



Women and the Right of Access to Information in Sierra Leone

A mixed-methods study

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**Society for
Democratic
Initiatives**

Working towards a Democratic Sierra Leone

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We were fortunate to collaborate with the Society for Democratic Initiative (SDI) in this research. Under Executive Director Emmanuel Saffa Abdullahi's guidance, SDI has established itself as one of the country's foremost transparency and governance organizations, with a particular emphasis on the right of access to information. Research Manager George Mustapha supervised a dedicated team of incredible enumerators who conducted extensive interviews and collected a wealth of data from various regions in Sierra Leone. Emmanuel and his team played pivotal roles in the validation process and report launch planning. We also note the incredible work of Project Lead Mohamed Jalloh for his tirelessness and persistence in assuring the study progressed. The expertise, experience, and integrity of SDI, Mohamed, and the many researchers greatly enriched this study.

Several key government agencies, including the Sierra Leone Information Commission and the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs, provided invaluable support throughout the project. We are grateful for their time and guidance. Their leadership paves the way for the women of Sierra Leone to exercise their right to information equitably one day. We also extend our appreciation to the civil society and

government colleagues from various institutions in Sierra Leone for their valuable input on design and implementation, based on the country's context.

The Carter Center is honored to have dedicated staff and interns who contributed immensely to the realization of this study and report. Among them is Laura Neuman, senior advisor in the Office of the Vice President for Peace Programs, the original developer of the women and access to information study and programming, who supported updating the study, training the enumerators, and providing oversight and analysis. Faizat Badmus-Busari, Erica Phillips, and Michael Baldassaro managed the overall project, established a data management and tracking system, ensured quality control, guided our local partners, and drafted much of the report.

We express our gratitude to IrishAid for their support and partnership. Lastly, we proudly recognize the numerous men and women who participated in our research by sharing their experiences. The passion of Sierra Leonean women for a meaningful right to information is truly inspiring. We have been touched by the warm reception from countless Sierra Leonean individuals and are grateful for their time, generosity, and commitment to women's equitable right to information.

Foreword

Paige Alexander
CEO, The Carter Center

Access to information is a fundamental human right that is crucial for exercising other rights. It lays the groundwork for governments to foster transparency, encourage greater participation and voice, and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of public administration. Through our efforts over the past two decades to advance the right to information, The Carter Center identified that marginalized populations, particularly women, often are unable to benefit fully from the right to information.

To examine our hypothesis that women are unable to exercise their right to access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men, The Carter Center developed a mixed-methods study. This study was conducted in Liberia, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and now Sierra Leone, encompassing more than 2,300 interviews across these four countries. In all instances, the study revealed inequities in exercising the right to information, identified the primary challenges women face, and highlighted the information most pertinent to women's economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights.

Sierra Leone has made significant progress in recent years, particularly related to fundamental rights and socioeconomic advancements, including education for girls. However, as this study's findings show, women in Sierra Leone continue to encounter various societal and structural barriers to exercising their right of access to information. In recognizing these barriers and taking active measures to reduce the barriers to meaningful access to information, women's opportunities for participation, representation, and empowerment will be amplified.

My colleagues and I extend our gratitude to the government of Sierra Leone, the Information Commission, our research-leading partner Society for Democratic Initiative, and the many Sierra Leonean experts, civil society leaders, and citizens who contributed to the completion of this study and who generously shared their stories and insights with our researchers. We hope this report and its findings will serve as a foundation to ensure that everyone can benefit from an equitable right to information.

Foreword

Ibrahim Seaga Shaw, Ph.D.

Information Commissioner and Chairperson, Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leone Right to Access to Information Commission is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the government's compliance, making recommendations for reforms, providing training, and raising awareness of the 2013 Sierra Leone Right to Access Information Act and people's right to information. As part of our mandate, we are dedicated to promoting and ensuring equitable access to information for everybody, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, age, status, and nationality.

As the information commissioner and chairperson, I am committed to deepening the Commission's important work to highlight the value of access to information and to engage with all partners in advancing the right. With our work in the capital city of Freetown and the four regions, including information commissioners assigned to each region, we have a unique opportunity to reach both the urban and rural populations with messages about the right to information. We can ensure that Sierra Leone has one of the world's most successful and effective right-to-information laws.

Therefore, I am particularly pleased with the collaboration of the Information Commission, The Carter Center, and the Society for Democratic Initiatives (SDI) to carry out this study on women and the right of access to information in Sierra Leone. This study is an integral step in identifying the barriers women face in pursuing information necessary for their economic and social empowerment. The study includes input from—in total –399 community leaders, experts, public servants, and information seekers from six districts, with interviews conducted in four different languages.

Findings from this study clearly demonstrate the necessity of improving access to information for women. By identifying barriers that women face in exercising their right, the study serves as an excellent starting point for a conversation around potential engagements that can create meaningful progress toward more equitable access to information. The invaluable opportunity to use the findings to reform policy, improve training, and reach women is one that we intend to seize. We thank The Carter Center and SDI for this important study and reiterate our deep commitment to champion women's right to access to information.

Foreword

Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Society for Democratic Initiatives

In this pivotal report, we delve into the complex issue of gender disparity in information access in Sierra Leone, a critical aspect often overlooked in the discourse of gender equality. The study meticulously examines how this disparity manifests across various districts, shedding light on the stark differences in access to information between women and men. It is an extensive analysis that goes beyond mere statistics, capturing the lived realities of women who face institutional and societal hurdles in accessing vital information.

The research methodology, encompassing interviews and observations, paints a vivid picture of the challenges encountered in the field. It is a testament to the commitment to understanding the nuances of this issue in different contexts, from urban centers to remote areas. The findings are a stark reminder of the ingrained biases and cultural norms that continue to impede women's full participation in society.

This report is more than just an academic inquiry; it is a clarion call for meaningful change. The recommendations, carefully crafted, aim to dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate gender inequality in information access. They call for a multifaceted approach involving sensitization

programs, awareness campaigns, policy reforms, and capacity building of women's groups. These are not just strategies, but are essential steps toward creating a society where women are equally informed and empowered.

As the Executive Director of the Society for Democratic Initiatives, I am proud to present this report. It stands as a beacon of hope and a guide for policymakers, civil society, and all stakeholders committed to forging a path toward gender equality and equitable exercise of the right to access information in Sierra Leone. By addressing these disparities head-on, we move closer to a future where every woman has equal access to information, enabling her to make informed decisions, participate actively in governance, and contribute significantly to the development of our nation.

By implementing the recommended interventions, the government, civil society, and relevant stakeholders can work together to remove barriers, change discriminatory attitudes, and promote equitable access to information. Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to access government-held information will contribute to their empowerment, active participation in society, and overall development.

Executive Summary

The right of access to information is a fundamental human right recognized by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights as essential for promoting freedom, accountability, and upholding democracy. It refers to the right of individuals and organizations to access information held by public authorities and, often, by private bodies that perform public functions or receive public funding.

Between February and August 2023, The Carter Center and Society for Democratic Initiatives (SDI) conducted a mixed-methods research study to identify the cultural, structural, and legal barriers faced by women that impede access to information in Sierra Leone. This study involved four separate surveys with community leaders, experts, public employees, and government office visitors. In addition, validation meetings were conducted in each of the research areas, including with women from the communities. Research teams were deployed in six districts: Bo, Bombali, Freetown (Western Area Urban), Kailahun, Port Loko, and Western Area Rural.

The study focused on three core questions: Were women able to exercise their right to information with the same facility (defined as frequency, ease, and rate of success) as men? If not, what were the main obstacles women faced in exercising this right? And if these obstacles could be overcome, what information is the most important for women's promotion and protection of rights and economic empowerment?

Key Findings

- The majority of community leaders and experts believe that women in Sierra Leone *do not* access government-held information with the same facility as men.
- Education and socio-cultural barriers were identified as the predominant obstacles facing women in accessing information in Sierra Leone. Community leaders and experts agreed that the top barrier to women's access to information was illiteracy. Other top barriers included women being

afraid of asking for information, lacking the confidence to make requests for information, not being culturally allowed to ask for information, and not having time because of domestic and household duties.

- Unlike in other country studies, “women not allowed in public buildings,” “women ignored when entering into a public building,” and “information is not seen as important to women” were not considered significant barriers to women in Sierra Leone. This suggests that women's exercise of the right to information is largely impacted by factors outside of the agency, i.e., obstacles that have negative impacts well before women even enter government offices. Non-participant observation confirmed that those women who could make it to the agency were treated relatively similarly to men.
- Almost every community leader (98%) thought government-held information was important to women for the promotion and protection of rights and increased economic empowerment.
- However, even though information was identified as important, among 148 community leaders, only 34 knew of a woman in their community who had requested information, and 16 said the process was either difficult or very difficult for them.
- While community leaders and experts responded that women are generally aware of the right to information, during the validation meetings with market women in all six districts, the women stated that they knew nothing or very little about the Right to Access Information Act and had never attempted to access information.
- Community leaders and experts agreed that the top information critical to women's rights and economic empowerment was related to sexual and gender-based violence, educational opportunities and scholarships, vocational opportunities and trainings, and the right to information.

Introduction

Though recent years have witnessed a plethora of research and programming related to voice, participation, and empowerment of women, access to information has been implied rather than explicitly identified as a core ingredient for success. Importantly, when focus is placed on a woman's ability to fully and effectively exercise her fundamental right to information, the considerable gender asymmetries become apparent. Continuing failure to engage in gender-sensitive policymaking; lack of engagement from women's civil society organizations; information access and flows that exclude women; and long-standing obstacles such as illiteracy, overwhelming household responsibilities, cultural mores, and immobility all have played a role in creating gender asymmetries in the exercise of the right to information.

Since 1999, The Carter Center has served as a leader in advancing the right of access to information. Through this work, the Center noted these important obstacles that may lead to inequity in women's ability to exercise their fundamental right to information. To demonstrate the hypothesis that women are not able to access information with the same facility (frequency, ease, and rate of success) as men, The Carter Center developed a mixed-method study. The study was piloted in Liberia in 2013, then refined and amended for application in Guatemala and Bangladesh.

The Sierra Leone study conducted in 2023 illustrates the shortcomings and challenges faced by women in exercising their right to information. The study explores the key barriers that women face, as well as which information would be most beneficial for women to further their social, legal, and economic well-being. This research and the recommendations developed based on the findings can serve as a platform from which coordinated action can be taken to empower women in Sierra Leone to fully exercise their rights.

What Is the Right to Information?

Access to information, also called the right to information and freedom of information, is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. According to the civil society organization Article 19, approximately 120 countries, representing 90% of the world's population, have access to information laws.

Access to information allows people to seek and receive information held by governments and often by private entities that perform public duties or receive public funds. It is an important right that serves both governments and their communities. For governments, an access-to-information regime helps increase citizen confidence as decision-making becomes more transparent, assists public administration to become more efficient and effective as recordkeeping systems are organized and procedures are established, and allows scarce resources to be properly applied and utilized. Additionally, access to information enables people to engage more meaningfully in public life, understand policies and help determine public priorities, and use the information to ensure the exercise of other human rights, including the rights to clean water, a safe environment, education, and health services. It is a tool that helps ensure social services reach the most disadvantaged and marginalized people, supports social accountability, and promotes political and economic empowerment and the protection of individual rights.

What Importance Does the Right to Information Hold for Women?

Often in our societies it is the most vulnerable and marginalized populations who suffer the most because of limited access to information, and this is particularly true for

women. In many countries, one-half of the population may be limited in their full enjoyment of the right to information and the myriad benefits that it provides.

With genuine access to information, women can take advantage of opportunities to transform their lives, families, and communities. For example, in India, a resident of a village in Orissa filed a Right to Information inquiry into the promised construction of ponds in and around the area where she lived. She received information that the money had already been allocated and spent, but it was clear to

her, as a community member, that no ponds had been built. The local government was forced to take action against the officials for misuse of funds.

Moreover, a research project conceptualized and conducted by a team at Yale University found that the use of right-to-information mechanisms could be as effective as a bribe when it comes to inciting government action.¹ This important finding illustrates how essential and effective these mechanisms can be to empower women, provide public transparency and accountability, and fight corruption.

Country Context

Status of Women in Sierra Leone

Women make up more than half, 50.8%, of the population of Sierra Leone, according to the 2015 Housing and Population Census.² However, this representation fails to be reflected in key areas such as education and literacy, access to justice, economic empowerment, decision-making and political leadership. Women's participation in socioeconomic and political and public decision-making spheres is still below the international and regional standards stipulated in human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, for which Sierra Leone is a signatory.

The most recent gender inequality index (2021) is 0.63, which takes into account health, empowerment and labor market indicators, ranking Sierra Leone 162nd in the world.³ Progress has been made in several areas of women's empowerment, but the few available indicators show very high levels of discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls, and other harmful practices.

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), women experience an overall parity of 68.4% when compared to men across four dimensions: economic opportunities, education, health, and political leadership. Sierra Leone is below the world average at 66.7%, highlighting the need for more policy and greater enactment of those policies to ensure gender equity. More alarming perhaps is the WEF's findings that women's global economic participation is only 60.1% relative to men, whereas their global political empowerment is even worse at 22.1%.⁴ Until the elections in July 2023, this global statistic has not been dissimilar from Sierra Leone's own 2018 female political representation of 20%.⁵

Women in Sierra Leone play vital roles at all levels in society, from their customary roles as primary caregivers to contributors to economic well-being and food security. However, access to the formal labor sector and good-paying jobs remains a persistent challenge. This inequality ultimately results in lower income for women than men. According to the World Bank, Sierra Leonean women account for more than 53% the total percentage of labor in the crop farming subsector and 52% in the poultry subsector.⁶ Nevertheless, women remain limited by lack of access to productive resources, including land ownership and financial resources.

In January 2023, President Julius Maada Bio signed into law the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (GEWE). The law enshrines improvements to women's access to finance, employment opportunities, equal pay, maternity leave, and political representation. GEWE establishes a 30% quota for women's participation in government for both appointed positions, including cabinet, ministry, and ambassador roles, and elected positions, such as parliamentary and local council seats. This bill was in practice during the 2023 Sierra Leonean elections, which resulted in a historic number of elected female lawmakers—41 out of 135 seats (30%), nearly double the previous numbers of women lawmakers from 14.5% in 2018. This now stands well above the average of West Africa at 18.4%, according to the IPU Parline data.⁷

Despite the encouraging recent policy efforts, the gender inequality landscape in Sierra Leone reveals its complexity through several health, educational, economic, and social measures. Deeply rooted in the patriarchal norms that shape political and governance systems, and social and economic power structures, these health, educational, economic, and social measures constitute major impediments to the progress of not only women, but also the country's overall development outcomes.

Promotion and Protection of Rights

Information is essential for the promotion and protection of women's rights. The *right to live free from violence* may be one of the most basic and fundamental of all human rights. However, its benefits have eluded women across the world, including in Sierra Leone. More than 61% of women in Sierra Leone between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced some form of physical violence, and more than 12% have faced sexual violence at some point in their lives.⁸ Even though statutes such as the Gender Justice Acts and the recently proposed Gender Empowerment Bill have provided significant legal precedent for the protection of women from violence, the reality remains that violence against women is high in Sierra Leone. Relatedly, an awareness of *marital and family rights* is important for women to know the legal structures in place to support themselves in situations of family or spousal conflict.

The exercise of women's *right to health care* is another example where information is essential. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the stark gender inequalities in Sierra Leone, especially in relation to access to adequate and equitable health care, as well as protection from economic distress after a health crisis. It was noticed that as soon as the healthcare systems within Sierra Leone began getting overburdened, family-planning and maternal-health services were the first to face a diversion of attention and resources. Women also are expected to commit a disproportionate portion of their income/savings into maintaining family well-being during health crises as compared to men.⁹ A lack of information and knowledge exacerbates women's health inequities.

The inability of women to effectively exercise their *rights to freedom of expression, public participation, and equality and antidiscrimination*, especially from a political standpoint, is primarily seen to be a function of a lack of awareness. Sierra Leone has consistently ranked highest among the countries with systemic gender inequalities. The recent enactment of the GEWE Act has been rightly praised and already proven successful in increasing female representation in the July 2023 legislative elections. However, there still exist significant social and cultural impediments for women wanting to participate in public life. Women in Sierra Leone have continued to lag behind their male counterparts across all these metrics, highlighting the need for increased female rights across all sectors. The GEWE Act signed and implemented in early 2023 may have significant positive ramifications for women exercising their *labor rights and right to social services and benefits*. The provisions of the Act will only be enjoyed if women have sufficient access to information related to its content and enforcement.

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is one of the primary motivators and opportunities that Sierra Leone's women gain through access to information, and therefore they have a vested interest in using information to further those rights. The impacts of economic empowerment extend far beyond monetary income, to private property, freedom of movement, and increased capabilities in society. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) has found that economic empowerment is one of the most potent routes for women to achieve and advance their rights. As income increases, women's understanding of and access to solutions for issues in education, health, family, and politics begins to proportionally increase.¹⁰ Moreover, data suggests that women invest a higher proportion of their additional income into their children's educational, health, and social well-being. Therefore, not only are the women themselves making more informed decisions, but they are also safeguarding the ability for future generations to be politically informed and active.

Achieving economic empowerment requires a robust rights system, and access to opportunities to exercise those rights. *Educational opportunities and scholarships*, including *vocational and technology training*, may significantly increase women's economic empowerment but are accessible only through information and awareness. Women in Sierra Leone continue to perform below average on almost all global education indicators, with a current female literacy rate that is half of the global standard, at around 43%. Technological literacy is becoming an increasingly important platform for women. However, according to the U.N., less than 1% of women in Sierra Leone exhibit a basic understanding of an Excel spreadsheet, and less than 2% are able to copy and move a folder on a computer.¹¹

Moreover, for decades, women in Sierra Leone have been excluded from the ownership of private property. *Land ownership* is considered an important source of income generation, stability, and sustenance. Even though a law instituted in 2007 gave women the legal right to inherit land, customary law restricts women's voices in decision-making related to that property. Only in 2022 did the Sierra Leone government pass the Customary Land Rights Act, which protects the right for women to buy, lease, or sell land.¹² However, given the lack of political awareness, low literacy rates, and lack of support, implementation of this law will be difficult. The access to information mechanisms in Sierra Leone would, therefore, play an essential role in educating and empowering women to make use of this provision in the law and experience its increased economic empowerment impact.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the percentage of women in senior and middle management positions was 21.5% in Sierra Leone, and 96.6% of women are working in the informal sector, compared to 89.3% of men. Women's right to work in the formal sectors has proved challenging. Findings from the 2019 Demographic and Health survey report a widening trend in gender inequality in work:

“Since 2013, there has been a slight increase in the percentage of women employed in professional/technical/managerial jobs, from 2% to 3%. Similarly, the proportion of women employed in the agricultural sector has increased slightly from 52% to 54%. Among men, the proportion employed in professional/technical/managerial jobs doubled from 7% in 2013 to 14% in 2019, while the proportion working in the agricultural sector declined from 55% to 49%.”¹³

Given the emphasis on informal work, like selling in markets and participating in smallholder agriculture for women, it is important that women have access to information on how to get trade licenses and access banking resources like loans.

Sierra Leone Right to Information Act

The right to information is upheld globally under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In Africa, access to information is guaranteed in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, among others. Several states have adopted specific laws that promote access to information in their national constitutions. In Sierra Leone, the Right to Access Information Act was passed in October 2013.

The Right to Access Information Act, 2013, places proactive publication obligations on public authorities and, as such, every public authority must publish information in accordance with its publication scheme. It also requires that requested information be provided within a reasonable time period, and no later than 15 working days from receipt of the application. If this is not possible, justification must be provided and is subject to further review. Any person may institute a request for information directly to public ministries and personnel. They also can take these requests to court to compel the head of a public authority to comply with its publication obligations. The Right to Access of Information Act established an independent body, the Right to Access Information Commission, with powers to monitor and report on compliance by public authorities.

When the Act was written, it notably included a provision to introduce the principles of access to information to civil servants and public body employees who are accustomed to a culture of secrecy and silence and protective of the information held by their respective institutions. This is reflected in the information commissioner's power to provide training for public officers. However, there were no provisions included for educational campaigns or public awareness activities beyond the commissioner's power to publicize the requirements of the Act and the rights of individuals under it.

Though the Right to Information Act in Sierra Leone went into effect more than 10 years ago, its implementation has been slow, and there is little evidence that it is reaching the full population. While the government's pledge to advance the right of access to information is clear, there remains a gap between commitment and full realization.

Study Methodology

The women and access to information study employed a mixed-methods research approach to identify the cultural, structural, and legal barriers women face that impede access to information in Sierra Leone. The research methodology—which has previously been applied in Liberia (2013), Guatemala (2014), and Bangladesh (2016)—was designed to answer three research questions:

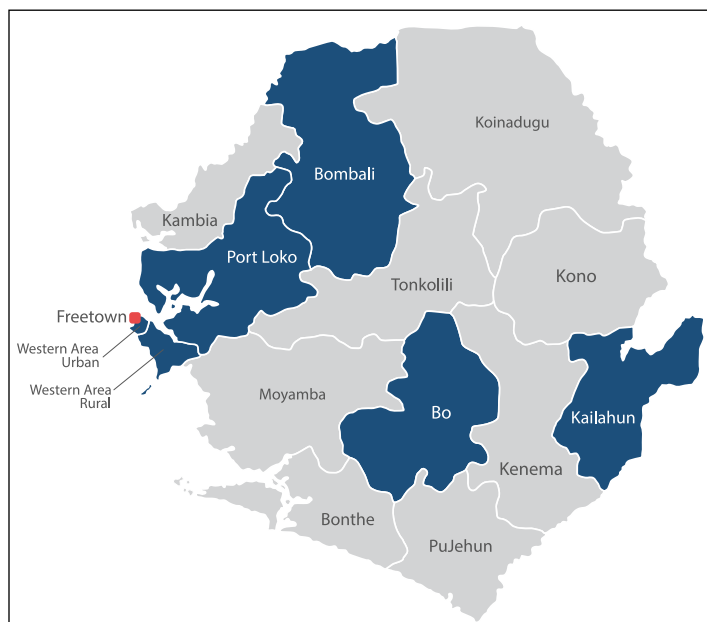
1. Are women able to access information with the same facility (frequency, ease, and rate of success) as men?
2. If not, what are the main barriers facing women in the exercise of the right to information?
3. What information is most important to women for the promotion and protection of rights and economic empowerment?

Between February and May 2023, research teams composed of one female and one male were deployed in six districts: Bo, Bombali, Freetown (Western Area Urban), Kailahun,

Port Loko, and Western Area Rural. SDI selected districts for inclusion with consideration to varying geography, religions, and cultural aspects.

Primary data was gathered through interviews and direct observation conducted by research teams in all districts, specifically:

- Interviews with community leaders (n=148) defined as individuals representing key local organizations and/or positions within the district, including but not limited to those leading women-focused groups, religious leaders, community development representatives, and other community leaders, as identified by local researchers.
- Interviews with experts (n=88) including government representatives (67%), NGO program staff (21%), university professors (6%), journalists (4%) and other individuals with expertise in economic empowerment and/or women's rights.
- Interviews with employees (n=43) at public agencies, including those who receive access-to-information requests from visitors.
- Interviews with visitors (n=78) at public agencies where they were seeking information or services.



Interview Respondents Disaggregated by District and Gender

District	Bo		Bombali		Freetown		Kailahun		Port Loko		Western Area Rural	
Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Community Leaders	19	6	15	10	14	11	15	10	12	13	12	11
Experts	14	1	11	4	9	6	10	5	12	2	4	10
Employees	18	1	1	0	1	0	4	0	6	1	6	5
Visitors	3	11	6	2	23	7	4	2	1	4	4	11

- Nonparticipant observation at 57 local offices representing 25 public agencies, visited multiple times—on different days and times—to gain a comprehensive understanding of what an average day at each site comprised in terms of interactions, the presence of men versus women, and type of information requested. The list of agencies observed by district is included in the annex to this report. Interviews were conducted in English, Krio, Mende, and Themne. Researchers recorded findings from interviews and direct observation using standardized forms to facilitate data collection and transmitted findings to a centralized database using a smartphone application called Open Data Kit (ODK) Collect. The standardized interview forms, observation form, and raw data are available via GitHub.¹⁴
 - The gender disaggregation was not uniform across the groups, although effort was made to seek diverse voices by the enumerators, and twice as many male experts were interviewed as female. Similarly, agency staff contained more men than women on staff, and 80% of the staff interviewed were men.
 - Due to variations in agency structures, number of employees, and various other factors, the number of interviews conducted with employees and visitors at public agencies is not uniform.
 - Employees at nonparticipant observation sites were asked to comment only on access to information within the context of their agency or office. Therefore, employee responses may not reflect their personal perceptions regarding barriers to women's access to information or the experiences of other government agencies.
 - Researchers did not consistently interview employees on each visit to an agency. This reduced the possible range of perceptions and the overall number of interviews conducted.
 - Women visitors interviewed at the agencies may not be representative of the general population of women in Sierra Leone.
 - The methodology does not include focus groups with unaffiliated women or individuals less likely to seek information/visit public offices. Interviews of community leaders were utilized in proxy to capture the realities of women, as were validation exercises that incorporated additional individuals from the study locale.
 - The findings presented in this report were gathered through a careful analysis of the data. However, the interviews were conducted in multiple languages and ultimately translated into English; consequently, some nuance may have been lost.
- In June and August 2023, at the conclusion of data gathering, a preliminary analysis of the findings was completed and shared by The Carter Center and SDI with local stakeholders through a validation process in each district where the research took place. The validation meeting provided an opportunity for the community to reflect on whether the findings were consistent with their own realities and to gather additional qualitative information from the discussion and comments. The validation meetings included stakeholders from government agencies, local experts, civil society organization leaders, and feedback-gathering sessions with women in marketplaces at the provincial level.

Limitations of Study and Considerations

- The study is not based on simple random or stratified sampling; therefore, it is not possible to generalize the findings beyond the scale and scope of this study.
- The selection of civil society and expert participants, in some cases, may have affected the nature of responses. Community leaders may have responded more from their own experience than on behalf of their communities. Also, both community leaders and experts may have highlighted their own areas of expertise.

Findings

Overall findings include aggregate findings from community leaders, experts, and employees. The qualitative and quantitative responses from interviews are supplemented by responses provided in validation meetings. The study demonstrated that the majority of community leader and expert respondents agreed that women are interested in exercising their right to information and that doing so would increase their capacity and empowerment. However, the majority of community leader and expert respondents also believe that women **do not** access government-held information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men.

Aggregate Findings

The data-collecting process included 148 community leader interviews, 88 expert opinion interviews, and nonparticipant observations at 24 public agencies. Forty-three agency employees and 78 visitors were also briefly interviewed during nonparticipant observation. In each of the six districts, two-day validation meetings were held; one day

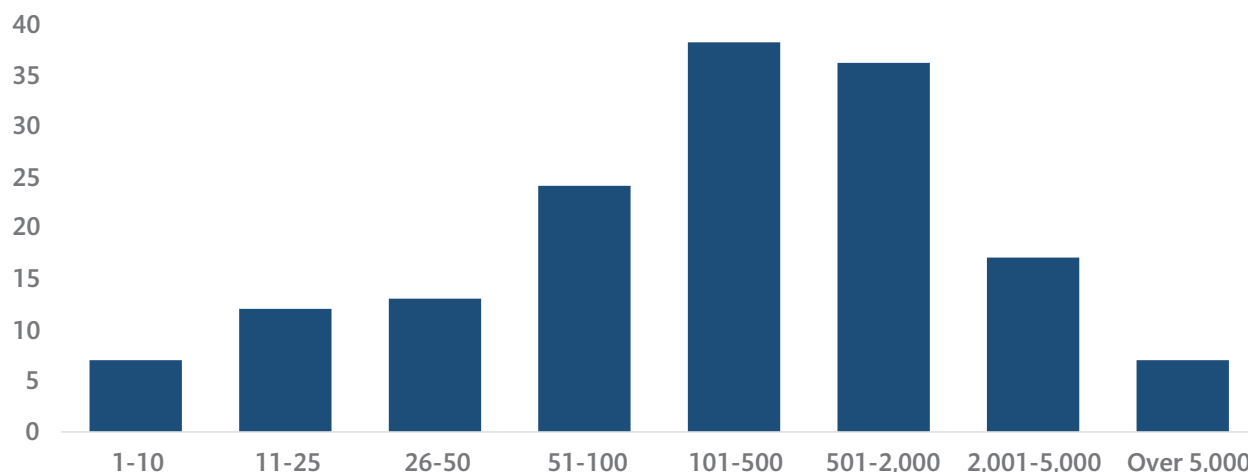
with study respondents and one day with market women to provide additional qualitative, context-specific insight to the survey findings. Each validation meeting had more than 10 participants, for a total of 140 validation participants.

Community Leaders

The majority of community leaders (53%) felt that women do not access information with the same facility as men. The 148 community leaders interviewed (87 male/61 female) worked on a diverse range of issues—as shown in the box below—and generally served both men and women in

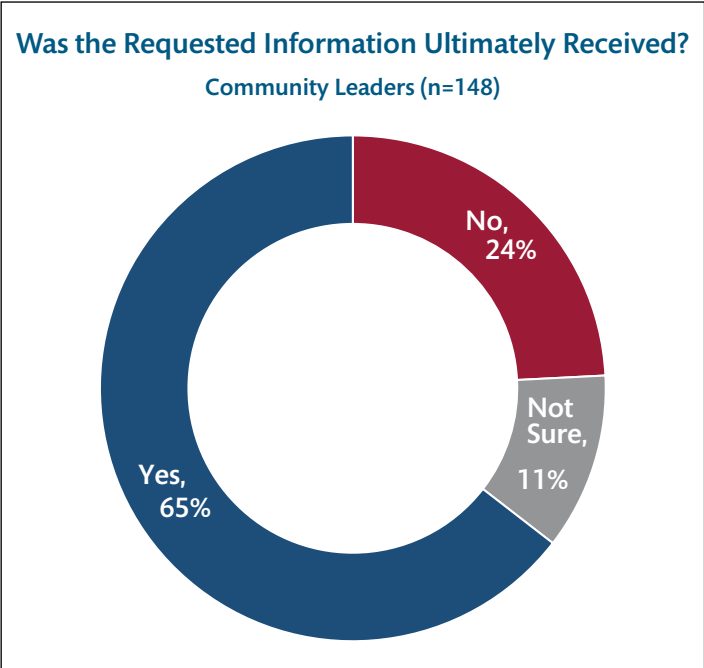
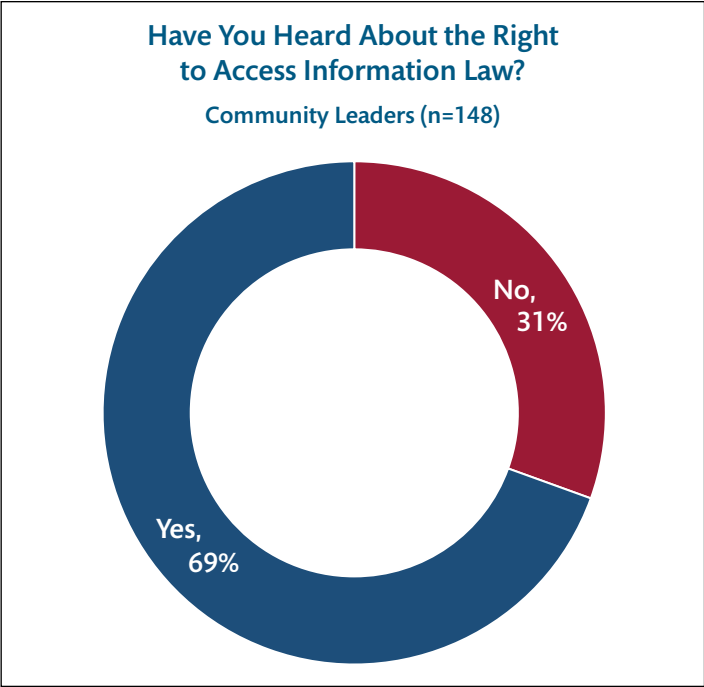


Number of Community Leaders and Size of the Communities They Represent



their communities. The size of the community represented by these leaders ranged from a few people to more than 5,000 members, and in total, the leaders interviewed for the study represented more than 150,000 people.

Almost 70% percent of community leaders had heard of the right-to-information law, and more than half, 51%, claimed to have an understanding of/familiarity with the Freedom of Information Act in Sierra Leone. Twenty-seven percent of the community leaders had tried to access information themselves, and 22% were aware of women they knew attempting to access information.



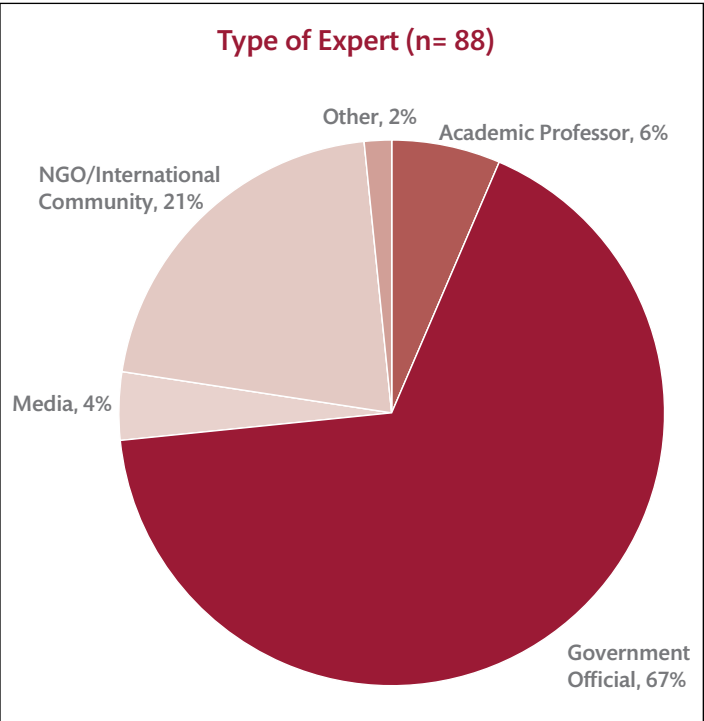
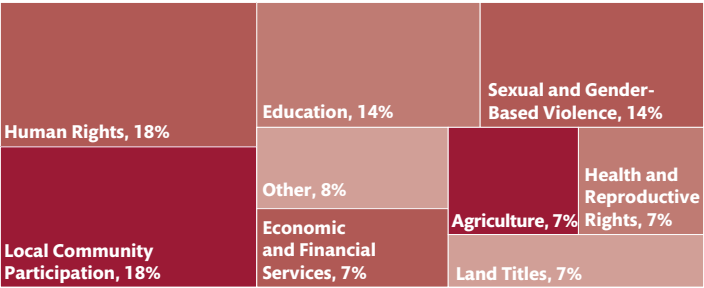
Of those community leaders who had attempted to access information or knew of someone who had attempted, 65% had successfully received the information. However, although more than half of the respondents had successfully received the information they were requesting, half acknowledged that the process was either difficult or very difficult for them as community leaders.

Experts

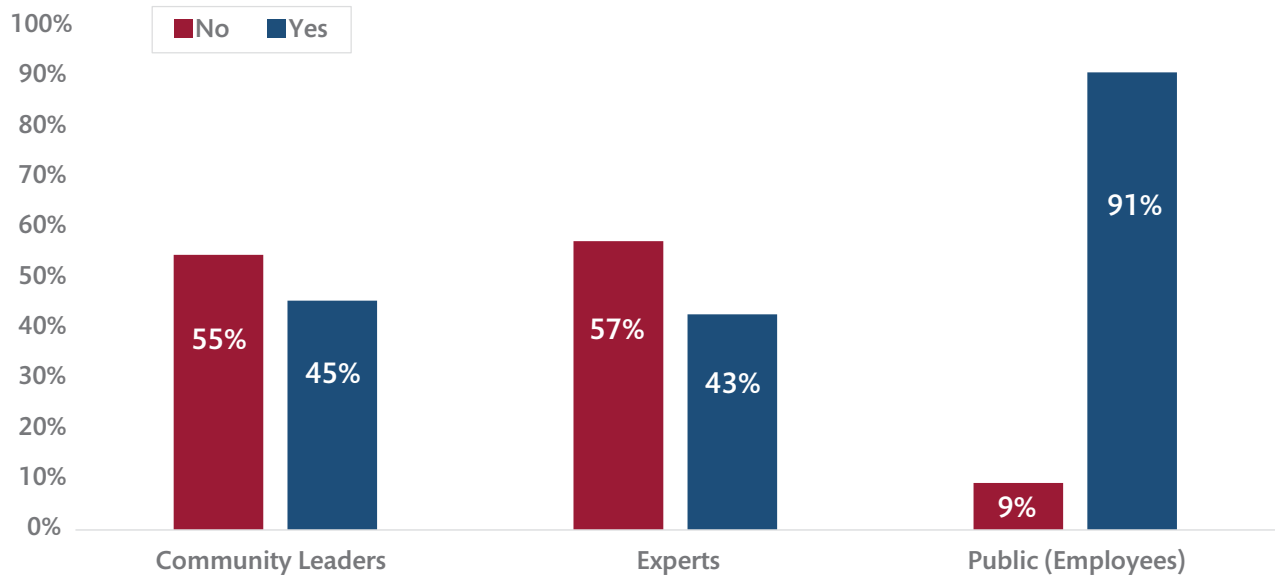
Similarly, the majority of experts (55%) believed that women do not access information with the same facility as men. Interviews were conducted with 88 experts (60 male/28 female) representing a variety of backgrounds, including government officials and NGO/CSOs.

Nonparticipant Observation

Partner SDI selected agencies related to development, social protection, and economic empowerment for nonparticipant observation. Researchers visited each office on three separate occasions, varying the day of the week and time of day, for a total of 170 visits. For a full list of the agencies visited, please refer to the annex of this report.



Do You Think Women Access Information With the Same Frequency, Ease, and Rate of Success as Men?



Enumerators at these agencies interviewed 43 employees (36 male/seven female) holding various positions in the offices and 78 visitors (37 male/41 female) visiting the offices for a number of reasons, including seeking information.

Inequities in Access to Information

According to this study, the majority of community leader and expert respondents say they believe that women do not access government-held information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men. Most government employee respondents, however, answered that they believed that women did access government-held

information with the same facility as men. Validation respondents noted that being asked in their place of work, fear of potential negative consequences, and ignorance of the experiences of women in the community who do not travel to government offices may account for the employees' beliefs.

Ninety-four percent of respondents agreed that women are interested in accessing information at the local, district, and national levels, and that women themselves would find the information very useful to improving their social and economic capabilities and knowledge of their rights.

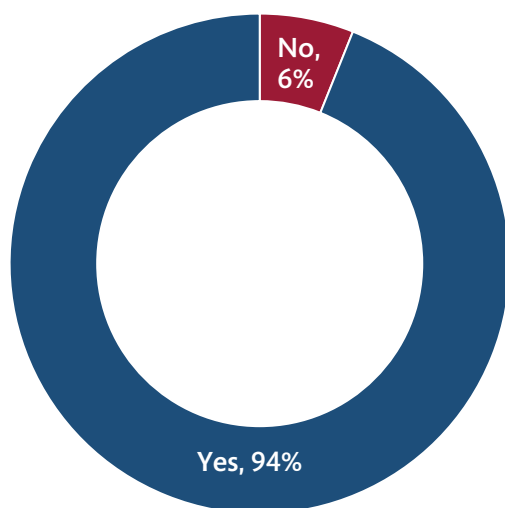
Experts were asked, "If women are less able to access information, what do you see as a consequence of this?" The main consequence identified was that this would negatively impact women in their progress to equality and development. Experts also suggested that a potential consequence may be increased domestic violence and instability, lower female representation in government positions, and a lack of knowledge regarding how to hold their government and public officials accountable and therefore less effectively use the law, government policies, and welfare/economic opportunities.

Gender

When disaggregating by gender, there are a few interesting things of note. Female employees (seven) answered that women do access information with the same facility as men. In contrast, a higher percentage of female community leaders and experts perceived that women do not access information with the same facility as their male counterparts.

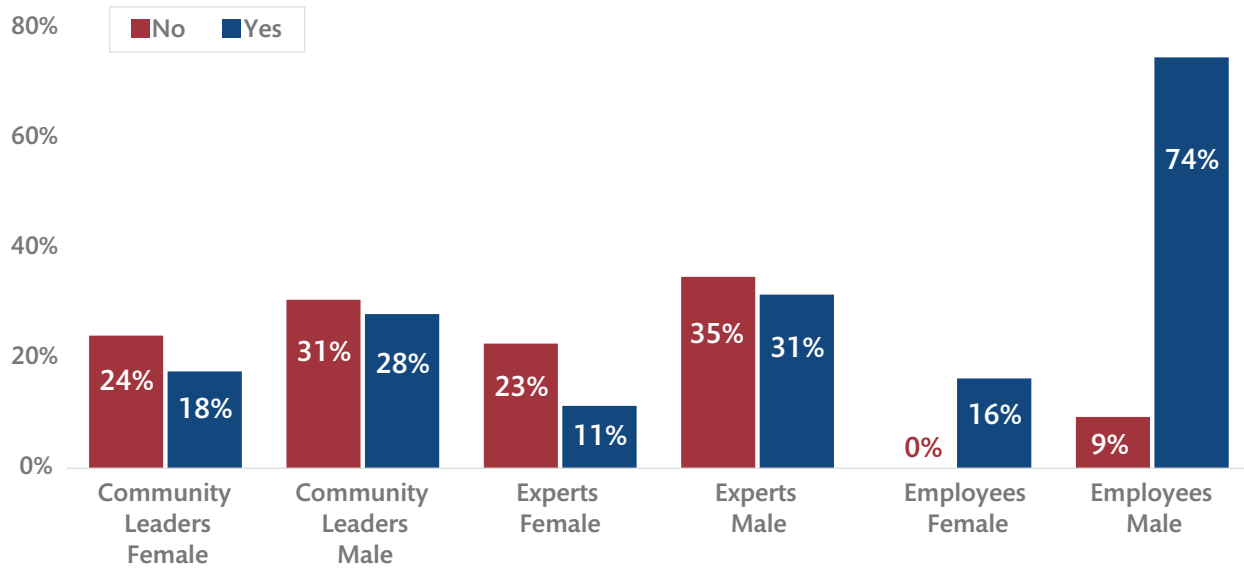
Are Women Interested in a Right-to-Information Law?

Community Leaders (n=148)



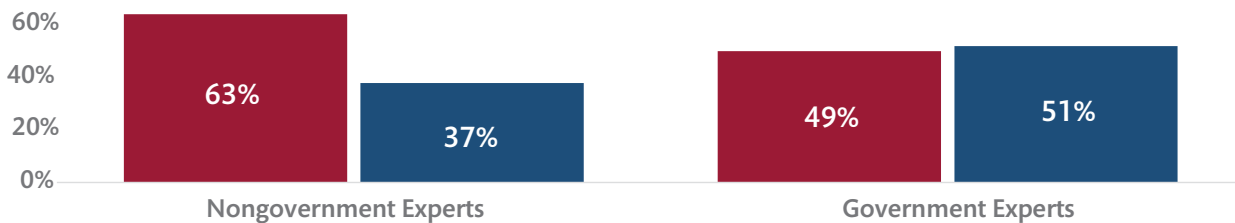
Do You Think Women Access Information with the Same Frequency, Ease, and Rate of Success as Men?

By Gender



Do You Think Women Access Information With the Same Frequency, Ease, and Rate of Success as Men?

Experts by Type, Experts (n=88)



Government vs. Nongovernment Experts (Media, Academic Professor, NGO/IGO, Other)

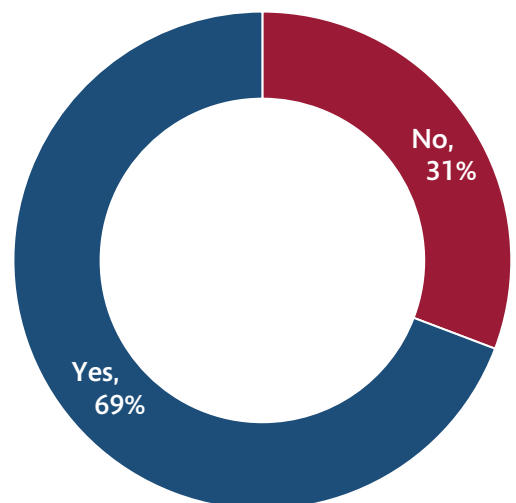
When looking at expert responses based on government versus nongovernment personnel, we see that government personnel are nearly split in half on whether they agree that women do access information with the same facility as men. Sixty-three percent of experts from backgrounds other than government responded that women do not access information with the same facility as men.

Nonparticipant: Visitors Seeking Information From Government Agencies

Visitors to various government agencies were interviewed briefly about their experiences reaching the government agencies and attempting to access information or services. The main barriers they expressed when traveling to the agencies were the long commute, transportation issues, and the cost of travel. Most visitors said their experiences at agencies

Did You Receive the Information You Were Seeking?

Nonparticipant Visitors (n=78)



were generally positive. Some experiences they noted included long wait times and complicated processes. Of the 78 visitors, only five (four male, one female) expressed that they had experienced discrimination/disrespectful conduct within the agencies.

Lastly, agency visitors were asked whether they had received the information they requested/sought. Sixty-nine percent of all visitors replied that they had received the information. Freetown was the only district where the majority of visitors did not receive the information they were seeking (27% yes, 73% no).

Those who did not receive the information indicated that the main reasons were a lack of available government personnel to respond to information requests and/or that the information was not yet available, and they would need to return at a later date. Of the 23 visitors who did not receive the information they were seeking, only two (one male, one female) responded that information was withheld from them.

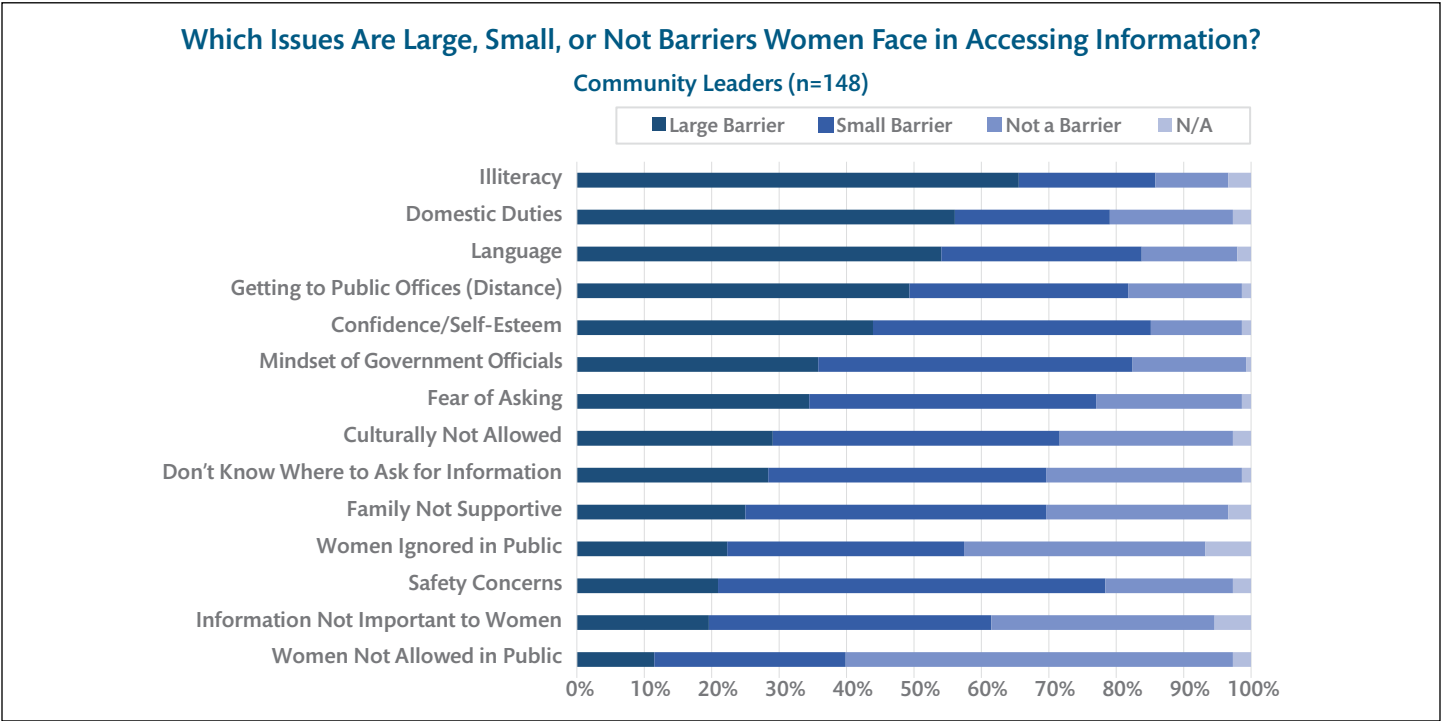
Barriers to Access to Information

To identify potential barriers that women may face in accessing information and the severity of those barriers, 14 potential barriers were provided to community leaders and experts, with the opportunity to provide any additional barriers to women exercising their right to information that were not part of the list.

Of the 14 barriers provided, responses from community leaders showed that illiteracy, domestic duties, and language were the largest barriers to women’s access to information.

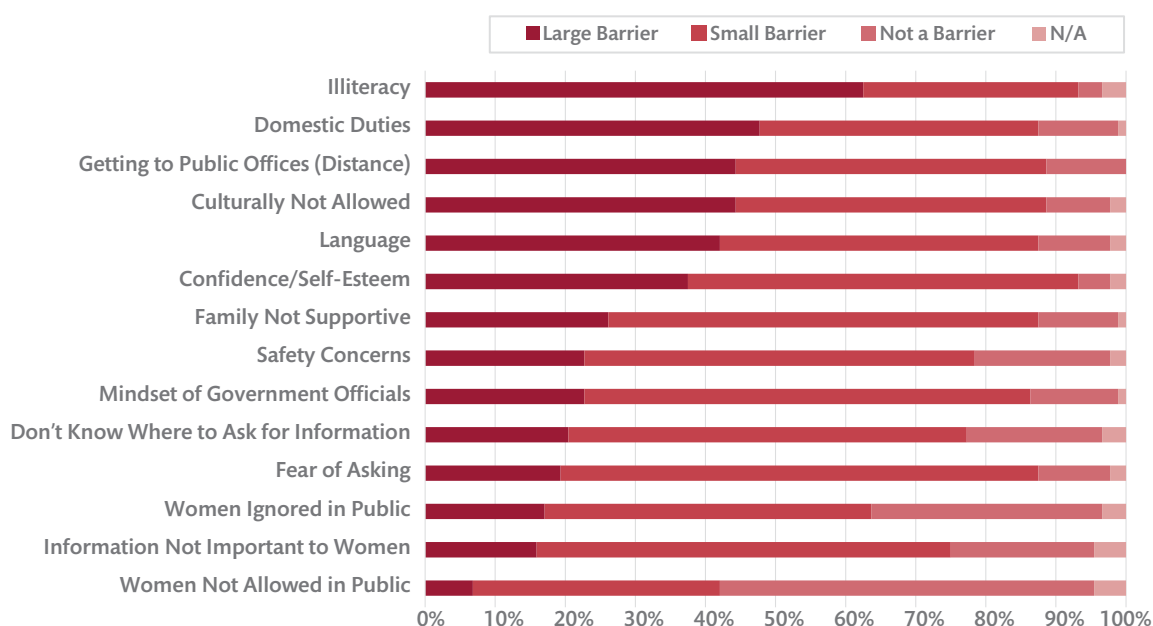
Of the 14 barriers provided, responses from experts showed that illiteracy, domestic duties, and “culturally not allowed” were the largest barriers to women’s access to information. Barriers that were offered as additions to the original list included political divisiveness/instability and the lack of female support/organizations. Kailahun and Port Loko were the only districts where men and women included lack of female representation in the government as an additional barrier.

Barriers to Women’s Access to Information	
1.	Don't know how / where to go to ask for information
2.	Fear of asking / fear of reprisals for asking
3.	Domestic duties
4.	Getting to public offices (mobility, cost, distance)
5.	Someone in the family not supportive (impedes)
6.	Lack of confidence to ask government for information
7.	Mindset of government official
8.	Illiteracy
9.	Women ignored when they go into public buildings
10.	Language
11.	Culturally not appropriate / allowed
12.	Safety concerns
13.	Information not seen as important for women
14.	Women not allowed in public buildings
15.	Other



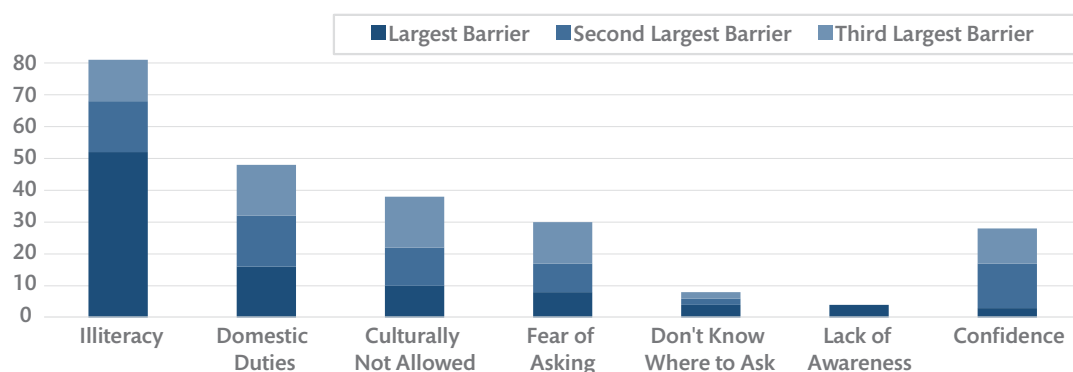
Which Issues Are Large, Small, or Not Barriers Women Face in Accessing Information?

Experts (n=88)



What Are the Three Greatest Barriers Women Face in Accessing Information?

Community Leaders (n=148)



Community Leaders

Top Three Barriers to Women's Access to Information:

1. Illiteracy
2. Domestic Duties
3. Culturally Not Allowed

Respondents were asked to categorize each barrier individually and assess whether that barrier was considered a small barrier or a large barrier to overcome or not considered a barrier at all. The identification of top barriers was based on the number of times the barrier was mentioned as one of the top three barriers facing women. Both community leaders and experts agreed that the largest barrier to women's access to information was illiteracy.

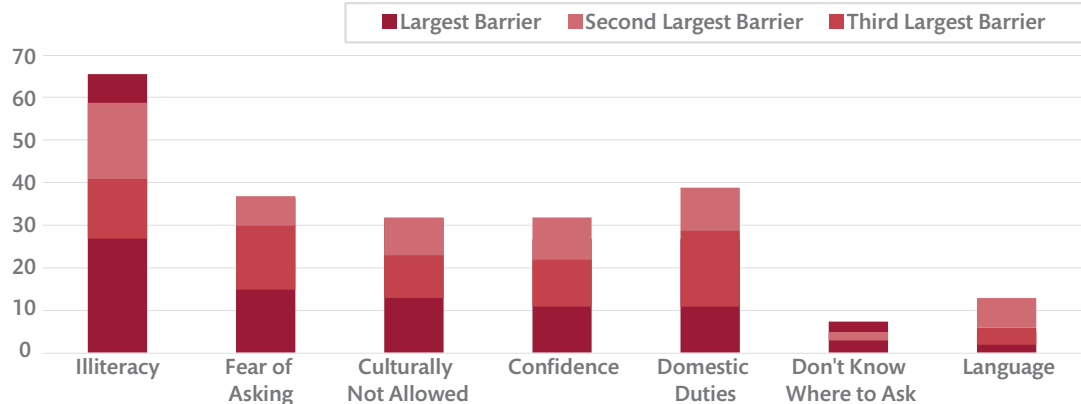
According to the experts, the top three barriers facing women were illiteracy, fear of asking, and culturally not allowed, which differs slightly from the answers provided by community leaders.

From the validation participants' responses, it was observed that culturally prohibited behavior, lack of confidence, and fear of asking were all associated with women feeling intimidated when entering spaces traditionally reserved for men. Nonparticipant observations at government offices indicated that a significant majority of employees, approximately 75%, were male, and most visitors entering government offices were either men or women accompanied by men.

Additionally, it was noted that women faced difficulties in exercising their right to access information because of household, family, and economic demands, which limited their time and freedom to seek information. Language also was ranked as a significant barrier, highlighting the diversity

What Are the Three Greatest Barriers Women Face in Accessing Information?

Experts (n=88)



Experts

Top Three Barriers to Women's Access to Information:

1. Illiteracy
2. Domestic Duties
3. Fear of Asking

of languages spoken, especially in rural areas, and underscoring the greater need for materials to be made available in multiple languages.

Community leaders and experts were asked to propose some possible solutions to the barriers facing women in exercising their right of access to information. The main suggestions included increasing female literacy, increasing awareness/support of the right to information, changing cultural beliefs/behaviors, and building female confidence. Another interesting suggestion was making government more efficient/decentralized and increasing female representation in government. Community leaders in Kailahun and Freetown also suggested that increased male support of women's access to information would be another useful solution.

Awareness of Rights

Community leaders and experts were asked to assess the current awareness level of women in their communities/organizations about their general rights. Respondents

were given a list of eight rights related to health, education, labor, and discrimination and rate them as very aware, somewhat aware, and unaware or not aware at all. Interestingly, community leaders responded that they believed that women in their communities had high awareness of their right to information, while experts believe that the right to information was one of the rights women were least aware of in their communities. The overwhelming majority of validation respondents agreed that the right to information is not well known. Generally, community leaders and experts believed that only about 50% of women have a strong understanding of their various rights.

Many experts felt that all of the rights listed were important because they provide women the opportunity to engage as members of society and fully participate in the decision-making processes, increase self-reliance, and contribute to their holistic development. Freedom from domestic violence was singled out, as it can have grave results on women's physical and mental health, and with information, women can hold their abusers to account. Community leaders said these rights will strengthen and dignify women's position in society and give women ownership over their lives, thoughts, and opinions.

Of the 10 rights related to economic empowerment, responses from community leaders and experts showed

Women's Awareness of Their Rights

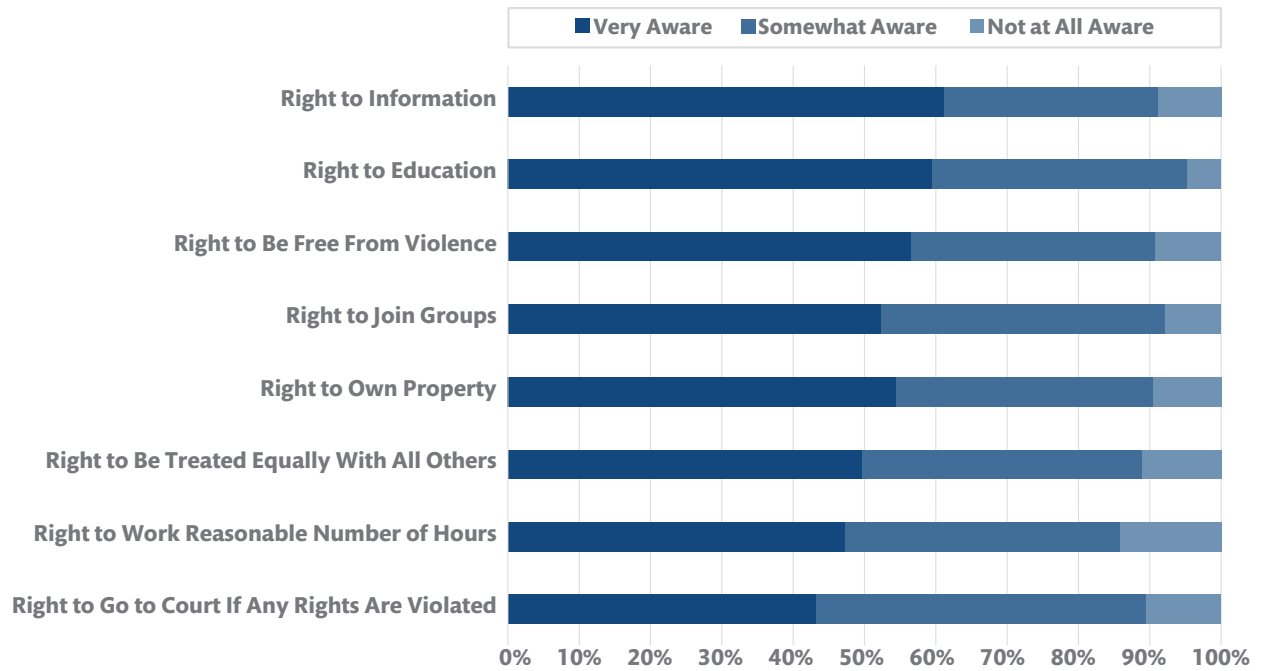
1. Right to be treated equally with all others (free from discrimination)
2. Right to be free from violence
3. Right to be able to join groups / associations
4. Right to be able to go to court if any rights are violated
5. Right to education
6. Right to own property
7. Right to information
8. Right to work under good conditions / reasonable hours

Survey Respondents:

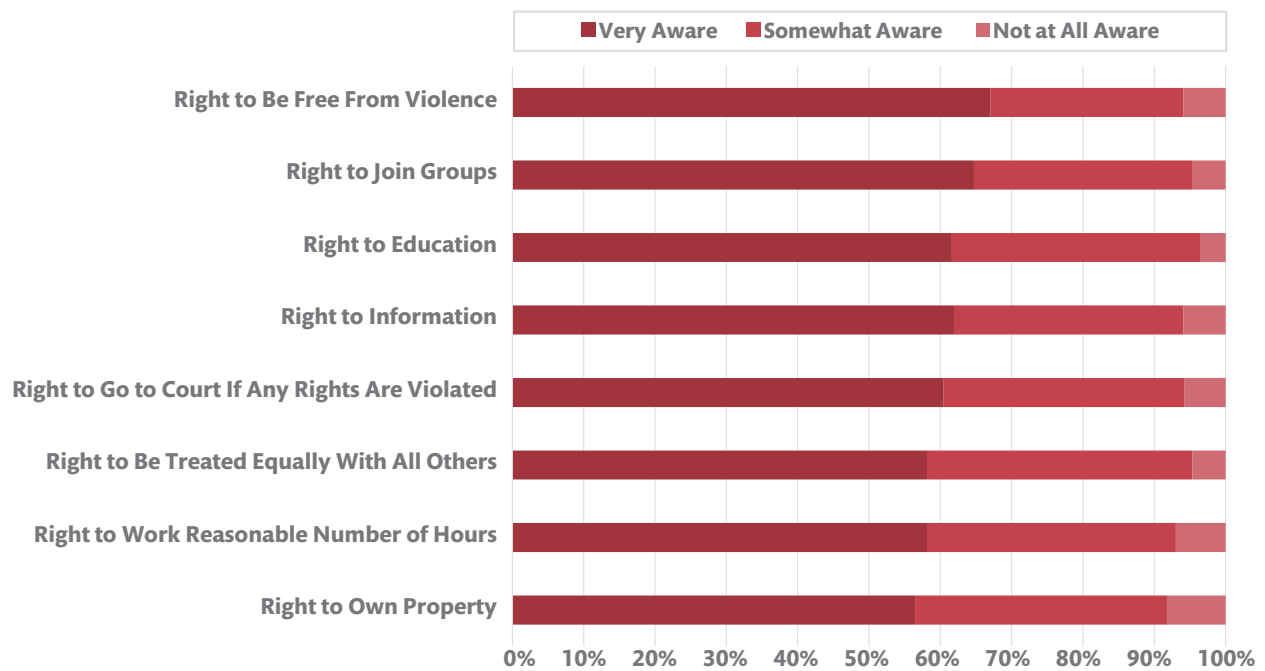
"A woman with education will always know her rights and also defend her fellow women in the community or society."

"Information is power. It will enable more women to speak."

Awareness of Rights Community Leaders (n=148)



Awareness of Rights Experts (n=88)



Information Most Useful for the Promotion and Protection of Women's Rights	Information Most Useful for the Economic Empowerment of Women
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To be free from violence / women's security 2. Property ownership / land rights 3. How justice system works 4. Labor law / labor rights 5. Right to public participation, including decision-making 6. Right to education 7. Marital / family rights 8. Health and reproductive rights 9. Right to free expression 10. Right to information 11. Social services / benefits 12. Anti-discrimination / equality 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Access to banks / loans / credit 2. Vocational training / skills training 3. Technology training 4. Educational opportunities 5. Job opportunities 6. Land / property ownership 7. Scholarships 8. How to start a business 9. How to get a trade license 10. Social development funds / project opportunities

that access to banks, educational opportunities, vocational training, and job opportunities were the most important. Experts responded that they felt these rights were important because they enable women to have greater self-reliance and ability to participate fully in the economy. Community leader respondents agreed that these rights help provide stability and a greater chance of employment and advancement within their field.

Priority Information for Women's Economic Empowerment and Promotion and Protection of Rights

A major component of this study is not merely to assess the type and severity of barriers that have the greatest impact on women accessing their right to information, but also to determine which information is considered most valuable for women's promotion and protection of rights and economic empowerment. A list of 12 potential areas of information related to the promotion and protection of women's rights, along with 10 potential areas of information related to achieving greater economic empowerment, was provided to community leaders and experts for their consideration.

Survey Respondent:

"If a woman gets information, she will use it to develop herself, her community, and the nation."

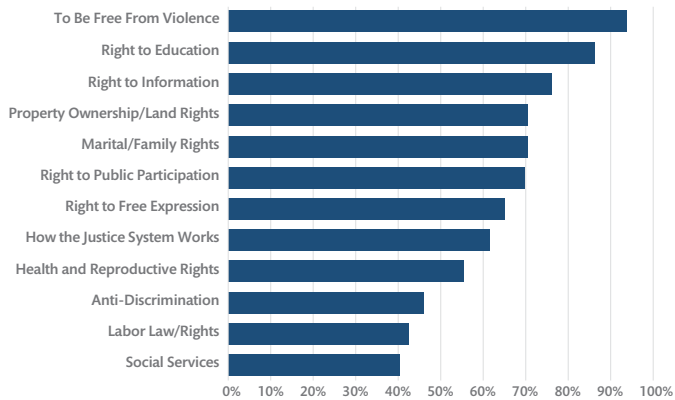
Of the 12 types of information listed, responses from community leaders and experts showed that freedom from domestic violence, right to education, and the right to information were the most important areas of information to the promotion and protection of women's rights.

Respondents were asked to categorize each type of information individually and assess which rights were most valuable to both the promotion and protection of women's rights and women's economic empowerment. The identification of the most valuable rights was based on the number of times that right was mentioned as either the most, second most, or third most important to women's rights and empowerment.

When queried about the information most valuable for enhancing economic empowerment and promoting and safeguarding women's rights, community leaders and experts indicated that education was the most important, closely followed by access to banks and job opportunities.

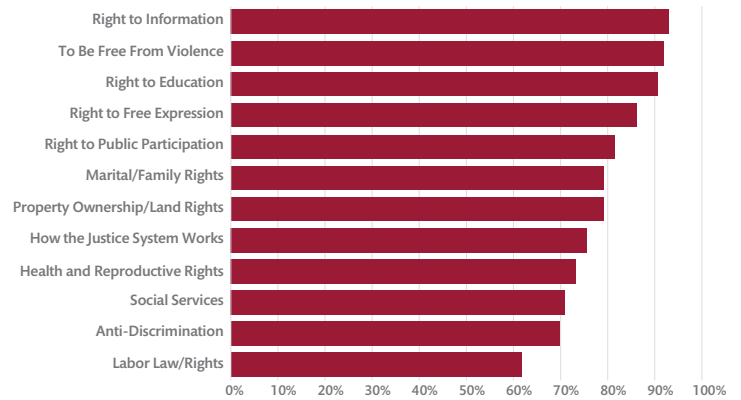
Which Information Is Most Valuable for the Promotion of Women's Rights?

Community Leaders (n=148)



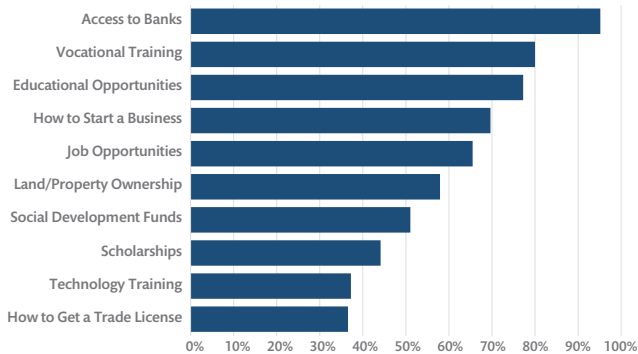
Which Information Is the Most Valuable for the Promotion of Women's Rights?

Experts (n= 88)



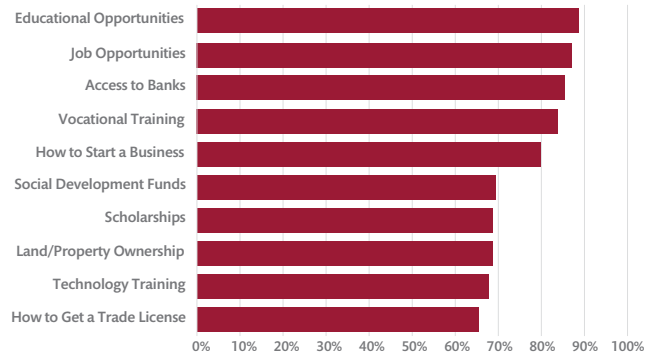
Which Rights Are the Most Useful for the Economic Empowerment of Women?

Community Leaders (n=148)



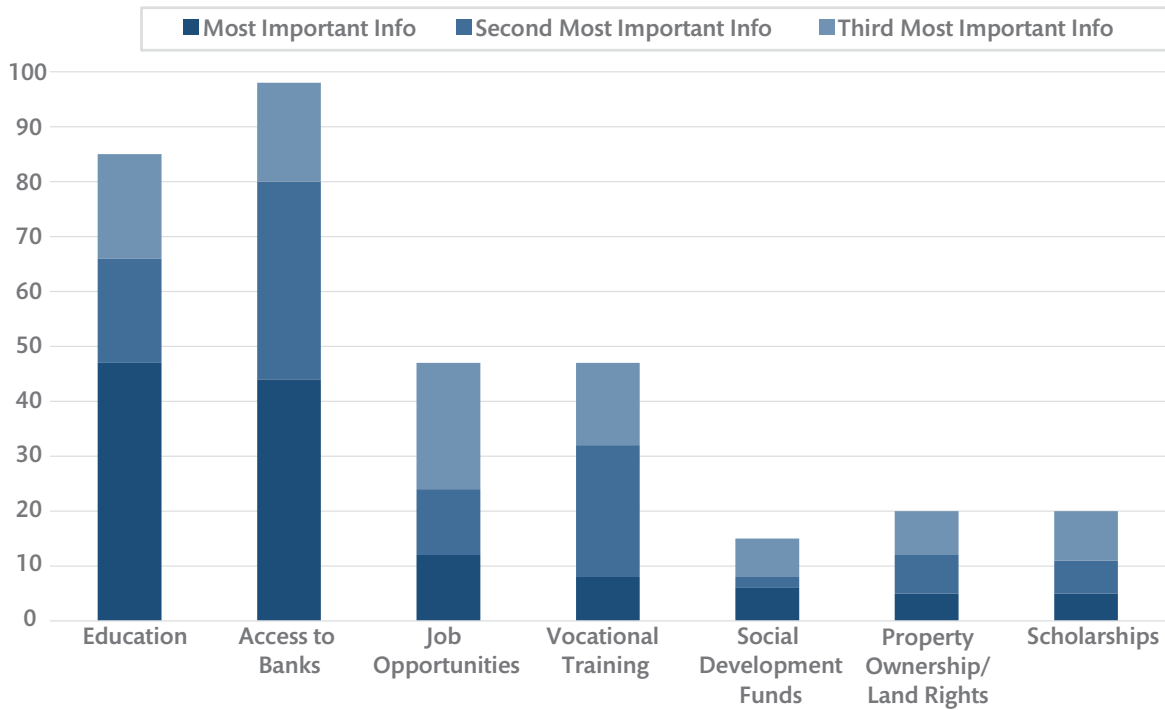
Which Rights Are the Most Useful for the Economic Empowerment of Women?

Experts (n= 88)



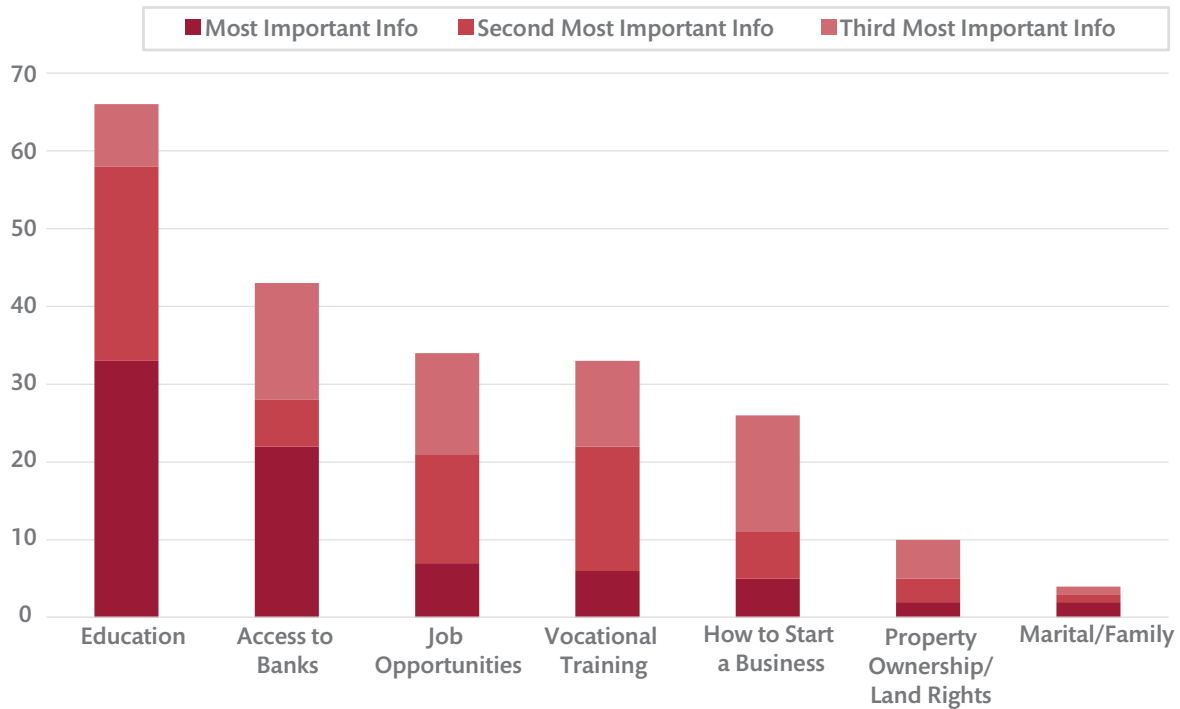
Rank the Information Most Valuable to Women for Economic Empowerment and Promotion and Protection of Rights

Community Leaders (n=148)



Rank the Information Most Valuable to Women for Economic Empowerment and Promotion and Protection of Rights

Experts (n=88)

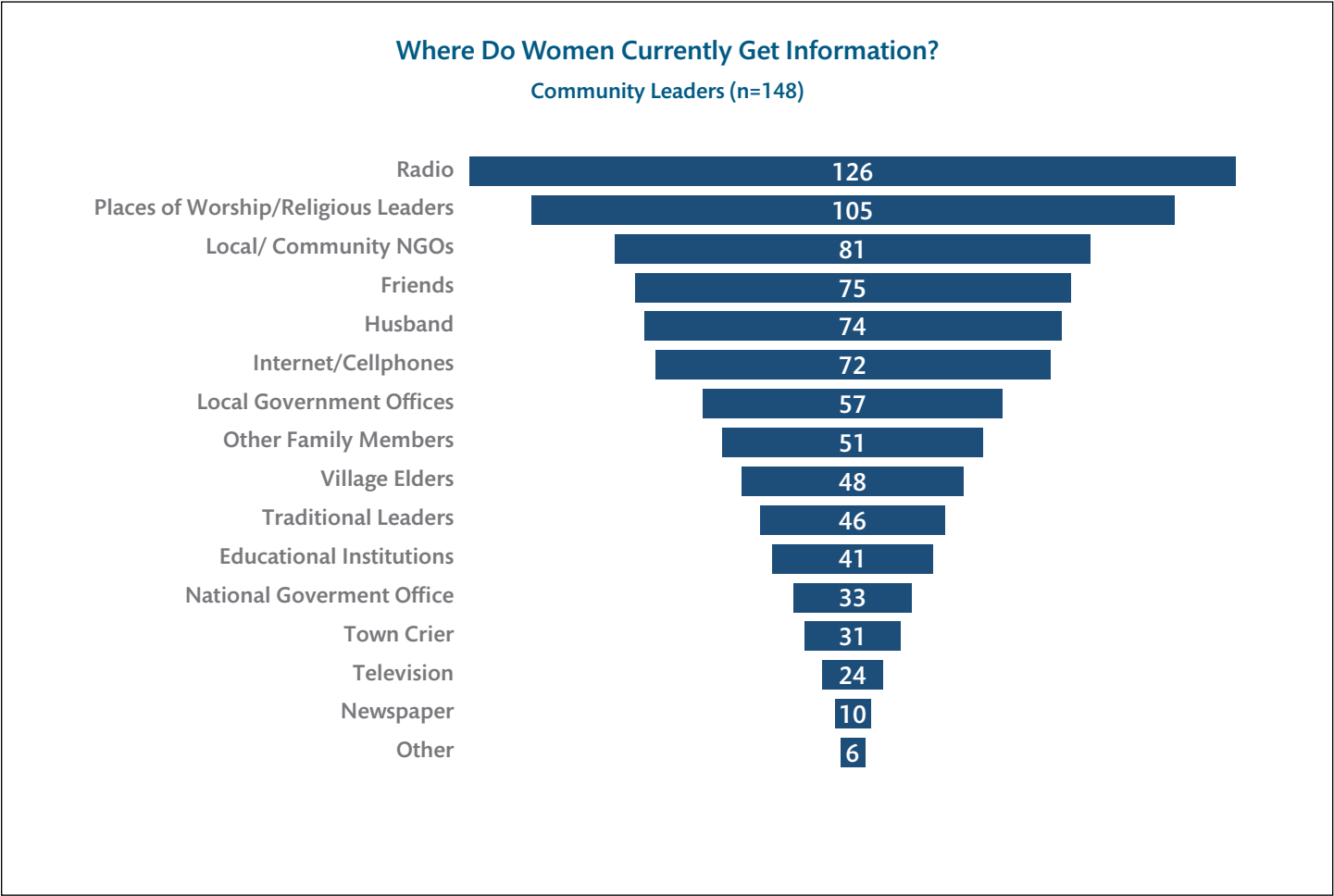


Current Information Sources

Where women receive their information was also something the study sought to identify. A list of 15 options was provided, and respondents could choose as many as applied or provide their own source. Women’s heavy reliance on radio and places of worship as the top two sources of information in their communities was cited by both community leaders and experts. Notably, community leaders said that

women get information from their husbands and friends. Findings from the interviews coincide with information from the validation meetings in which women reiterated that they rely heavily on their husbands and community for information and guidance.

Validation participants relayed that while information from the radio is important, information has a larger impact when it is spread through trusted community members and organizations.



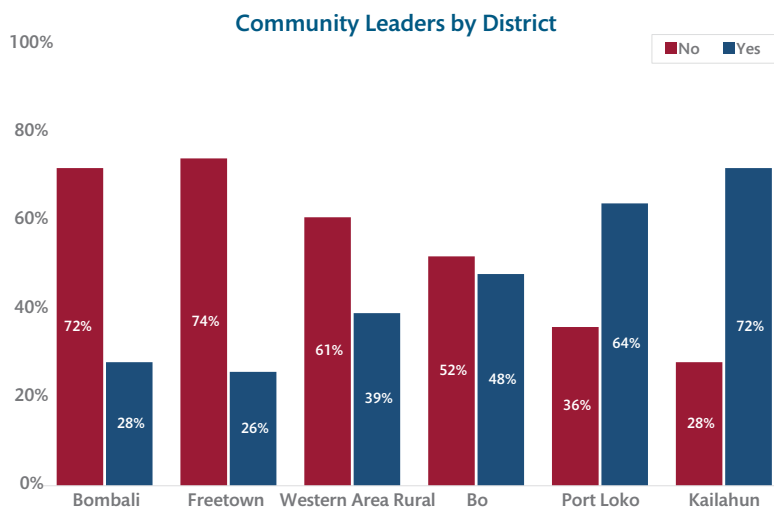
District Findings

In addition to reviewing the aggregate findings, the study considered the results from the six districts in which the interviews and validation exercises were conducted: Bo, Bombali, Freetown (Western Area Urban), Kailahun, Port Loko, and Western Area Rural. In general, community leaders and experts in the various districts agreed in their interview responses. In Bo, Bombali, Freetown, and Western Area Rural, there was agreement that women do not access information with the same facility as men. In Port Loko and Kailahun, the majority of community leaders and experts agreed that women do access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success. Interestingly, the lowest percentage of female respondents was from Bo, with only 24% of community leaders and 7% of experts. However, the expert respondents in Bo felt very strongly that women were not able to access information with the same facility as men. The second lowest percentage of female respondents was

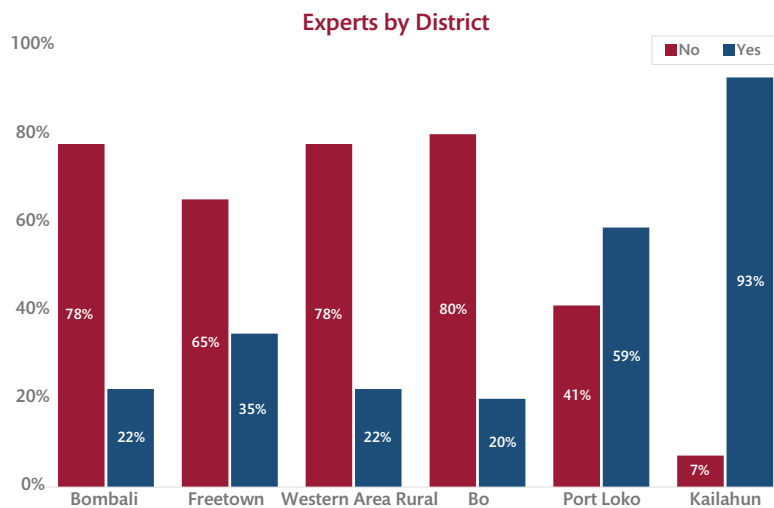
from Kailahun, with 40% of community leaders and 14% of experts. However, expert respondents in Kailahun felt very strongly that women did access information similarly to men.

Features of both Bo and Kailahun include a large use of Mende language in the south and southwest areas and major cities with Islam as the dominant religion. However, there were differences in many of their socio-cultural gender indicators remain. For example, Kailahun has one of the highest percentage rates of women who believe a husband is justified in beating his wife, 69.6%, while Bo had one of the lowest, 44.9%. In Bo, women’s literacy rate is 41.2% and Kailahun’s is 31.1%. However, their male literacy rates are much closer, with Bo at 56.8% and Kailahun at 53.4%. This shows that while they are comparable in certain development and education measures, using gendered data reveals that Kailahun has a wider gap in facility between men and women.

Do You Think Women Access Information with the Same Frequency, Ease, and Rate of Success as Men?



Do You Think Women Access Information with the Same Frequency, Ease, and Rate of Success as Men?



Bo

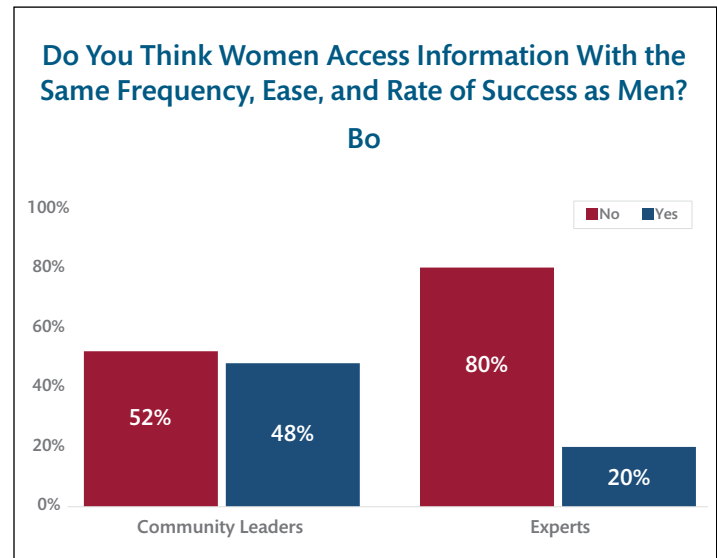
In Bo, 25 community leaders (19 male/six female) and 15 experts (14 male/one female) were interviewed. The community leaders mainly worked in areas of human rights (16%), sex and gender rights (14%), and community participation (13%). A majority of the experts were in government (67%), with the rest in the NGO and other spaces. During the nonparticipation discussions, enumerators interviewed 19 employees (18 male/one female) and 14 visitors (three male/11 female).

The majority of community leaders and experts interviewed perceived that women do not access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men.

Greatest Barriers and Most Important Information

The greatest barriers community leaders and experts identified for women were illiteracy, language, and getting to public offices. Community leaders and experts generally agreed that sexual and gender-based violence and the right

to information were among the most important information factors for women to protect their rights. They also agreed that access to banks and education was the most valuable information for women's economic empowerment.



Greatest Barriers for Women Community Leaders

1. Illiteracy
2. Getting to Public Offices
3. Lack of Confidence
4. Language
5. Domestic Duties

Greatest Barriers for Women Experts

1. Illiteracy
2. Culturally Not Appropriate
3. Language
4. Getting to Public Offices
5. Safety Concerns

Most Valuable Information for Women Community Leaders

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
2. Right to Information
3. Property Ownership/Land Rights

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Access to Banks
2. Education
3. Vocational Training

Most Valuable Information for Women Experts

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
2. Right to Information
3. Right to Public Participation

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Access to Banks
2. Education
3. How To Get a Trade License

Bombali

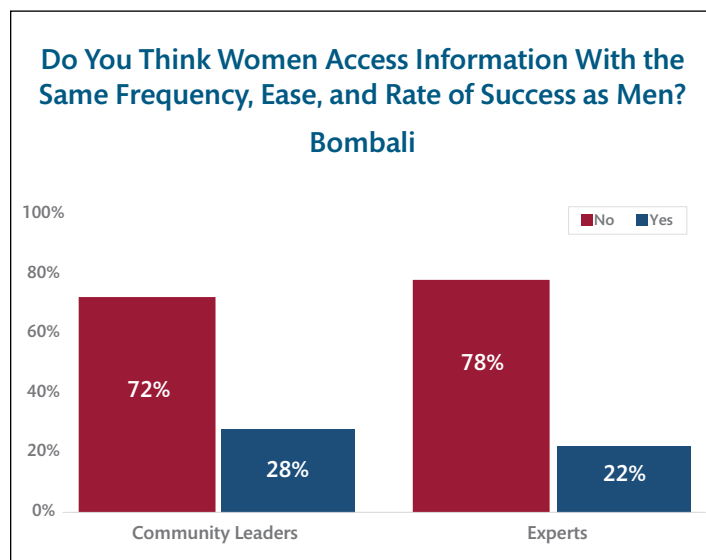
In Bombali, 25 community leaders (15 male/10 female) and 18 experts (14 male/four female) were interviewed. The majority of community leaders worked in areas of agriculture (20%), education (17%), and economic services (17%). Experts were evenly split, with a third in government, a third in academia, and a third from the nongovernmental sector. During the nonparticipation observation, enumerators interviewed one employee (male) and eight visitors (two male/six female).

The majority of community leaders and experts interviewed perceived that women do not access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men.

Greatest Barriers and Most Important Information

The greatest barriers community leaders and experts identified for women were illiteracy and domestic duties. Community leaders and experts generally agreed that sexual and gender-based violence was among the most important information for women to protect their rights, followed by a

right to education and the right to information. Community leaders and experts generally agreed that job opportunities and access to banks were the most valuable information for women's economic empowerment.



Greatest Barriers for Women Community Leaders

1. Domestic Duties
2. Getting to Public Offices
3. Fear of Asking
4. Don't Know Where to Go for Information
5. Family Not Supportive

Greatest Barriers for Women Experts

1. Illiteracy
2. Lack of Confidence
3. Women Not Allowed in Public Buildings
4. Domestic Duties
5. Information Not Seen as Important for Women

Most Valuable Information for Women Community Leaders

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
2. Right to Education
3. Marital and Family Rights

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Access to Banks
2. Job Opportunities
3. Scholarships

Most Valuable Information for Women Experts

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
2. Right to Information
3. Right to Public Participation

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Job Opportunities
2. Vocational Training
3. Education

Freetown (Western Area Urban)

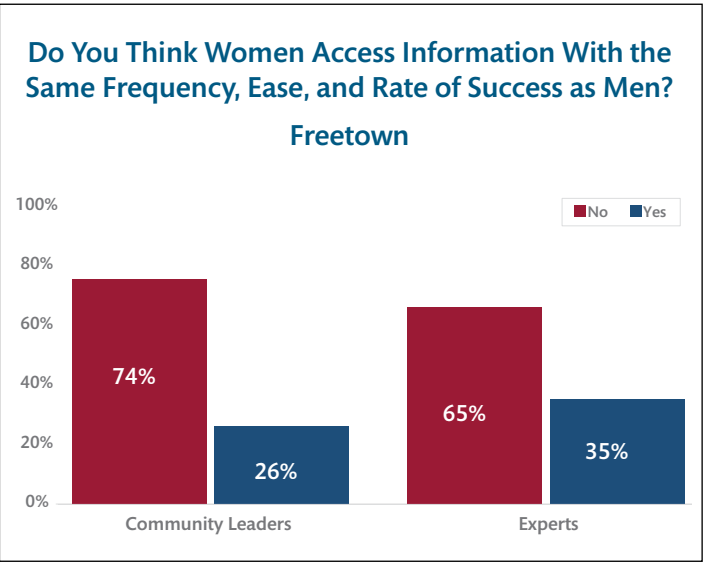
In Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, 31 community leaders (17 male/14 female) and 46 experts (26 male/20 female) were interviewed. The community leaders worked in areas of education (26%), human rights (24%), and economic services (15%). Of the experts interviewed, 87% self-reported as working in government, with the rest in nongovernmental organizations and the media sector. During the nonparticipation observation, enumerators interviewed one employee (male) and 30 visitors (23 male/seven female).

The majority of community leaders and experts interviewed believed that women do not access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men.

Greatest Barriers and Most Important Information

The greatest barriers experts and community leaders identified for women were illiteracy, domestic duties, and language. Community leaders and experts generally agreed that sexual

and gender-based violence and the right to education were among the most important factors for women to protect their rights. They also agreed that job opportunities, access to banks, and education were the most valuable information for women’s economic empowerment.



Greatest Barriers for Women
Community Leaders

- 1. Illiteracy
- 2. Language
- 3. Domestic Duties
- 4. Lack of Confidence
- 5. Mindset of Government Officials

Greatest Barriers for Women
Experts

- 1. Illiteracy
- 2. Domestic Duties
- 3. Language
- 4. Lack of Confidence
- 5. Mindset of Government Officials

Most Valuable Information for Women
Community Leaders

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

- 1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
- 2. Right to Education
- 3. Right to Information

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

- 1. Job Opportunities
- 2. Education
- 3. Access to Banks

Most Valuable Information for Women
Experts

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

- 1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
- 2. Right to Public Participation
- 3. Right to Education

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

- 1. Job Opportunities
- 2. Access to Banks
- 3. Education

Kailahun

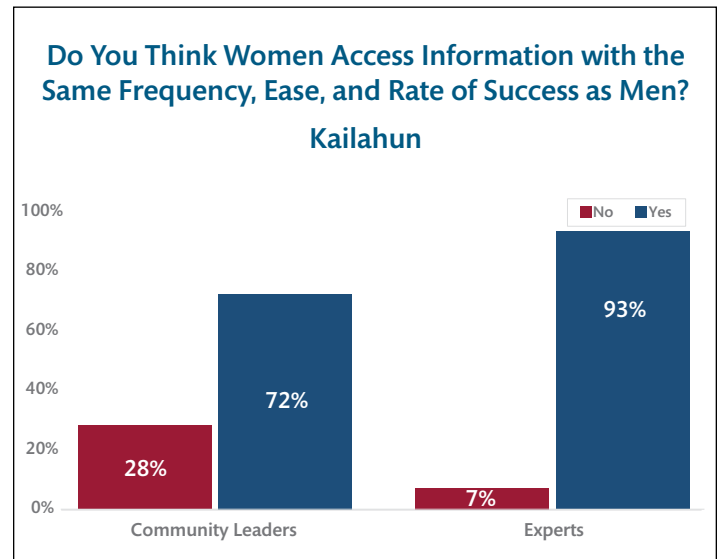
In Kailahun, 25 community leaders (15 male/10 female) and 14 experts (12 male/two female) were interviewed. The majority of community leaders worked in areas of local community participation (23%), human rights (20%), and education (17%). Experts worked either for the government (64%) or a nongovernmental organization (36%). During the nonparticipation observation, enumerators interviewed four employees (all males) and six visitors (four male/two female).

The majority of community leaders and experts interviewed believed that women do access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men. However, in reviewing the surveys, many of the respondents who said women do access information noted that it is a constitutional right or that it is valuable as the reason for their answer. It may be that these respondents were considering the policy rather than the practice/reality that women face.

Greatest Barriers and Most Important Information

The greatest barriers community leaders and experts identified for women were illiteracy, domestic duties, and language.

Community leaders and experts generally agreed that sexual and gender-based violence and the right to education were among the most important information for women to protect their rights. They also agreed that access to banks, education, and vocational training opportunities were the most valuable information for women's economic empowerment.



Greatest Barriers for Women Community Leaders

1. Illiteracy
2. Language
3. Family Not Supportive
4. Lack of Confidence
5. Domestic Duties

Greatest Barriers for Women Experts

1. Lack of Confidence
2. Domestic Duties
3. Culturally Not Allowed
4. Getting to Public Offices
5. Mindset of Government Officials

Most Valuable Information for Women Community Leaders

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
2. Right to Education
3. Right to Freedom of Expression

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Access to Banks
2. Vocational Training
3. Education

Most Valuable Information for Women Experts

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Right to Education
2. Right to Public Participation
3. Right to Information

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Education
2. Job Opportunities
3. Vocational Training

Port Loko

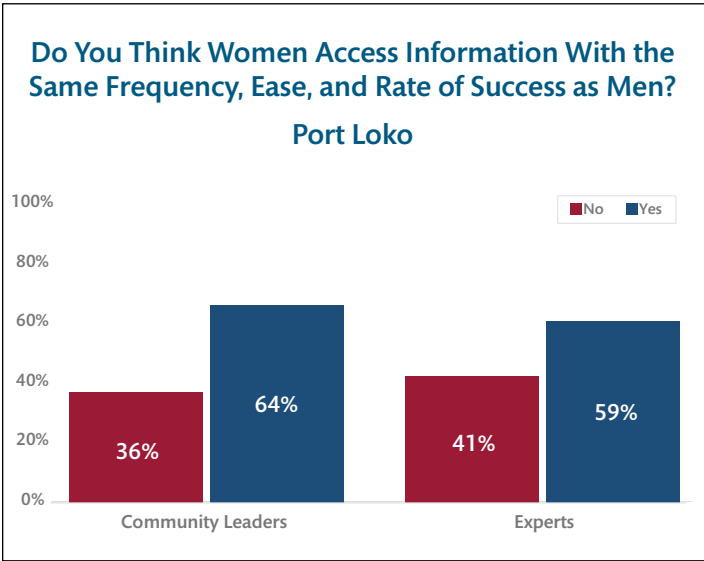
In Port Loko, 25 community leaders (12 male/13 female) and 17 experts (12 male/five female) were interviewed. The community leaders worked in areas of human rights (25%), education (21%), and sexual and gender rights (21%). The group of experts interviewed included 53% working in government and 29% in NGOs, with the remaining in academia and media spaces. During the nonparticipation observation, enumerators interviewed seven employees (six male/one female) and five visitors (one male/four female).

The majority of community leaders and experts interviewed believe that women do access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men. Of the respondents who said “yes,” more than 70% indicated it was equitable because the right to information is a constitutional right and/or that there was an obligation to share information. It may be that these respondents were considering the policy rather than the practice/reality that women face.

Greatest Barriers and Most Important Information

The greatest barriers community leaders and experts identified for women were illiteracy, domestic duties, and being culturally not allowed to seek information. Community

leaders and experts generally agreed that sexual and gender-based violence and the right to property ownership and land rights were among the most important information for women to protect their rights. They also agreed that access to banks, education, and information on how to start a business were the most valuable information for women’s economic empowerment.



Greatest Barriers for Women
Community Leaders

- 1. Illiteracy
- 2. Language
- 3. Family Not Supportive
- 4. Lack of Confidence
- 5. Domestic Duties

Greatest Barriers for Women
Experts

- 1. Lack of Confidence
- 2. Domestic Duties
- 3. Culturally Not Allowed
- 4. Getting to Public Offices
- 5. Mindset of Government Officials

Most Valuable Information for Women
Community Leaders

- Promotion and Protection of Rights:
- 1. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
 - 2. Right to Education
 - 3. Right to Freedom of Expression
- Increasing Economic Empowerment:
- 1. Access to Banks
 - 2. Vocational Training
 - 3. Education

Most Valuable Information for Women
Experts

- Promotion and Protection of Rights:
- 1. Right to Education
 - 2. Right to Public Participation
 - 3. Right to Information
- Increasing Economic Empowerment:
- 1. Education
 - 2. Job Opportunities
 - 3. Vocational Training

Western Area Rural

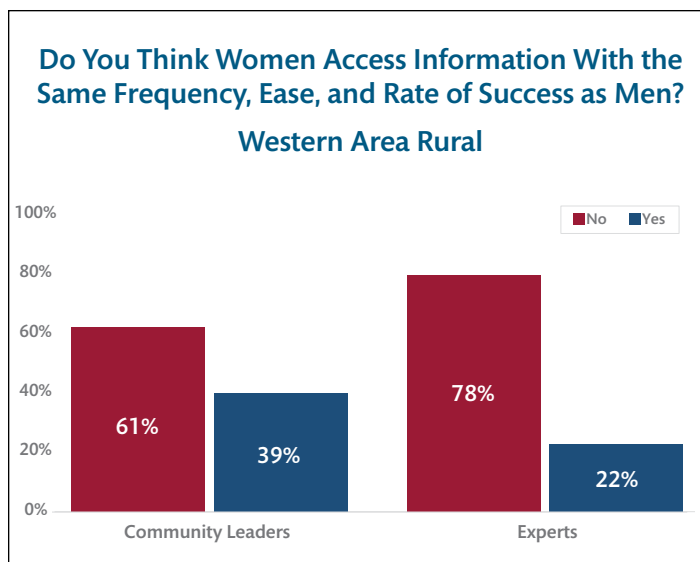
In Western Area Rural, 23 community leaders (12 male/11 female) and 14 experts (four male/10 female) were interviewed. The community leaders worked in areas of human rights (17%), education (17%), and community participation (14%). Experts were in government (57%), nongovernmental organizations (21%), academia, media, and others. During the nonparticipation observation, enumerators interviewed 11 employees (six male/five female) and 15 visitors (four male/11 female).

The majority of community leaders and experts interviewed believed that women do not access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men.

Greatest Barriers and Most Important Information

The greatest barriers identified for women by community leaders and experts were illiteracy, language, and traveling to public offices. Community leaders and experts generally agreed that the right to information and the right to

freedom of expression were among the most important information for women to promote and protect their rights. They also agreed that vocational training opportunities and education were the most valuable information for women's economic empowerment.



Greatest Barriers for Women Community Leaders

1. Illiteracy
2. Domestic Duties
3. Language
4. Lack of Confidence
5. Getting to Public Offices

Greatest Barriers for Women Experts

1. Illiteracy
2. Culturally Not Allowed
3. Getting to Public Offices
4. Language
5. Lack of Confidence

Most Valuable Information for Women Community Leaders

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Right to Freedom of Expression
2. Right to Information
3. Right to Education

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Vocational Training
2. Education
3. Access to Banks

Most Valuable Information for Women Experts

Promotion and Protection of Rights:

1. Right to Information
2. Right to Freedom of Expression
3. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Increasing Economic Empowerment:

1. Education
2. Vocational Training
3. Social Development Funds

Conclusion

Information is a crucial ingredient for democratic accountability, civic engagement, and the exercise of human and socioeconomic rights. Yet this study has demonstrated the hypothesis that for many Sierra Leonean women, important barriers exist to accessing the necessary information to increase economic empowerment and protect and promote their fundamental rights.

The study on Women and the Right of Access to Information sought to identify cultural, structural, and legal barriers that generate information asymmetry. In collecting data through interviews and nonparticipant observation and augmenting our understanding of the findings through validation workshops, we have begun to highlight perceptions of inequities and pinpoint barriers.

Barriers such as illiteracy; domestic duties; language and cultural barriers; difficulty in getting to public offices because of mobility, safety, and time; and mindset of predominantly male public officials all have played a role in

detering women's full and effective exercise of the right to information.

However, if these barriers can be overcome or minimized, the majority of respondents confirmed that access to public information would lead to women becoming more economically empowered, resulting in better overall development outcomes for their families, communities, and Sierra Leone as a country. Intentionally, this study does not provide prescriptive conclusions, but rather serves to demonstrate perceived inequities, illuminate challenges, and contribute to the discussion that will lead to potential solutions.

With the completion of this study and the dissemination of its findings, The Carter Center hopes that key government agencies, the Information Commission, civil society partners, and the media will jointly identify and apply creative means to better ensure that all people can enjoy a meaningful and equitable right of access to information.

Annex: List of Agencies

Bo

- 1 Bo District Council
- 2 Human Rights Commission
- 3 Ministry of Agriculture
- 4 Ministry of Labor
- 5 Ministry of Lands
- 6 Ministry of Social Welfare
- 7 Ministry of Trade and Industry
- 8 National Revenue Authority
- 9 National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT)
- 10 Sierra Leone Police

Bombali

- 1 Bombali Local Council
- 2 Human Rights Commission
- 3 Legal Aid Board
- 4 Ministry of Agriculture
- 5 Ministry of Education
- 6 Ministry of Labor
- 7 Ministry of Lands
- 8 National Revenue Authority
- 9 National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT)
- 10 Sierra Leone Police

Freetown

- 1 Freetown Council
- 2 Ministry of Agriculture
- 3 Ministry of Internal Affairs
- 4 Ministry of Labor
- 5 Ministry of Lands
- 6 Ministry of Social Welfare
- 7 National Revenue Authority
- 8 National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT)
- 9 Sierra Leone Cooperative Society
- 10 Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency

Kailahun

- 1 District Health Management Team (DHMT)
- 2 Human Rights Commission
- 3 Kailahun District Council
- 4 Ministry of Agriculture
- 5 National Revenue Authority
- 6 Sierra Leone Police

Port Loko

- 1 District Health Management Team (DHMT)
- 2 Human Rights Commission
- 3 Ministry of Agriculture
- 4 Ministry of Education
- 5 Ministry of Labor
- 6 Ministry of Lands
- 7 Ministry of Social Welfare
- 8 National Revenue Authority
- 9 National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT)
- 10 Port Loko District Council
- 11 Port Loko Magistrate Court
- 12 Sierra Leone Police

Western Area Rural

- 1 District Health Management Team
- 2 Ministry of Agriculture
- 3 Ministry of Education
- 4 Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs
- 5 Ministry of Social Welfare
- 6 Sierra Leone Police
- 7 WAR District Council
- 8 WAR Magistrate Court
- 9 Waterloo District Education Office

Endnotes

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