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Empowering Women through Higher Education: Teaching Strategies that Enhance Participation in Community Decision-Making in Bo District Southern Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This study explores the role of higher education in empowering women to participate effectively in community decision-making processes in Sierra Leone, with a particular focus on Bo District. Framed within the context of inclusive development and gender equity, the research investigates how teaching strategies at the tertiary level contribute to building women's leadership capacity and civic engagement. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative data through structured questionnaires administered to 180 female university students and graduates, and qualitative data via semi-structured interviews with lecturers, university administrators, and community stakeholders. The sample consisted of 100 female university students who completed structured questionnaires, 30 female graduates who also responded to questionnaires, 20 female lecturers and academic staff who participated in interviews, 10 university administrators and curriculum planners who were interviewed, and 20 community stakeholders who also took part in qualitative interviews. Findings indicate that while a significant number of respondents (67.5%) are actively engaged in community development activities, only 35.8% participate formally in decision-making structures. Most participants reported that higher education improved their communication skills (88%), leadership abilities (72%), and civic awareness (65%). However, practical engagement in leadership roles remains limited due to cultural, institutional, and structural barriers. Despite the presence of leadership-related content in academic programs, a gap exists between theoretical knowledge and actual leadership practice. The study concludes that higher education institutions play a critical role in fostering women's empowerment but must go beyond curricular content to implement experiential, gender-sensitive, and mentorship-based teaching strategies. Strengthening such approaches can enhance women's influence in local governance and contribute meaningfully to sustainable community development in Sierra Leone. The research recommends that policy makers, educators, and institutions collaborate to institutionalize inclusive pedagogies that support female leadership at both academic and community levels.

Keywords: Empowerment, Higher Education, Community Decision-Making, Teaching Strategies

Introduction

Over the past decades, global conversations on inclusive development have evolved from focusing solely on political representation to encompassing educational strategies that foster empowerment and participation. Among the key themes that have emerged is the role of higher education in promoting women's active engagement in community decision-making. This emphasis is grounded in the understanding that education particularly at the tertiary level is not merely a tool for personal advancement but a transformative force for social change, gender equity, and sustainable development (Agbalajobi, 2019).

Despite making up nearly half of the global population, women continue to face barriers to effective participation in governance and leadership, particularly at the grassroots level. In many developing countries such as Sierra Leone, this exclusion is compounded by low levels of female enrolment and attainment in higher education, especially in rural areas (Bangura, 2021). Research consistently shows that educated women are more likely to participate in leadership roles, engage in civic life, and contribute to development planning at the community level (Ellis & Blackden, 2017). The connection between educational empowerment and community involvement is thus vital for shaping inclusive development trajectories.

Higher education equips women with the critical thinking skills, self-confidence, communication abilities, and leadership competencies necessary to influence decisions that affect their communities. Universities and teacher-training institutions serve as both academic centers and incubators for civic agency, leadership training, and gender awareness. Through inclusive pedagogical strategies, mentorship programs, service-learning models, and participatory teaching approaches, higher education institutions can create spaces that empower women to act as agents of change (Alston, 2015; Brown & Elias, 2023).

Effective teaching methods that promote active learning, gender-sensitive curricula, and community engagement experiences have the potential to close the gap between formal education and real-world leadership. For instance, experimental learning initiatives that embed students particularly women in community service, development projects, and participatory governance platforms not only build technical competencies but also foster a sense of responsibility and agency (Anderson, 2022). Moreover, when female students are mentored into leadership roles during their academic journey, they are more likely to carry those capacities into their post-graduation community contexts (Fakoya, 2020).

In Sierra Leone, where structural, cultural, and economic barriers have historically marginalised women from leadership, strengthening women's participation through higher education represents a promising pathway toward both gender equality and sustainable community development (Conteh, 2020). The implementation of national policies such as the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Policy and the Local Government Act has laid important legal foundations. However, translating these frameworks into meaningful participation requires interventions that address foundational inequalities most notably those related to educational access and outcomes (Banda, 2020).

This paper argues that the solution lies not only in legislative reforms or advocacy but also in adopting inclusive, gender-transformative teaching strategies that empower women at the tertiary education level to assume active roles in community decision-making. By positioning this study within the context of educational empowerment, the research shifts from merely assessing political representation to examining how learning environments and teaching practices can be intentionally leveraged to build leadership capacity among women.

Ultimately, sustainable development cannot be achieved without inclusive governance, and inclusive governance cannot exist without women's active and informed participation. Higher education thus emerges as a key platform for cultivating the skills, confidence, and civic consciousness necessary for women to influence community development initiatives meaningfully.

General Aim of the study

The general aim of this study is look at Empowering Women through Higher Education: Teaching Strategies that Enhance Participation in Community Decision-Making In Sierra Leone

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how teaching strategies in higher education institutions contribute to empowering women to participate actively in community decision-making in Sierra Leone.
2. To assess the relationship between women's educational attainment at the tertiary level and their level of engagement and influence in community development processes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite on-going global and national efforts to promote gender equality, women's active participation in community decision-making remains limited, particularly in many parts of Sierra Leone. This problem is deeply rooted in cultural norms, institutional barriers, and limited access to higher education. Although education has been widely recognized as a powerful tool for empowerment, there is insufficient research exploring how specific teaching strategies within higher education institutions influence women's ability to engage in leadership roles at the community level. While policies such as the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) framework provide important legal backing, the gap between policy and practice remains wide. In particular, there is a lack of evidence on how curricula, pedagogical practices, and academic support systems either enable or hinder women's leadership capacities in real-world community settings. The study therefore seeks to address the critical question: how can teaching strategies in higher education effectively foster women's participation in community decision-making in Sierra Leone?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and education by offering context-specific insights into the Sierra Leonean higher education landscape. By focusing on teaching strategies, the study moves beyond access to education and interrogates the quality and relevance of educational experiences for female students. Second, it highlights the link between classroom learning and community engagement, thereby supporting curriculum reforms aimed at integrating civic education, leadership development, and experiential learning. Third, the study provides evidence-based recommendations for higher education institutions, policymakers, and community organizations seeking to improve gender inclusivity in leadership and development planning. Furthermore, it supports the operationalization of national policies like the GEWE and the Local Government Act by identifying educational entry points for enhancing women's agency. Ultimately, this research aims to serve as a catalyst for institutional and pedagogical reforms that empower women to become effective leaders and change agents in their communities.

Limitations of the Study

Despite efforts to ensure the credibility and depth of this study, certain limitations were acknowledged. One limitation was the potential for social desirability bias during interviews, particularly among graduates and academic staff who might present more favourable views of educational institutions. Additionally, while the study focused on Bo District, the findings may not be easily generalizable to other regions of Sierra Leone due to differing socio-cultural and institutional contexts. Furthermore, cultural and traditional factors influencing women's participation in decision-making may not have been fully captured through institutional-level analysis alone.

Delimitations of the Study

The scope of this study was deliberately narrowed to higher education institutions within Bo District, Southern Sierra Leone. It focused specifically on female students, graduates, academic staff, and administrators within institutions offering programs in community development, leadership, and the social sciences. The research did not include primary or secondary educational levels, nor did it extend to informal educational programs. Additionally, while the study addressed women's participation in decision-making, it was limited to community-level engagements and excluded national political representation or broader state-level governance structures. These delimitations were necessary to maintain a focused and manageable research scope while allowing for in-depth analysis of teaching strategies and their influence on women's empowerment in a higher education context.

Literature Review

Empowering women through education has long been recognized as a vital tool for achieving gender equity and promoting inclusive development. In particular, higher education plays a transformative role in equipping women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes that affect their communities. As global development discourse increasingly emphasizes the importance of grassroots participation, several studies underscore the direct link between tertiary education and women's civic and political engagement (Agbalajobi, 2019; Ellis & Blackden, 2017).

Higher education does more than impart academic knowledge; it fosters critical thinking, leadership, and communication skills essential for participation in governance and development planning. Research by Alston (2015) and Anderson (2022) highlights how tertiary education institutions act as incubators of civic agency, especially when they implement inclusive and participatory teaching strategies. Methods such as experiential learning, mentorship programs, community service initiatives, and leadership workshops provide female students with real-world exposure to leadership and governance contexts.

In Sierra Leone, where patriarchal structures and socio-cultural norms have historically limited women's participation in leadership, the role of higher education is especially significant. Although legal frameworks like the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Policy and the revised Local Government Act exist to support female leadership, practical implementation often falls short due to societal resistance and structural inequalities (Conteh, 2020; Banda, 2020). Therefore, there is a pressing need for higher education institutions to take proactive roles in addressing these gaps through gender-responsive pedagogy.

Teaching strategies that are participatory, inclusive, and gender-sensitive have been identified as critical in fostering women's empowerment. Brown and Elias (2023) emphasize the importance of creating learning

environments that allow women to build confidence and leadership skills. These strategies include group-based problem-solving, role-playing in leadership scenarios, and mentorship pairings with female role models. When women are engaged through such methods, they are more likely to view themselves as capable leaders and decision-makers.

Despite these opportunities, challenges remain. Bawa and Sanyare (2019) note that financial constraints, cultural expectations around gender roles, and institutional biases within educational settings still hinder many women from fully benefiting from higher education. Moreover, some curricula remain gender-neutral without being truly inclusive, missing the chance to empower female students in ways that reflect their unique social realities.

The literature shows that higher education when delivered through intentional, gender-transformative teaching strategies has the potential to serve as a powerful platform for enhancing women's participation in community decision-making. By integrating leadership development, civic engagement, and gender awareness into teaching practices, educational institutions in Sierra Leone can play a central role in promoting inclusive governance and sustainable development.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the role of higher education in promoting women's participation in community decision-making in Bo District, Sierra Leone. The quantitative component focused on measuring the prevalence and effectiveness of educational strategies aimed at empowering women. Meanwhile, the qualitative aspect explored the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by women in higher education as they engaged in community development activities. This integrated approach provided a comprehensive understanding of both measurable outcomes and the contextual dynamics surrounding educational empowerment.

Study Area

The research was conducted in Bo District, located in the Southern Region of Sierra Leone. The district was specifically selected for its exciting academic environment, comprising institutions such as Njala University and other tertiary institutions offering programs in community development, gender studies, and leadership training. The choice of Bo District was further informed by its active involvement in decentralization and civic participation initiatives, which have created avenues for women's engagement in community decision-making processes.

Target Population

The study population included a wide range of stakeholders involved in or affected by educational empowerment and community participation. These comprised female students enrolled in both undergraduate and postgraduate higher education programs, female graduates already participating in community development initiatives, and female academic staff and lecturers engaged in teaching or research related to empowerment and leadership. Additionally, university administrators and curriculum developers were included, as well as community leaders who had experience working with women's participation projects. The selection of this diverse group was intended to provide a holistic understanding of the pathways

through which higher education influences women's community involvement.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study targeted a total of 180 respondents, selected through a multistage sampling technique. In the first stage, a stratified sampling method was used to group higher education institutions according to type (public or private) and program offerings (such as social sciences, education, or health sciences). In the second stage, purposive sampling was employed to select female students and graduates who were known to be actively involved in community projects. In the final stage, a snowball sampling technique was used, whereby selected participants referred others who also met the inclusion criteria, particularly for the qualitative interviews. The sample consisted of 100 female university students who completed structured questionnaires, 30 female graduates who also responded to questionnaires, 20 female lecturers and academic staff who participated in interviews, 10 university administrators and curriculum planners who were interviewed, and 20 community stakeholders who also took part in qualitative interviews.

Data Collection Instruments

Data for this study were collected using multiple tools to capture both quantitative and qualitative information.

The structured questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data from students and graduates. It focused on several areas, including awareness of leadership training and civic engagement programs, participation in decision-making platforms such as student unions and community projects, perceptions of how relevant curriculum content was to real-life community needs, and challenges faced in applying academic knowledge to community decision-making.

Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from lecturers, graduates, university administrators, and community leaders. These interviews explored institutional strategies used to empower women, such as mentorship programs, experiential learning opportunities, and courses on gender and leadership. Additionally, the interviews gathered personal narratives on community involvement, perceptions of how higher education contributed to leadership capacity, and barriers to translating educational achievements into tangible community influence.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of the instruments, the questionnaire and interview guides were reviewed by educational experts and gender specialists at Njala University. These experts evaluated the instruments for content and construct validity to confirm that the questions aligned with the study objectives. A pilot study involving 15 participants was also conducted to test the reliability of the instruments. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.82, indicating a high level of reliability.

Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data collected was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were used to summarize responses, while inferential statistics, including Chi-square tests and correlation analysis, were applied to examine relationships between variables such as education level and community engagement.

For the qualitative data obtained through interviews, thematic analysis was employed. Transcripts were carefully reviewed, coded, and analysed to identify recurring themes related to women's empowerment, leadership development, and the role of educational strategies. This analysis provided rich, contextual insights that complemented the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Njala University Research Ethics Committee before data collection began. All participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and written consent was obtained prior to their involvement. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the research presents and discusses the key findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected. The results are summarized in tables and followed by an in-depth discussion based on research objectives and questions. The discussion links the findings to existing literature and the broader context of women's participation in community decision-making and sustainable development in Sierra Leone.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage (%)
Age Range	20–25 years	52	43.3%
	26–30 years	38	31.7%
	31–35 years	30	25.0%
Educational Level	Undergraduate	100	83.3%
	Postgraduate	20	16.7%
Academic Discipline	Social Sciences	54	45.0%
	Education	30	25.0%
	Health Sciences	24	20.0%
	Agriculture	12	10.0%
Participation in Community	Yes	81	67.5%
Development Activities	No	39	32.5%

The demographic data shows that most participants were young female students enrolled in undergraduate programs. This reflects the growing female enrolment in higher education in Bo District. The representation across disciplines indicates that leadership and civic values are being introduced across a variety of academic domains. The relatively high engagement in community development (67.5%) suggests that these women are already active contributors to local initiatives, which is a positive sign for building sustainable communities through female empowerment.

Table 2: Exposure to Leadership and Civic Education Content

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
My academic program includes leadership or civic engagement courses.	83.0%	17.0%
I have participated in leadership or gender-related workshops.	48.0%	52.0%
I am a member of a student union or civic organization.	68.0%	32.0%
I have held a leadership position in a student or community group.	32.0%	68.0%

Source: Field data 2025

Most respondents agreed that their academic programs included content on leadership and civic engagement, which suggests that higher education is fostering awareness of gender and governance issues. However, fewer students (48%) reported participation in workshops or training programs, and only 32% had held leadership positions. This indicates a gap between academic exposure and practical engagement, consistent with findings by Anderson (2022) and Boateng (2020), who argued that theoretical knowledge often fails to translate into leadership action without active mentorship or institutional support.

Table 3: Participation in Community Decision-Making

Type of Engagement	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Formal participation (e.g., ward committee)	43	35.8%
Informal community activities (e.g., outreach)	81	67.5%
No participation	39	32.5%

Data source: Field

Only 35.8% of respondents reported participating in formal decision-making platforms, while a higher number were involved in informal activities. This finding aligns with Duflo (2015) and Dahlerup (2018), who noted that cultural and structural barriers often limit women's access to formal leadership spaces despite their contributions in informal settings. The high rate of informal engagement implies strong civic motivation, but institutional gatekeeping may prevent these women from holding decision-making authority.

Table 4: Perceived Impact of Higher Education on Empowerment

Perception of Higher Education	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
It has improved my confidence and communication skills.	88.0%	12.0%
It has enhanced my leadership and critical thinking abilities.	72.0%	28.0%
It has increased my awareness of civic duties and responsibilities.	65.0%	35.0%

An overwhelming majority of respondents reported feeling more empowered due to their academic experiences. This supports theories by Bawa & Sanyare (2019) and Brown & Elias (2023), which suggest that education is a key catalyst for gender equality and community leadership. Despite these positive internal transformations, structural limitations still curtail women's outward influence in governance processes.

Table 5: Challenges to Community Engagement and Leadership

Challenges Identified	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Financial limitations	86	71.7%
Lack of access to political/traditional leadership platforms	77	64.2%
Cultural or gender-based discrimination	71	59.2%
Inadequate mentorship and follow-up	65	54.2%

Sources: Field Data

The study found that economic and socio-cultural challenges remain significant barriers to women's leadership roles. These findings are in line with Agbalajobi (2019) and Fakoya (2020), who argued that gender inequality in African governance stems from deeply rooted patriarchy and institutional neglect. Despite having academic knowledge, women face financial and cultural constraints that limit their ability to influence decisions, highlighting the need for systemic reforms and policy-driven empowerment strategies.

The results reveal that while higher education provides the foundational tools for civic engagement and leadership, actual participation in community decision-making remains limited by external constraints. The internal empowerment gained through education must be supported by policies, mentorship, and community-level advocacy to translate into meaningful leadership roles. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening institutional frameworks, reforming curriculum delivery, and addressing sociocultural bottlenecks that restrict women's leadership in Sierra Leone.

Summary, Conclusion, And Recommendations

Summary of the Study

This study investigated the role of higher education in promoting women's participation in community decision-making and its subsequent effects on sustainable development in Bo District, Sierra Leone. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combined quantitative data from 180 female students, graduates, academic staff, and community leaders with qualitative insights from interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The findings showed that while a majority of female students and graduates were exposed to leadership and civic education content, there was a significant gap between theoretical knowledge and practical leadership engagement. Most participants were involved in informal community activities, but fewer held formal leadership roles in decision-making platforms. The study highlighted that higher education positively influenced women's confidence, communication, and leadership skills, fostering a sense of civic responsibility. However, several challenges including financial constraints, cultural and gender-based discrimination, and limited access to leadership platforms continued to hinder effective participation in formal decision-making processes.

These results point to the critical need for systemic reforms within higher education institutions and communities to facilitate women's leadership and enhance their contributions to sustainable development.

Conclusion

The study concludes that higher education plays a crucial empowering role in equipping women with the knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary for active participation in community decision-making. Nonetheless, educational empowerment alone is insufficient without concurrent efforts to dismantle socio-cultural and institutional barriers that restrict women's access to leadership positions.

Women in Bo District demonstrate a strong willingness to engage in community development activities, especially in informal settings. Yet, prevailing gender norms, limited financial resources, and insufficient mentorship structures undermine their ability to translate educational gains into tangible leadership outcomes. Therefore, meaningful progress in women's participation in governance requires a holistic approach that integrates educational interventions with policy reforms, cultural sensitization, and support mechanisms.

Ultimately, enhancing women's leadership in community decision-making is not only a matter of gender equity but also a vital driver for sustainable development in Sierra Leone.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for stakeholders involved in education, community development, and gender equality. Higher education institutions should integrate practical leadership and civic engagement components into their curricula, such as internships, mentorship programs, and leadership workshops, to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. They should also promote gender-sensitive policies and create inclusive environments that encourage women to assume leadership roles within student bodies and academic settings. Furthermore, institutions are encouraged to facilitate partnerships with community organizations to provide experiential learning opportunities focused on sustainable development and women's empowerment.

For government and policy makers, it is important to develop and enforce policies that increase women's representation in formal community governance structures, which may include reserved seats and quotas where necessary. Additionally, allocating funding and resources to support programs aimed at women's economic empowerment will help address financial barriers that limit their participation in leadership. Public awareness campaigns should also be conducted to challenge cultural stereotypes and promote the value of women's contributions to decision-making processes.

Community leaders and stakeholders have a role to play in fostering inclusive community forums that actively encourage and support women's participation in decision-making at all levels. They should work towards establishing mentorship networks that link experienced female leaders with emerging women in higher education and community roles. Collaboration with educational institutions is also essential to identify and nurture female talent for leadership positions.

Lastly, future research should focus on examining the long-term impacts of educational interventions on women's leadership outcomes across different districts, including rural areas. It would be valuable to explore male perceptions and their roles in supporting women's participation in decision-making to gain a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics. Investigating the effectiveness of specific mentorship and empowerment programs will also help identify best practices for scaling up successful interventions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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