkolili recorded no women running for these posts in both rural and urban communities.

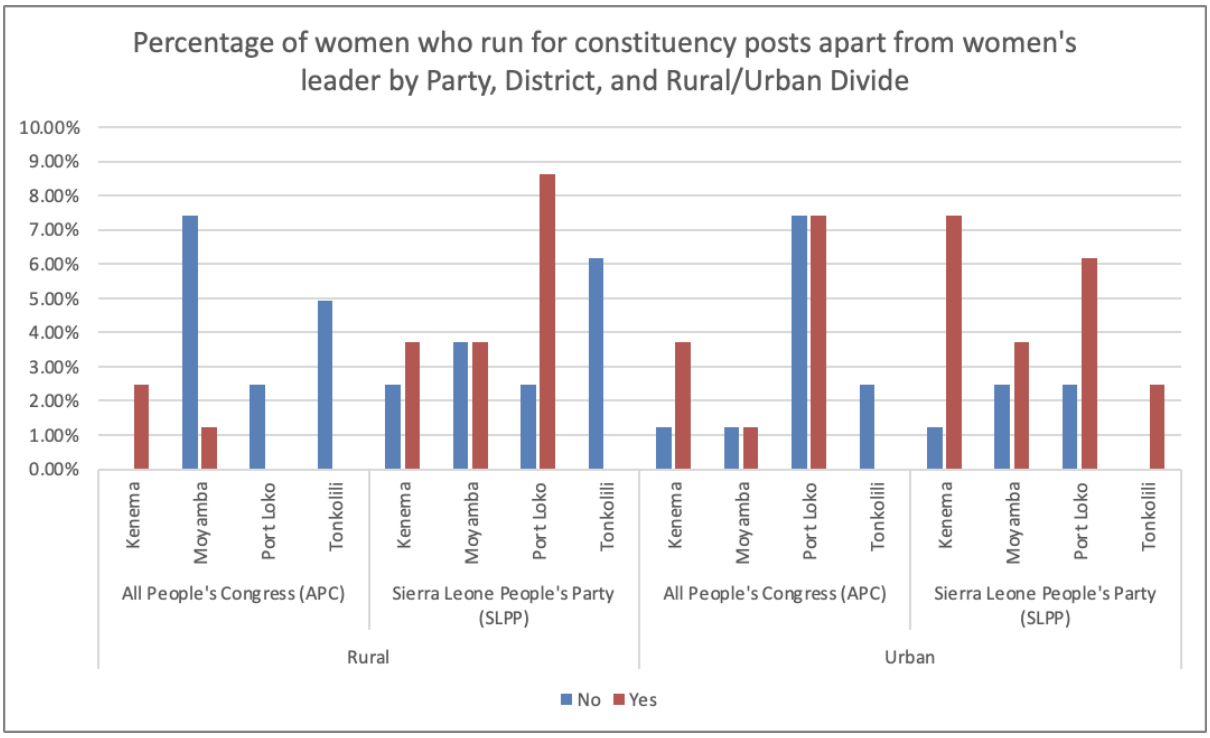
A similar trend was noted for SLPP, although not as stark. In rural communities, twice as many SLPP women party members ran for positions in Port Loko than Moyamba and Kenema, although again, none were recorded in Tonkolili. In urban communities, SLPP women ran in all four districts, including Tonkolili. The highest numbers were recorded in Kenema, with Port Loko coming in second, followed by Moyamba and Tonkolili (Figure 10).

*Figure 9: Percentage of women running for general leadership positions (constituency level)*




***Respondents were asked:*** *During the last constituency contest do you know if any women ran for positions apart from women's leader in your party?*

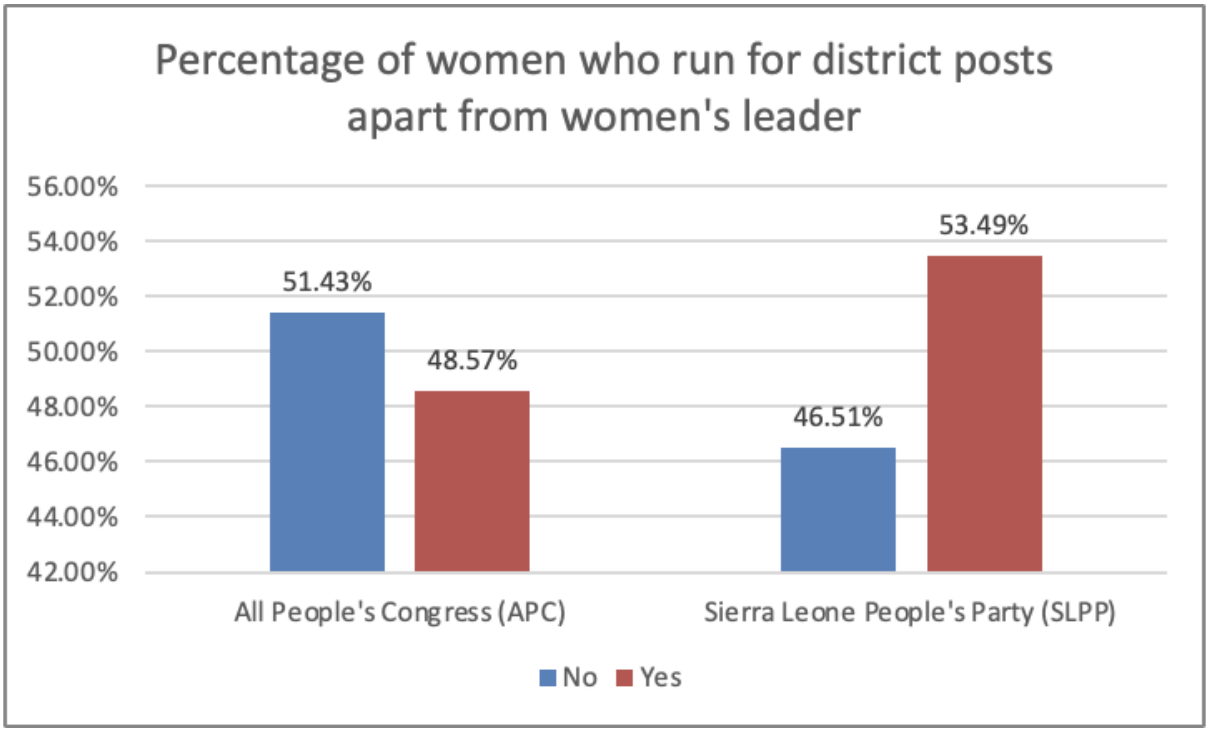
*Figure 10*: *Percentage of women running for leadership posts by Party, District and Locale*




***Respondents were asked:*** *During the last constituency contest do you know if any women ran for positions apart from women's leader in your party?*

A related question, posed at the district, than the constituency level, revealed similar results. There was a roughly 50-50 split in the numbers of respondents who noted women running for these positions and those that said they did not know of any women running for executive posts other than women's leader. However, it appears that more APC women are running for these posts at district level (37% at constituency level compared to 48.6%). Conversely, the numbers of SLPP respondents saying they knew of women who ran for posts other than women's leader at the District level declined from 63.4% to 53.5%. Interestingly, Tonkolili in particular posed constraints for both APC and SLPP female candidates. Given the Sierra Leone cultural context where historically northern districts have been more resistant to women in leadership, (for example, female chiefs can be found in the South, but not the North), it would be worth examining the extent in which this is also a factor, beyond the character of the political party.

*Figure 11: Percentage of women running for general leadership positions (constituency level)*




***Respondents were asked:*** *during the last District delegate contest do you know if any women ran for positions apart from women's leader?*

### 3.3.4. Challenges Faced by Women in Contesting for Zonal, District and Party level Executive Positions

Although women do run for delegate positions, the number of women in these positions is overall very low. To understand the reasons for this, we asked respondents "who/what is the main hindrance for women's participation in this constituency?" Responses showed that irrespective of which process (election or selection) was in play, women faced stiff resistance to delegate positions. Successful women (including parliamentarians and delegates) were less likely to attribute these constraints to structural conditions within society. Instead they pointed to women's agency, including a lack of confidence, education, and party inactivity as the main barriers women face.

For the majority of respondents however, structural constraints were the main barriers to their successful election. A predominant issue was culturally grounded patriarchy, including male resistance to female leadership entrenched within the parties. Financial barriers and violence were also frequently mentioned. The perception of suppression by the ruling party was also mentioned by APC respondents.

#### 3.3.4.1. Male Executives

Respondents pointed to male dominance in society and the implications this has had on restricting the political space for women - many felt that men systematically schemed to keep women out. Party leaders at all levels were implicated - from zonal/sectional level, all the way to the national level.

*"Our male executive leaders are making it very difficult for us to fully participate in politics in this part of the country. For example, we are currently divided in this district based on their way of playing politics. They are not allowing us to fully participate, they micromanage us, they control us in every aspect of our political activities. (APC female party member);*

*The party does not want women in the delegate positions, if a women decide to aspire for this position the party executives will not give their support to that aspirant, some of our strongholds have been divided, for instance in Port Loko although we are still in the majority some people transfer to the ruling party (APC, Influential Party Member, Port Loko).*

*"Firstly the position women always acquired within the party is Women Leader position and that involves many challenges. Positions like Chairperson, Secretary General, YG among others are not given to women. It's only women's leader that is given to women... There are four main positions that are delegate positions that leads to party convention...We always face challenges with men for such positions. In Port Loko district we are lucky to have a woman as Chairperson in one constituency. Persons acquiring such a position is not easy. You have to sell the party ideology to people in towns, villages and everywhere. This place is an APC stronghold but the SLPP party is making inroads and progress now. Anywhere I go I ensure to sell the party ideology because most of the people here are APC supporters. I convinced people to see reasons to crossover to SLPP. I explained about the Free Quality education in the country and*

*for instance I advocated to approved both primary and secondary schools including teachers in my village." SLPP Female Party Member*

*"Culture is one of the key hindrances to women's political participation here. People generally do not believe women can be more of a good leader than men. So as a result even if a capable female candidate aspires, it's somehow difficult for people to vote for her due to their mentality. " (APC male party member);*

Women are also subject to violence and intimidation, including sexual abuse by fellow party members as ways to prevent them from gaining office.

*"The party has some certain groups who have considered themselves to be the owner of the party, if they see any extra person want to contest for a position. For example, I was pushed to the point of getting very serious damage by the constituency chairman [name withheld] because I decided to contest for an executive position; all that is preventing other women [and causing them] to be afraid of joining politics. These men can insult us publicly, molest us, [mis]treating us with so many things." (APC Female Party Member)*

### 3.3.4.2. Financial Constraints

Another frequently mentioned constraint was that of finances. Women lacked money to buy delegates, as well as to campaign more generally. General campaign costs include travel, buying food and other goods for supporters, paying for publicity such as PA systems and T-shirts among other expenses. Lavali (2017) for example, in outlining the substantive costs that MPs incur included meeting voters' personal demands, party contributions to help underwrite party costs, greater expenditure in swing districts, as well as rewarding supporters, among the drivers of costs for MPs.

As the criteria for delegate election has illustrated, securing a parliamentary position requires support at all levels of the process since in principle, the constituency level delegates in turn elect the district level delegates, who then elect national level delegates who are responsible for voting in the symbol allocation process. Thus, to win, it is important that you are able to have enough people who can vote for delegates that will support you. It is within this process of jockeying for delegates that many respondents spoke about vote buying and intimidation.

The dangers of this process was clearly illustrated through events on the ground in Kenema, where elections had taken place in April. However, concerns around vote buying had led to the cancellation of a number of elections and re-runs were pending. Researchers reported the buying of party cards in Kenema by a prominent senior member of the SLPP party in order to influence the elections. However, according to respondents, to circumvent this, the president, who is the party leader, decreed that rather than party cards, voters could stand openly behind the candidate of their choice. Eligibility to vote was based on community knowledge of the voter as a party member in good standing, notwithstanding whether they had a party card or not, which was the standard criteria. Concerns over the misuse of party cards to control the voting process underscores one of the primary complaints women had about the use of money to control the process.

*"For example, when a poor woman contests against a wealthy person, it would be very difficult for the poor woman to contest. In our constituency we have 80 delegates, if a wealthy person bought 60 of them with Le1,000,000 for each delegate that would be the end." (SLPP female party member).*

*Women also lack the zeal and enthusiasm to participate in governance at the constituency level because they lack the financial resources. It's difficult to see people supporting women financially to aspire for political positions. All of these put together break their aspirations and moral strength." (APC male party member);*

The issues that emerged in Kenema also reveal the importance of the centre in what are ostensibly local level elections. Control of party cards can effectively determine who gets a delegate position, a point that was reiterated by the Kenema respondent cited above regarding the difficulties of lack of money to buy delegates. The question of money to buy delegates is one that contributes also to the low numbers of women elected as parliamentarians as delegate votes are seen as being up for sale. This makes politics considerably expensive for women in the SLPP party, and women are generally less able to meet these costs.

In the words of an SLPP party member, *"[it's] not that women are not capable but the problem is when someone who has more money comes, the delegate will sell their vote and that is a challenge for us women who can't afford to give them the money. So lack of financial assistance is a key constraint women face in running for the party symbol in this constituency." (SLPP Female Party Member).*

Another SLPP party member said, "*Lack of financial support. At times symbol awarding can be a problem at zonal level because someone can come with plenty of money. The community people might not even want him but because of money they will decide to give him the symbol instead."*

Thus, irrespective of the process, selection or election, women are discriminated against. Objective qualifications do not appear to be as useful as personal ties and connections:

As one respondent put it:
*I became constituency secretary general in the 2013 constituency, district, regional and national elections. I was selected because of eligibility; that is, I was a fully registered member and paid my contributions. During the selection process, ranking members of the APC party told three of us aspirants to consult ourselves who should get selected. This was fruitless and inconclusive among us but party members selected me based on eligibility. Moving forward in 2018 elections this was the other way around because few selected ranking members already chose selected executives they favoured. I lost my position because the process was unfair. The APC party constitution clause is either election or selection. This is what the party adheres to (APC Female Party Member).*

For another,

*"People acquiring positions for zonal executives do not require any educational qualifications like WASSCE, BECE or whatsoever. Those that acquired their positions gained it through familiarity with high ranking SLPP party members or political connections. The process is not fair, to [not] check for eligibility like being a registered SLPP party member, paying membership dues and influence among the people (SLPP Female Party Member)*

From the discussions above, it is clear that for women to succeed, connections with influential (often male) party members who can help broker their way, as well as money are key. Moreover, responses show that there are "big men," within the party that are able to use money to influence elections. While it would seem that a process of selection could help address the concerns with vote buying that respondents mention as operating within the SLPP, women's responses showed that the selection process was also problematic; women who were affiliated to "big men" or party leaders were often the ones most likely to do well, even if they were not necessarily the choice of the community. Thus, what mattered was loyalty to, or the favour of, key people within the party.

*Being in the opposition*

Another factor mentioned by respondents was the opposition dynamic. For APC members, particularly in districts that were the stronghold of the ruling party, women reported facing particular challenges. It is not clear if these problems are different from ones that male politicians might also face however.

*The SLPP Kenema executive are my main hindrance because they are in governance they are blocking us in all aspects. Even if we are going out to talk to our colleagues, they would monitor us with the idea that we* [are] *on campaign. They are making it very difficult for us. (APC female party member).*

### 3.3.4.3. Perceived Deficiencies in women (education/Shyness)

Men and successful women in leadership positions in the party were more likely to blame women's lack of participation on the women themselves. Successful women were more likely to emphasise their accomplishments as helping them to do well (such as education) and to ascribe women's poor performance to qualities inherent to women such as shyness, lacking self-confidence, or their perception that leadership positions should be for men.

*The women are also a factor because only a few of them show up to participate in constituency politics. Most women don't aspire for positions; those who show up are likely to be selected. Moreover, most women are shy and lack self-confidence. In addition, culture/customary barriers is also a factor. Some traditions do not encourage women to participate (Male Party Member)*.

Another mentioned concern was women's lack of engagement with the party, including registering and being active within the party and familiarity with the party's laws and regulations.

*"In some cases most women have not registered with her party, [is] not active in party activities, they don't even know the party laws and regulations." (Female SLPP Party Member)*

### 3.3.4.4. Is it easier to be selected in party strongholds?

As is clear from above, respondents shared that women found it difficult to attain delegate positions within the executive, outside of the women leader position. To understand whether this was the same across parties and in all regions we asked respondents whether it was easier to be selected in prominent positions in non-party strongholds. Recall that Figures 9, 10 and 11 suggest that women are more likely to attain executive level positions in urban areas as well as in areas that were not the party strong hold. However, responses to this question were mixed. Some respondents believed that it was indeed easier to run for a delegate position outside of the party stronghold. Others however felt that challenges to women's leadership transcended the issue of strongholds.

For those that believed opposition areas were easier, they found that the competition was not as fierce, as men were less interested in the positions:

In speaking about being given a symbol, a female parliamentarian had this to say: *"Because it's the party stronghold, that's the more reason the woman will be bullied by the men knowing that it's possible to win in that community. If not the party stronghold the party might encourage a woman to run because it's a game of chance." (SLPP Female Parliamentarian).*

However, other women felt that given patriarchal contexts where men do not believe women should lead, even opposition strongholds could be difficult for women. Moreover, some women felt that they stood a better chance of being known and having their record speak for them in strongholds. At the same time, ruling party abuse and opposition was also cited as a concern in opposition strongholds.

*It's still not easy whether it's in the party stronghold or not. As a woman you have to face the same challenges every woman faces (such as being considered incompetent to men, finance, inferiority syndrome etc) in aspiring for party executive positions (SLPP Party Member Tonkolili)*

*"It's possible to acquire leadership positions only if the men agree and support the process. Patriarchal system is disturbing the process because men take it that they should lead always. ...Yes there are women in this position in opposition strongholds….APC award symbols or allow women to acquire leadership positions in SLPP strongholds but in their strongholds like Bombali and Port Loko that is not the case. Where the party does not stand the chance to prevail is where they allow women to acquire positions. Definitely men fight women for positions in these locations. When women come forward to acquire leadership positions men feel challenged and therefore intimidate female aspirants. For example in the 2012 elections, a female aspirant contested for leadership position in Lokomasama. She faced great challenges and violence. What they did to her is unspeakable. I don't know if she's alive because I understand that they killed her. So this can happen in a party's strongholds or in opposition strongholds. (APC Female Unsuccessful Candidate, Port Loko)*

## 3.3.5. Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Ability to Be Selected as Party Standard Bearer

Given that COVID-19 has generally been seen to exacerbate women's vulnerabilities, key informants were asked whether they believed COVID-19 would affect women's chances of being elected. A total of 45% of respondents believed that COVID-19 would not affect their chances of being selected as the party's candidate, compared to 37.5% of respondents who believed that it would. For those that believed COVID could affect their chances, the most frequently cited concerns included restrictions on gathering, crowds and movement, which could affect their ability to campaign, and concerns around finances given the economic constraints generated by COVID-19.

*As one* parliamentarian *put it, "Yes, it will affect the women's ability to run because poverty will increase. Some* women *are in businesses but if this* capacity *is affected, it will hamper women's ability to run." (SLPP Female Parliamentarian).*

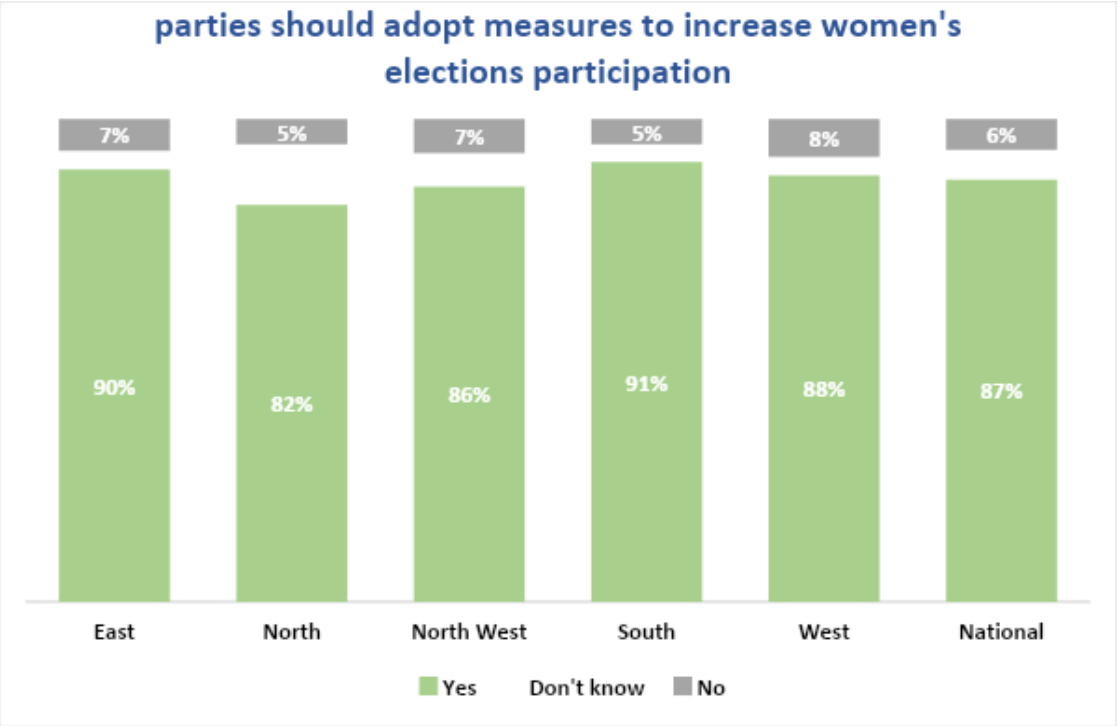
## 3.3.6. Measures to Support Women's Political Participation

In light of the low numbers of women in politics, survey respondents and key informants were asked if they thought political parties should adopt measures to ensure that more women were able to compete and win.

### 3.3.6.1. Parties and COVID-19

Both survey respondents and key informants were in favour of increased measures by political parties to increase women's political participation. In the survey, a total of 87% of respondents felt that parties needed to take concrete steps to increase women's participation, and that, "parties should adopt measures to increase women's elections participation" (Figure 11).

*Figure 12: Should Parties Adopt Measures to Increase Women's Political Participation*

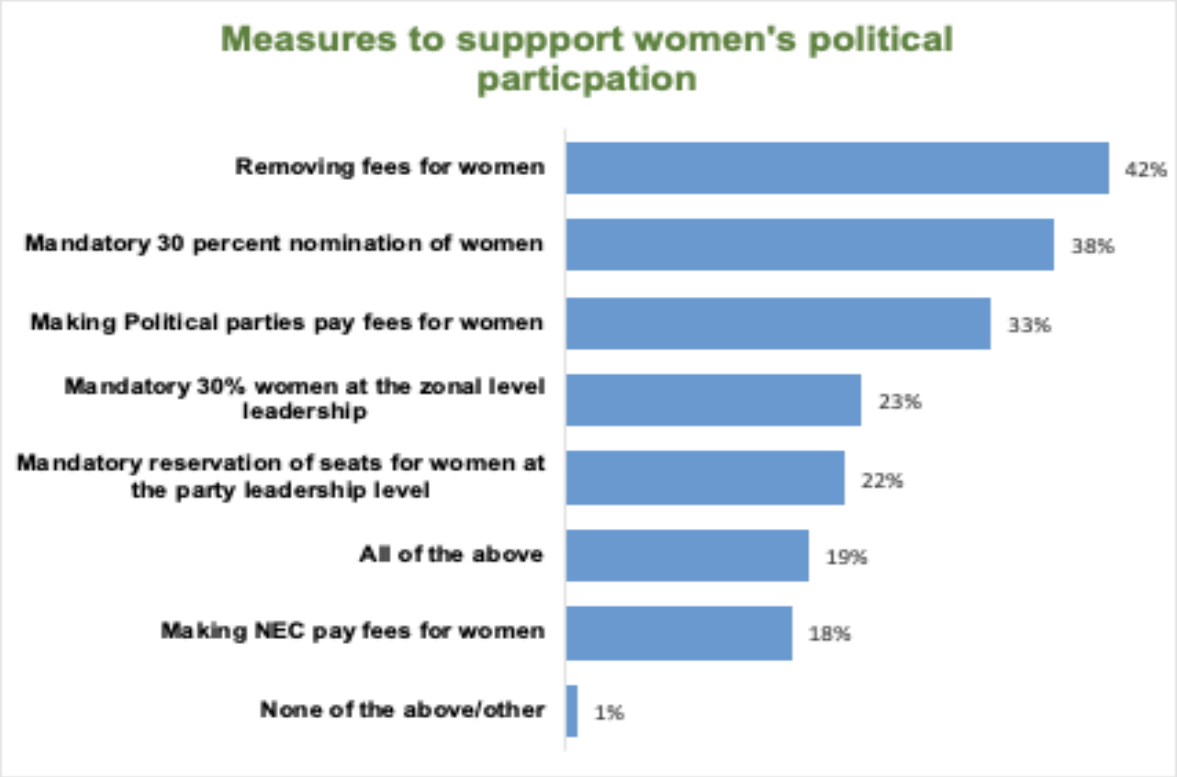



***Respondents were asked:*** *Do you believe that political parties should adopt measures to ensure more women are able to compete in elections and win seats?*

Interventions to boost women's political participation were offered at two levels. The first were measures aimed at addressing structural constraints external to women; namely the financial and cultural barriers.

Removal of nomination fees for women received the most support: just over four out of every ten respondents (42%) supported this measure, followed by provision of a 30% quota for women, supported by 38% of respondents. One third of respondents felt that political parties should pay fees for women. Other measures with some level of support included establishing a quota for women at the party leadership level (22%), as well as having NEC pay women's nomination fees (18%). Nearly two in ten (19%) respondents supported all of the measures (Figure 12).

*Figure 13: Measures to Support Women's Political Participation*




***Respondents were asked:*** If yes, (to the above question) which of the following measures would you support?

Similarly, a majority of key informants also believed that parties should adopt measures to boost women's political participation. Only one respondent from the SLPP responded in the negative to this question. In addition to the responses above, KIIs provided several more examples of measures that could be undertaken to boost women's political participation. Responses were open-ended and then coded, rather than the pre-determined list that formed part of the survey questions.

Key informants provided more detail about quotas, speaking about them on several levels. They discussed both constitutional and party level quotas and called for quotas for all posts, including leadership positions within the executive. In the words of an APC female respondent,

*"Give them a quota of at least 30 in Party leadership roles. Encourage more women to come forward. For a start, allocate certain executive roles for women to contest only outside the women leader and deputy role (APC female Respondent)*.

Key informants also emphasised the need for the party to "encourage women" or to 'give them a chance." For respondents, if parties could provide opportunities for women to lead, and encourage them to play key roles in the party, this would help in enabling women to have leadership roles within the party. Effectively, they wanted parties to be open to women's participation.

*Let them give opportunity to women to participate (SLPP Woman Party Member);*

*They should encourage and provide more safety for women who want to play leadership roles in the party'" (APC Woman party member).*

This was closely linked to comments around sensitisation – that the party should take a lead role in sensitising people to be open to women:

*"the party must have a robust campaign to encourage women to aspire and be voted for" (APC Male Party Member).*

*Massive sensitization by the Party to the grassroots (SLPP Male Party Member).*

On the question asking specifically about how the party can ensure that more women are able to run for the party's nomination, many of the same issues emerged, particularly, provision of financing for women (including waiving or paying for nomination fees), establishment of quotas and winnable seats, encouragement, and empowerment. The issue of protecting women against violence was also frequently mentioned. A parliamentarian mentioned party members accompanying women on campaigns as one way to help protect women from violence.

*"Less violence from various parties. This is one of the reasons why women don't want to be involved in leadership positions"(SLPP Female Party Member);*

*"They should protect women from intimidation and political violence (APC Female Party member);*

Another factor mentioned by one respondent was removal of some of the qualifying conditions for candidates:

*"Some political parties should remove rigid conditions so that women can get their party's nomination. Although the SLPP party doesn't have tough conditions, but other parties should remove such conditions. For example, an aspirant must have residence in a specific locality for a prolonged time or be an active member within the party ranks. If some parties don't remove these conditions this will hinder women participation (Male Party Member, unknown political party).*

Similarly, a question was asked about what political parties can do to ensure that more women are selected as their party's nominee. The results were very much in line with the above mentioned points, including quotas, encouragement and sensitization of male party members, fee reduction, and free and fair elections. While a few respondents mentioned the importance of strongholds, one response implied that increased competitiveness even in strongholds could provide opportunities for women:

*Every political party has strongholds. Therefore, political parties should identify potential women with substance to get selected as their party's nominee. In the past APC bragged that Port Loko is their stronghold but the dynamics have changed and SLPP is making great*

*headway in the district. In addition, training and capacity building of women is important. (SLPP Male Party Member).*

### 3.3.6.2. The role of NEC and PPRC

Respondents were asked what role they felt NEC and PPRC should play to ensure that parties awarded more symbols to women. The two most frequently mentioned issues were for PPRC and NEC to advocate with the political parties to allocate symbols to women, as well as the provision of discounted or full payment of registration fees for candidates, and/or other financial assistance. Several respondents also mentioned the importance of NEC and PPRC providing a level playing field for all parties to compete, and to show impartiality in their rulings. This last point was most frequently mentioned by APC female party members.

*"They should be neutral and not support any party. NEC and PPRC must not be biased because all that is the reason why political violence is on the rise and women can't compete for the fear of their lives and families (APC woman)" (APC Female party member)*

Respondents also wanted PPRC and NEC to play stronger roles in enforcing existing policies.

As one respondent said, " PPRC encouraged political parties to have women's policy, these policies should be enforced by the political parties….PPRC should enforce the party polices for women...if PPRC enforces, NEC will comply" (SLPP female parliamentarian).

### 3.3.6.3. Existence of a Gender Policy

Both APC and SLPP have a gender policy. Respondents were asked if they knew if their party had a gender policy. Nearly 46 percent (45.82%) of respondents said "no," compared to 31.3% that said yes. Others did not know. This shows that knowledge of the party gender policy is very low. Moreover, of those who said yes, when asked what the policy said, responses differed. For some, the policy meant that certain positions were reserved for women – namely the women's leader:

*"Our policy is clear, there are certain positions meant for men and women. Women are supposed to have their women's leader, while the men are referred to as Chairmen." *APC Female Party Member)*

*If we say there is a meeting, everybody should come, both men and women. Both men and women are allowed to participate in party politics at the same level. (APC female party member)*

*Women have the freedom to contest for any position within the party (SLPP Female party Member)*

*We have what we called women's leadership position that is purely for women, and only women are allowed to cast their vote in that election for the women's leader position (SLPP Female Party Member)*

The lack of both knowledge about the gender policy and what it actually says clearly shows that these policies are not being implemented. Moreover, if women do not know to what they are entitled, how can they make demands and hold the party accountable?

# 4.Conclusions and Implications for Women's Political Participation

Covid-19 has clearly deepened the existing vulnerabilities of women. Women are severely under-represented in leadership positions and the overall response structure from national to district and community levels. This research shows that notwithstanding COVID-19, women face severe hindrances when it comes to accessing executive positions at the zonal, constituency, district and national levels. For both these parties, respondents mentioned that women did run/stand for executive level positions with delegate rights; but the main executive position women held was that of women's leader. While this is a voting position, it was difficult to see women attain positions outside of this one, restricting the number of women who can actually vote in the delegate selection process.

The reasons provided for these challenges are very similar to those that women have mentioned in numerous studies as barriers to their political participation in general elections (Fofana Ibrahim, 2015; National Democratic Institute, 2007; Trocaire, 2018). Although there was some variation noted in the delegate recruitment process with APC relying more on selection/consensus and election, and SLPP relying on elections/voting, the main constraints raised by women were largely the same, the two processes in practice make it difficult for women.

The main barriers for women were within their own political party. Culture and tradition, reinforced by patriarchal party structures all combined to make it difficult for women to access these positions. This along with men's greater financial power has enabled men to keep women out of these spaces. The prevalence of buying delegate votes and party cards (for votes) were widely noted by both political parties, but particularly within the SLPP.

This speaks to the need to guarantee competitive intraparty politics ensuring that the playing field is fair and level, and that discriminatory or illegal practices are swiftly followed up on. For instance, women provided examples of unfair electoral practices, including being given the wrong time for the election leading to the unavailability of their supporters at the time of voting; or elections being held during problematic times for women, thus ensuring they were unable to be present, and so on. Given that delegate elections are largely internal affairs, there needs to be some level of intervention to ensure that these processes are indeed free and fair. Women must be protected in these competitive spaces from unfair and

discriminatory practices, as key informants revealed that there are quite a number of mechanisms currently being used to undermine them.

At the same time, there has to be a balance between competition and party destabilisation. One of the recurrent concerns by APC respondents was suppression by the ruling party. This included intimidation and limits in allowing them to meet. Simultaneously, the party is facing some level of internal strife, as evidenced by current court cases. In such a context, processes such as selection could be seen as one way to maintain party cohesiveness, yet, it has negative implications on women's political participation as described below, given that the committee of leaders responsible for this selection are largely male senior party figures, or women affiliated with key male leaders within the party. The space for independent new voices was very small. Women who tried to run against favoured others were gently encouraged to drop out in favour of the preferred candidate.

Women also noted the prevalence of violence and intimidation, all as factors preventing them from attaining positions even at the lowest levels. Yet, accessing these institutions is crucial: if women are not represented, it reduces the chance of bringing more women into politics. As one APC female party member put it, speaking about the National Executive Committee, the highest leadership body within the party:

*"There is only one woman within that body. With a male dominated body, how can women acquire leadership positions? Other reasons are lack of financial support, familiarity with ranking members and high ranking men of the party want sexual intimacy with women aspiring for higher positions. The party needs to restructure NEC (APC Female Party Member).*

Moreover, these institutions provide important leadership opportunities and exposure to women. Several of the current parliamentarians cut their teeth in them, moving up through the ranks. For example, one current parliamentarian started off as a zonal chair, before becoming a district executive member, to serving as a councillor.

To address these constraints, while respondents noted a range of activities that rely on changing behaviour and attitudes and beliefs, other recommendations directly addressed the deep structural barriers by advocating legal reform. Across respondents from both parties, quotas were a frequently mentioned initiative that women felt would allow them an even playing field to compete. Quotas were mentioned at several levels. For some respondents, political parties needed to develop quota policies that included reserving seats within the executive for women, and also more generally, for symbol allocation. One way to do this would be to ensure that parties develop gender policies that are part of the party constitution, which can then be monitored and enforced by PPRC. Currently, although several parties have gender policies, these are voluntary and there are no penalties for lack of enforcement. Nevertheless, while parties prepare to incorporate these policies into their constitution, they could popularise them and CSOs could engage with parties to encourage them to comply as well as monitor compliance.

Other respondents called for quotas at the level of the constitution, with the force of the law. Some asked that the process of transforming the new GEWE policy into a bill be speedily implemented. Such legal reforms should be accompanied by attitudinal and behavioural

change sensitisation activities encouraging greater acceptance of women in leadership, as well as reducing violence against women. NEC and PPRC should play stronger roles in regulating political party behaviour, particularly around violence in elections as well as ensuring that all voting processes, including at the delegate level are properly done. While such policies are not directly gender-specific, given the ways in which violence as well as flawed voting practices has been used to intimidate and exclude women, this will have positive implications.

Finally, also required is greater tangible assistance to women to enable them to access these positions: this includes financial opportunities and provision, protection from violence, and continued capacity building programs, such as education, training and capacity building, to encourage women to take, and continue to excel in leadership positions.

# 5. Recommendations

1. Addressing SGBV
    a. There needs to be a sustained public campaign to increase awareness of the SGBV hotline. Women need to be able to easily access help for SGBV, both at the reporting and service level.
    b. Deepen sensitisation and activities with men on changing mindsets, attitudes, and practices that facilitate sexual gender based violence against women. This includes in the political sphere where women political candidates face SGBV-related violence and abuse.
2. Provision of quotas and safe seats:
    a. There should be a deliberate and targeted effort to increase women's representation at ward and constituency levels, in addition to national level efforts. This starts with the implementation of enforceable quotas at the level of the Constitution and the Political Party. Party-level affirmative action policies should be incorporated into party constitutions and formalised. Quotas should be comprehensive and mandate all political parties to have more females in leadership positions across the various institutional organs of the party.
    b. Parties should popularise existing gender policies. CSOs should monitor compliance and encourage parties to abide by these policies.
    c. These efforts should be combined with the provision of safe seats, again within the constitution for women in their party strongholds.
    d. Sensitisation must also continue on the need to increase women's political participation with citizens as well as politicians.
3. Strengthen PPRC and NEC's regulatory powers:
    a. Empower PPRC to monitor, regulate and enforce quotas and safe seats with ramifications for non-compliance.
    b. Protecting women from violence: PPRC to enforce party codes of conduct particularly around violence and strengthen regulatory powers for violators.
    c. Political parties should also sanction members that participate in violence, and provide protection for women in their campaigns.

   d. Ensure that PPRC regulates parties fairly and without prejudice.
   e. Ensure that NEC conducts and monitors elections at all levels including constituency elections, freely, and fairly.
   f. Monitoring and regulation of the use of money to buy votes at the various levels for delegate positions.
4. Financing women's electability:
   a. Steps should be taken to make politics affordable for women. We recommend that both NEC and the political parties provide discounts, pay, or waive nomination and candidature fees for women candidates including those running as independents. A separate election fund for women candidates should be set aside to address financial constraints.
   b. Implement wider development activities to enable women to be financially independent, including microfinance, and business training opportunities.
5. Confidence building of women
   a. Continue training and empowerment programs for women to enhance their leadership, communication and other skills.

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