



Sierra Leone Poll: Women and Politics

According to a December 2018 IRI Center for Insights in Survey Research national poll of Sierra Leone, a plurality of women saw their quality of life improved since the elections, and a majority think the country is heading in the right direction.

This post-election poll also revealed women's interest in engaging in a variety of civic activities, from attending political meetings to running for office. Interest in pursuing most of such opportunities is correlated with education: women with formal education are more frequently interested in such activities than their counterparts who never attended school.

Despite the fact that women vote at similar levels as men and more than one-quarter of women express interest in running for office over the next several years, many cited barriers that may impede greater political engagement. The leading reasons why there are not more women politically engaged in Sierra Leone include that women fear violence if they run for office, they are discouraged by cultural norms, and there is a lack of support from political parties. This survey data provides context for the [low number of women running in the 2018 elections](#).

Methodology:

IRI's Center for Insights in Survey Research commissioned Pan Africa Field Services to conduct a nationally representative survey of 1,519 Sierra Leoneans aged 18 and older. Please consult the full poll [presentation](#) for further information.

Sierra Leonean women largely optimistic; need more opportunities and support to foster political engagement

Women's Outlook

Sierra Leonean women are slightly more likely than men to feel that their quality of life has improved since the 2018 election, to the tune of 43 percent versus 38 percent. There is also growing optimism about the direction of the country: While just 37 percent of women thought the country was going in the right direction shortly before the 2018 elections, 54 percent of women thought so several months after the elections. Young women (aged 18-35) in particular are optimistic: 59 percent think that the country is going in the right direction, compared to 48 percent among older women.

Women and the 2018 Elections

Female voters were more likely to have voted for President Julius Maada Bio than men; with 61 percent of women who stated they voted in the second round of the 2018 elections casting their vote for the Sierra Leone People's Party's (SLPP) presidential candidate compared to 56 percent of men. This is in line with the findings of [IRI's February 2018 poll](#), which also found women more likely to vote for SLPP.

In the lead-up to the elections, women were less likely than men to have watched or listened to one of the broadcast presidential debates; 56 percent of men said they tuned in compared to 46 percent of women. Women with formal education were more likely than women without formal education to watch or listen to the debate, 60 percent versus 44 percent, illuminating a need for enhanced outreach to the latter group in the future.

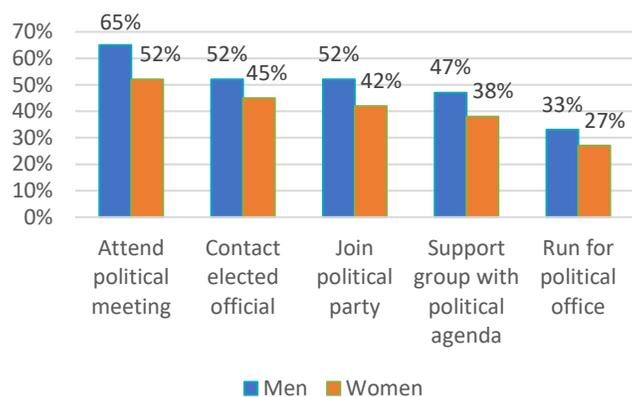
Both women and men most frequently named creating jobs among the issues that should be the post-election government's first priority to address. Women aged 18-

35 were a little more likely to name the job issue (49 percent) than women aged 36 and older (43 percent.) Providing education and healthcare were the other top three priority issues for the government to address. Women with formal education have a more positive impression of the government's performance: 68 percent rate it as somewhat or very good, compared to 57 percent among those without formal education.

Women and Political Engagement

Women were less likely than men to have engaged in a variety of civic participation activities, such as attending a political meeting, joining a political party, supporting a political group, or having contacted an elected official. Age is a factor here: older women are more likely than younger women to have engaged in such activities, but both younger and older women express fairly similar levels of interest in pursuing these activities in the future. Education also plays a role: women with any level of formal education are more likely to have engaged in activities such as signing a petition, participating in a protest, attending a political meeting, contacting an elected official, posting about political issues on social media, or joining a political party. Women with formal education also show higher rates of interest in participating in such activities in the future than women who lack formal education. For example, they are twice as likely (42 percent versus 19 percent) to be interested in running for political office.

Top Activities of Interest



An interesting dichotomy emerges when it comes to voting and running for office: women were just as likely as men to have voted in the 2018 elections and a substantial share of women (27 percent) are interested in running for political office within the next several years. However, there are multiple factors that appear to stand in the way of women's greater participation in political life. For example, women exhibit a lack of confidence in their own skills. When asked to associate a series of common leadership attributes with men, women, or both genders, pluralities of female

respondents said strength, experience, higher education and leadership skills are either gender neutral or traits most associated with men. Softer skills, such as the ability to listen or to communicate, were associated almost equally between genders.



Women working at a polling station

More practical reasons also help to explain why women are not more politically engaged in Sierra Leone. An equal share of Sierra Leonean men and women (63 percent) named fear of violence as a reason, followed by women being discouraged from running by cultural norms (52 percent.) The issue of cultural norms does not appear to decrease among the younger generation; in fact, younger women (58 percent) were more likely to name this factor than older women (46 percent).

Troublingly, 50 percent of women also cited a lack of support from political parties—which was echoed by an almost equal share of men (47 percent). Men and women also largely agreed on several other reasons for why there are not more politically engaged women, such as women not getting elected even if they run for office (46 percent), women lacking the financial resources to mount a campaign (45 percent), women being preoccupied with child-rearing duties (44 percent), women lacking familial support (41 percent), and women lacking political experience (36 percent).

Men and women diverged on only one potential reason for why women are less politically engaged: women lacking the confidence to run (named by 47 percent of men and 39 percent of women.) Three quarters (74 percent) of women would vote for a well-qualified female candidate representing their preferred political party without reservations, compared to just 59 percent of men who would do so. When asked if it would make them more or less likely to vote for a candidate if the person was female, older women were less likely (15 percent) to say they would vote for a female candidate than younger women (10 percent).