

Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone

¹Mrs. Theresa Foray, ^{*2}Dr. John Pahoni Stevens, ³Joe Ansu Foray Esq

¹Njala University Sierra Leone

²Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone

³Director of Human Resource Management, SALWACO- Sierra Leone

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.11070144>

Received: 31 July 2026; Accepted: 05 August 2026; Published: 13 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Women's participation in football has gained global recognition, yet in many developing football contexts it continues to be shaped by gender ideologies, dominant social discourses, and unequal power relations. In Sierra Leone, limited research has examined how language and discourse influence women's experiences, identities, and participation in football. This study, *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, investigated how discourses surrounding gender, competence, leadership, and belonging shape women's involvement as players, coaches, referees, and administrators. The study adopted a mixed-methods design informed by Critical Discourse Analysis and feminist discourse perspectives. A total of 327 respondents were selected from female football stakeholders, comprising 286 players and 41 coaches, referees, administrators, and managers. Simple random sampling was used for players, while purposive sampling was employed for key stakeholders. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically and through discourse analysis. The study achieved a 97% response rate, and the sample size was determined using Slovin's formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The findings revealed that discourse significantly shaped women's football participation. Female footballers were represented both as symbols of empowerment and achievement and through gendered narratives that questioned their competence and legitimacy. Language functioned as both a mechanism of exclusion and a tool of resistance. The study concludes that women's participation is influenced by the interaction of language, ideology, and institutional power, and recommends gender-responsive communication, greater female representation in decision-making, and more inclusive discourse to advance women's football in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Language and Power; Gender and Feminist Discourse; Identity Construction; Sierra Leone football.

INTRODUCTION

Football has evolved from a recreational activity into a global social institution with cultural, economic, political, and communicative significance. As the world's most popular sport, it connects diverse populations and serves as a space where identities are constructed, social values are negotiated, and power relations are reinforced or challenged (Coakley, 2016; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2023). Consequently, football reflects broader issues of gender, inclusion, nationalism, and inequality. Football contributes to the physical, psychological, and social development of young people by promoting teamwork, leadership, communication, discipline, and interpersonal skills (Park et al., 2020; Graña et al., 2021). Its communicative nature is evident through verbal interaction, non-verbal signals, tactical exchanges, media narratives, and institutional discourse, all of which shape relationships, authority, and belonging (Leo et al., 2013; Stevens & Sheriff, 2025).

The globalisation and commercialisation of football have expanded its influence through broadcasting, digital media, sponsorship, and international competitions. However, this growth has also highlighted persistent inequalities between men's and women's football in areas such as funding, infrastructure, media representation, and institutional support (FIFA, 2023; Charway & Strandbu, 2023). In Sierra Leone, football is both a global cultural influence and a local social institution. From a pragma-discourse perspective, it is a space where language, media narratives, institutional communication, and gender ideologies shape participation, representation, and decision-making. Understanding football therefore requires examining not only its sporting dimension but also the communicative practices through which inclusion, exclusion, and power are constructed.

Football, Language and Power

Although football is often viewed as a physical and recreational activity, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises it as a communicative and ideological space where language, power, and social identities are constructed and negotiated (Foray et al., 2025). Football is shaped not only by actions on the pitch but also by discourses produced by the media, governing bodies, coaches, supporters, policymakers, and everyday interactions. These communicative practices influence perceptions of legitimacy, authority, belonging, and participation. Language plays a central role in constructing social realities and power relations rather than merely reflecting them. Dominant groups shape public perceptions through discourse, while institutions reproduce ideologies that influence how gender, competence, leadership, and participation are understood (Van Dijk, 2018; Stevens & Sheriff, 2026). From a pragmatic perspective, meaning is created through context, interaction, and shared knowledge. Consequently, communication in football extends beyond speech to include policies, institutional practices, cultural norms, and symbolic representations that determine access to opportunities and resources (Gee, 2014; Fairclough, 2015).

Media and institutional discourse are particularly influential. Research shows that men's football is commonly associated with professionalism and technical excellence, whereas women's football is frequently framed through narratives of struggle or novelty, reinforcing gender stereotypes and unequal visibility (Cooley et al., 2021; Bruce, 2023). Although football organisations promote gender equality through policies and development programmes, disparities in funding, infrastructure, leadership, and media representation remain (FIFA, 2023; CAF, 2024). In Sierra Leone, football dominates public discourse, yet attention remains focused on men's football, limiting the visibility and recognition of female players, coaches, referees, and administrators (Zhao et al., 2025). This study therefore views "voice" as representation, recognition, participation, and influence, arguing that women's inclusion in football depends not only on access to resources but also on the communicative practices that shape identity, legitimacy, and power.

Historical Development of Women's Football

The history of women's football reflects a persistent struggle for recognition, equality, and inclusion within a sport traditionally regarded as a male domain. Although women have played organised football since the establishment of the British Ladies' Football Club in 1895, their participation has been shaped by gender ideologies, socio-cultural beliefs, and institutional practices rather than athletic ability alone (Foray, 2026). Early female footballers faced opposition from political, religious, medical, and media institutions, which portrayed football as incompatible with femininity (Williams, 2021).

The First World War (1914–1918) stimulated the growth of women's football through charity matches and increased public interest. However, the English Football Association's 1921 ban on women playing on affiliated grounds significantly restricted its development until feminist movements and gender equality campaigns in the 1970s promoted organised competitions (Pfister, 2022; Gaffney, 2015). The inauguration of the FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991 and the inclusion of women's football in the Olympic Games in 1996 accelerated global growth through professional leagues, improved governance, and wider participation (FIFA, 2023). Nevertheless, inequalities in funding, leadership, infrastructure, and media representation persist. In Africa, progress has been made through policy reforms, although financial, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers continue to shape women's football, providing important context for understanding female participation in Sierra Leone.

Female Football Participation Globally

The global development of women's football over the past three decades represents a major transformation in sport. Once marginalised, women's football has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the game, driven by advocacy for gender equality, institutional investment, professionalisation, and changing social attitudes. Despite this progress, inequalities persist in participation, governance, funding, media representation, and institutional support (FIFA, 2023; UEFA, 2024). International organisations have played a significant role in this growth. FIFA's Women's Football Strategy and UEFA's development programmes have promoted participation, professional leagues, grassroots football, improved governance, coaching, and greater representation of women in leadership (FIFA, 2023; UEFA, 2024). These initiatives have expanded opportunities for women and girls through organised competitions, youth development programmes, and international tournaments such as the FIFA Women's World Cup, which have attracted increasing audiences, sponsorship, and media attention.

The professionalisation of women's football, particularly in Europe, North America, Asia, and Oceania, has improved salaries, athlete welfare, coaching, and career pathways. Beyond sport, football has become an important tool for empowerment, contributing to leadership, confidence, teamwork, resilience, communication skills, and social inclusion (United Nations, 2023). Studies also show that participation strengthens team cohesion, collective efficacy, self-esteem, and identity development (Alves et al., 2022; Leo et al., 2013; Stevens & Sheriff, 2025). Despite these gains, women's football continues to receive less investment, sponsorship, infrastructure, and media coverage than men's football, while women remain under-represented in coaching, officiating, administration, and leadership (Charway & Strandbu, 2023). Media narratives often emphasise personal lives rather than sporting achievements, reinforcing gender stereotypes (Bruce, 2023). Consequently, contemporary research increasingly views women's football as a site where language, discourse, and power shape participation, legitimacy, and inclusion, particularly in developing contexts such as Sierra Leone.

Female Football Participation in Africa

The development of women's football in Africa reflects the continent's broader socio-economic conditions and growing commitment to gender equality in sport. Although football is central to African society, women's participation has long been constrained by patriarchal norms, limited institutional support, economic challenges, and gendered expectations. Recent investments by FIFA, the Confederation of African Football (CAF), and national football associations have expanded opportunities through leagues, grassroots programmes, coaching, officiating, and administration (CAF, 2024; FIFA, 2023). Historically, colonial sporting systems and patriarchal beliefs reinforced football as a male domain, discouraging female participation (Saavedra, 2021; Gu & Xue, 2022). While countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Morocco have advanced through sustained investment and supportive policies, women across Africa continue to experience inequalities in funding, infrastructure, sponsorship, and leadership opportunities (CAF, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). From a pragma-discourse perspective, language and media narratives reinforce gender stereotypes that undermine women's legitimacy. Consequently, although women's football is expanding, institutional, cultural, and discursive barriers continue to shape participation, particularly in emerging contexts such as Sierra Leone.

Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone

Football occupies a central position in Sierra Leonean society, serving as a major medium of social interaction, national identity, and community cohesion. Despite its popularity, public attention and institutional investment remain heavily concentrated on men's football, while women's football receives comparatively limited recognition, visibility, and support (Stevens et al., 2025a). Although girls have long participated in informal football, organised opportunities developed slowly because of cultural beliefs that associated football with men, inadequate facilities, and weak institutional support. Consequently, women remain under-represented as players, coaches, referees, administrators, and decision-makers.

A significant milestone in women's football development was the establishment of the Craig Bellamy Foundation Girls' Football League in 2012, which combined football with education and life-skills training. The initiative challenged gender stereotypes and encouraged greater commitment by the Sierra Leone Football

Association (SLFA) to women's football. Subsequent programmes, including grassroots initiatives, coach and referee development, and the Sierra Leone Women's Premier League, further strengthened the institutionalisation of women's football (Stevens et al., 2025a). Despite these advances, progress continues to be constrained by limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and weak institutional capacity. Women's football receives less sponsorship, media coverage, equipment, and commercial support than men's football, limiting player development and programme sustainability. Media representation and public discourse also reinforce gender inequalities by portraying football as a masculine activity and discouraging girls' participation through traditional family and community expectations (Stevens & Sheriff, 2025b).

From a pragma-discourse perspective, these communicative practices reproduce unequal power relations by shaping whose participation is recognised and valued. Nevertheless, women's football continues to expand through growing leagues, increasing numbers of female officials, and stronger institutional commitment. Sustained progress requires not only greater investment and organisational support but also the transformation of language, cultural discourses, and gender ideologies that influence women's opportunities and legitimacy in Sierra Leonean football.

Language, Culture and Gender Ideologies in Sierra Leonean Football

Language is central to social life because it shapes perceptions, constructs identities, and regulates social relationships. Beyond communication, it transmits cultural values, social norms, and ideological beliefs. Within football, language influences how participation, leadership, competence, and legitimacy are understood. Consequently, examining women's experiences in football requires attention to the communicative practices and cultural discourses that shape their representation and opportunities (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2023).

In Sierra Leone, football dominates public discourse through radio, television, newspapers, social media, and everyday conversations. However, coverage largely focuses on men's football, particularly European leagues and the Leone Stars, while women's football receives limited visibility. This imbalance reinforces the perception that men's football is the norm, marginalising women's participation and achievements (Stevens et al., 2025a). From a pragmatic perspective, meaning is shaped by context and social interaction. Expressions such as "football is a man's game" implicitly reinforce gender expectations, positioning football as a masculine space and limiting women's legitimacy within the sport (Stevens & Sheriff, 2026).

Cultural beliefs further sustain these linguistic practices. Traditional gender ideologies often associate men with leadership, strength, and public participation, while women are linked to domestic responsibilities. These beliefs are reproduced through families, schools, religious institutions, and communities, discouraging girls from participating in football (Gu & Xue, 2022). Family and community discourse frequently influences participation through advice, criticism, humour, and persuasion, demonstrating how language functions as a subtle mechanism of social control by shaping aspirations and perceived opportunities (Stevens & Sheriff, 2025b). The media also plays a significant role in constructing gender ideologies. Sports coverage in Sierra Leone predominantly prioritises men's football, while women's football receives limited attention. When female players are featured, narratives often emphasise personal struggles rather than technical competence, contributing to their symbolic marginalisation (Bruce, 2023). Although social media has enabled female footballers to promote achievements and advocate for inclusion, it has also exposed them to stereotypes and online harassment.

Institutional communication further influences gender relations within football. Policies, governance structures, and selection procedures shape access to leadership and resources. Although football organisations increasingly promote equality and inclusion, women remain under-represented in coaching, administration, and decision-making, revealing a gap between inclusive discourse and institutional practice (Fairclough, 2015). From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, language both reflects and constructs social realities. While dominant discourses can reproduce gender inequality, inclusive communication, positive media representation, and gender-sensitive policies can challenge stereotypes and strengthen women's participation in football. Thus, language functions both as a mechanism of exclusion and as a tool for empowering women within Sierra Leonean football.

Research Gap

Despite growing global scholarship on women's football, limited attention has been given to the relationship between language, power, and female participation, particularly in developing football contexts such as Sierra Leone. Existing studies have examined the historical development of women's football, governance, gender inequality, institutional support, and professionalisation, largely from sociological, managerial, and developmental perspectives, with limited focus on how communication shapes participation, identity, and legitimacy (Bruce, 2023; Charway & Strandbu, 2023; FIFA, 2023). African research has similarly focused on financial, infrastructural, governance, and socio-cultural barriers while giving insufficient attention to the role of language, media narratives, and institutional discourse in reproducing gender inequalities (CAF, 2024; Gu & Xue, 2022). In Sierra Leone, studies have documented challenges relating to participation, leadership, sponsorship, and visibility but have largely overlooked the influence of discourse, gender ideology, and institutional power. This study addresses these gaps by adopting a pragma-discourse approach to examine how language and power shape female football participation and representation in Sierra Leone.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Feminist theory and Gender theory, which explain how language, power, culture, and institutional practices shape female participation in football in Sierra Leone. Together, the theories argue that women's opportunities and experiences are socially and culturally constructed rather than biologically determined, providing a framework for understanding how discourse reproduces gender inequalities while promoting inclusion and empowerment.

Feminist theory attributes women's unequal participation in football to patriarchal structures that privilege men in access to resources, leadership, governance, and decision-making. These inequalities are reflected in disparities in funding, sponsorship, media representation, and leadership opportunities (FIFA, 2023; Charway & Strandbu, 2023). It further explains that language and cultural beliefs portraying football as a masculine activity reinforce gender inequality (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2023). Contemporary feminist perspectives also recognise the influence of intersecting factors such as class, ethnicity, religion, and location (Crenshaw, 2021). Gender theory argues that gender roles are socially constructed through communication, socialisation, and cultural practices rather than biology (Connell, 2021). It explains how stereotypes and traditional expectations discourage women's participation and contribute to their under-representation in playing, coaching, officiating, administration, and football leadership (Gu & Xue, 2022; Charway & Strandbu, 2023).

Relevance of the Theories to the Study

Feminist Theory and Gender Theory complement each other in explaining the structural and socio-cultural factors that influence female participation in football. Feminist Theory focuses on institutional power relations and gender inequality, while Gender Theory explains how these inequalities are produced and sustained through language, culture, and social interaction. Together, they provide the conceptual foundation for analysing how discourse, cultural beliefs, organizational practices, and power relations influence women's opportunities to participate as players, coaches, referees, administrators, and decision-makers in Sierra Leonean football. The theories therefore support the study's examination of how language functions both as a mechanism for reproducing gender inequality and as a means of promoting greater inclusion and empowerment in football.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design within a mixed-methods framework to generate and integrate both quantitative and qualitative data. The descriptive survey design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine the current status of female participation in football in Sierra Leone and to describe the pragmatic, socio-cultural, institutional, and organizational factors influencing such participation. The mixed-methods approach facilitated the collection of numerical data through structured questionnaires and qualitative evidence through key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The integration of these sources enabled the researcher to triangulate findings and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of women's participation in football, including the communicative practices, gendered

experiences, institutional arrangements, and socio-cultural factors that shape participation. In addition to the descriptive analysis, the qualitative component was informed by a critical discourse perspective. This perspective was adopted to examine how language, communication, gender relations, institutional practices, and power relations were reflected in participants' accounts of women's participation in football. Thus, the methodology did not treat participants' responses merely as descriptions of experiences but also examined how such experiences were constructed and communicated through discourse.

Study Population, Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study population comprised registered female football stakeholders drawn from forty (40) women's football clubs affiliated with the Sierra Leone Female Premier League and the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA). According to SLFA records, the target population consisted of 1,041 respondents, comprising 1,000 female football players, 26 female referees, 7 female coaches, and 8 football administrators. These categories represented the principal stakeholders involved in women's participation, officiating, coaching, administration, and organizational management of football in Sierra Leone.

The sample size for female players was determined using Slovin's formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a sample of 286 players. Given the relatively small populations of referees, coaches, and administrators, all members of these categories were included in the study through a census approach. Consequently, the total sample comprised 327 respondents, consisting of 286 female players, 26 female referees, 7 female coaches, and 8 football administrators. Simple random sampling was used to select the female players in order to provide each eligible player with an equal opportunity of selection and thereby minimise sampling bias. Purposive sampling was employed for referees, coaches, and administrators because these participants possessed specialised knowledge and professional experience relevant to the organisation, management, and administration of women's football. Their relatively small population sizes also made purposive inclusion appropriate for obtaining information-rich qualitative data.

Research Instruments and Development

Three principal instruments were used for data collection: a structured questionnaire, a key informant interview guide, and a focus group discussion guide. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher based on the study objectives, research questions, relevant literature on women's participation in sport and football, and the theoretical and analytical perspectives underpinning the study. The items were organised into sections corresponding to the major variables of the study, including the level of female participation in football, factors influencing participation, organizational and leadership roles, socio-cultural experiences, and challenges encountered by female football stakeholders.

The questionnaire contained mainly closed-ended items measured using appropriate response categories and Likert-type scales, together with a limited number of open-ended questions to allow respondents to provide additional explanations where necessary. The interview guide was developed to elicit detailed information from coaches, referees, and administrators concerning institutional practices, leadership structures, gender relations, policy implementation, resource allocation, and challenges affecting women's participation. Similarly, the focus group discussion guide was developed to encourage players to discuss their experiences, motivations, socio-cultural perceptions, communication practices, discrimination, opportunities, and barriers within women's football. The development of the instruments followed a systematic process. First, the researcher reviewed relevant empirical and theoretical literature to identify concepts and themes associated with women's participation in football. Second, the identified concepts were translated into measurable questionnaire items and open-ended questions. Third, the instruments were reviewed for clarity, relevance, sequence, redundancy, and alignment with the research objectives. This process ensured that the items adequately represented the constructs being investigated rather than relying on questions developed without reference to the study framework.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

Content validity was established through expert assessment of the questionnaire, interview guide, and focus group discussion guide by specialists in linguistics, sports studies, gender studies, and research methodology.

The experts evaluated the instruments for relevance to the study objectives, clarity of wording, appropriateness of response categories, and adequacy of item coverage. Based on their recommendations, ambiguous, repetitive, leading, and irrelevant items were revised, merged, or removed. A pilot study was conducted among respondents from women's football clubs excluded from the main study. The pilot exercise assessed the clarity, comprehensibility, sequencing, and administration of the instruments and helped identify potential difficulties in responding to the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot study informed further refinement of the instruments. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which produced a coefficient of 0.84, indicating good internal consistency and confirming the suitability of the questionnaire for the main study. The trustworthiness of the qualitative data was enhanced through expert review, purposive selection of information-rich participants, triangulation of interviews and focus group discussions, and the use of common guiding questions. With participants' permission, discussions were audio-recorded, supported by field notes, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were repeatedly checked against the recordings and field notes to minimise transcription errors and preserve the accuracy and intended meanings of participants' responses.

Data Collection Procedures

Following the necessary institutional and ethical approvals, the researcher contacted the relevant football clubs and stakeholders and explained the purpose of the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study without penalty. Questionnaires were administered to the selected female players, while interviews were conducted with selected referees, coaches, and administrators. Focus group discussions were conducted with female players to generate collective accounts of their experiences and perceptions. The use of questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions enabled methodological triangulation. Quantitative responses provided measurable evidence concerning participation and the factors affecting it, whereas interviews and focus group discussions provided contextual explanations of participants' experiences. Comparing evidence obtained from these different sources strengthened the credibility of the interpretation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using SPSS Version 25. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were used to summarise the data, which were presented in tables and charts for interpretation and comparison across respondent categories and study variables. Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using a critical discourse analytical approach guided by the study objectives. The analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, identification of recurring ideas and discursive patterns, and systematic coding of meaningful data segments. Both deductive and inductive coding were employed. Deductive codes were derived from the research objectives and analytical framework, including gender stereotypes, discrimination, institutional support, leadership, access to facilities, economic constraints, and socio-cultural expectations, while inductive codes emerged from participants' accounts.

Codes were refined, grouped into categories, and developed into themes. Critical discourse analysis focused on linguistic features such as agency and passivity, inclusion and exclusion, evaluative language, modality, pronoun use, lexical choices, and the construction of gender and power relations. A coding framework was developed to ensure analytical consistency. Coded extracts were reviewed against the original transcripts to maintain interpretive accuracy, while themes were compared across participant categories and regions. Quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently triangulated to strengthen the credibility of the study.

Trustworthiness of the Qualitative Analysis

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the transcripts, triangulation of questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, and comparison of accounts from different categories of football stakeholders. Dependability was addressed by following a clearly defined sequence of transcription, coding, categorisation, thematic development, and interpretation. The coding framework and analytical decisions were documented to provide an audit trail of how raw responses were transformed into themes and findings.

Confirmability was enhanced by grounding interpretations in participants' actual statements rather than imposing predetermined conclusions on the data. The researcher repeatedly returned to the original transcripts when interpreting themes to ensure that conclusions were supported by the evidence. Transferability was supported by providing sufficient contextual information about the study population, participants, institutional setting, and experiences of women involved in football so that readers could assess the relevance of the findings to comparable contexts. Where possible, qualitative findings were compared across interviews and focus group discussions and then considered alongside the quantitative results. Convergence between the different sources was treated as corroborating evidence, while divergent findings were examined as potentially meaningful variations in participants' experiences and positions. This process strengthened the overall trustworthiness of the study.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage. Quantitative data established patterns in the level of female participation, roles, motivating factors, and challenges, while qualitative data provided explanations of the social, cultural, institutional, and discursive processes underlying those patterns. The integration of the two forms of evidence enabled the researcher to identify areas of convergence and divergence and to develop a more comprehensive interpretation of female participation in football in Sierra Leone. Overall, the combination of a descriptive survey, structured quantitative measurement, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions, thematic analysis, and critical discourse analysis provided a systematic methodological framework for investigating not only the extent of women's participation in football but also the meanings, discourses, institutional practices, and power relations through which such participation is enabled or constrained.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study to protect participants' rights, welfare, and privacy and to ensure the integrity of the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from the Njala University Research Ethics Committee (NUREC) before data collection commenced. Ethical approval was granted by the Njala University Research Ethics Committee (NUREC), Approval No. NUREC/2026/023. Permission was subsequently obtained from the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA) and the management of the participating women's football clubs. All participants received clear information about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before participating. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing personal identifiers from all data and securely storing completed questionnaires and interview records. The information collected was used solely for academic purposes, and the findings were reported honestly, objectively, and in accordance with accepted research ethics.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics Of Respondents

Regional Age Breakdown (Total N = 265) Analysing age at the regional level reveals a very narrow variance across the country. The dataset splits cleanly into two distinct age cohorts, with younger squads securing the coastline and southern areas, and slightly older squads occupying the northern and eastern regions.

Table 4.1: Regional Age Frequencies & Proportions

Geographic Region	Player Frequency (f)	Regional Average Age	Statistical Weight of Sample
Western Region	72	17 Years Old	27.17%
Southern Region	72	17 Years Old	27.17%

North-West Region	43	17 Years Old	16.23%
North-East Region	43	18 Years Old	16.23%
Eastern Region	35	18 Years Old	13.20%
National Baseline	265	17.29 Years Old (Weighted Mean)	100.00%

Table 4.1 presents the regional distribution and average age of female football players across Sierra Leone. The findings show that the Western Region and Southern Region each contributed 72 players (27.17%), jointly accounting for 54.34% of the total sample. The North-West and North-East regions each contributed 43 players (16.23%), while the Eastern Region recorded the smallest representation with 35 players (13.20%). The weighted national average age of respondents was 17.29 years, indicating that female football participation in Sierra Leone is predominantly concentrated among adolescents transitioning from youth football to senior competitive football.

The regional distribution of respondents reflects unequal opportunities and institutional support for female football in Sierra Leone. Higher representation from the Western and Southern regions suggests greater access to organised football programmes, clubs, competitions, and development initiatives. These regions also benefit from stronger media presence, closer engagement with football institutions, and greater public discourse, enhancing the visibility and participation of female footballers. In contrast, lower representation from the Eastern, Northeastern, and Northwestern regions indicates disparities in infrastructure, financial resources, and institutional support, reinforced by socio-cultural beliefs that portray football as a masculine activity and discourage girls' participation.

The age profile further shows that female participation is concentrated during late adolescence, when educational demands, family expectations, and career decisions strongly influence continued involvement in football. Encouragement from parents, coaches, peers, and administrators can strengthen participation, whereas discriminatory language and gender stereotypes may discourage it. From a language and power perspective, regional disparities reflect unequal access to football development resources and opportunities for representation. Regions with stronger football structures provide greater visibility and participation, while underrepresented areas experience limited recognition and support. These findings highlight the need for expanded grassroots development, inclusive communication, and equitable institutional support to strengthen female football participation across all regions of Sierra Leone.

Table 4.2: Regional Academic Frequencies & Proportions

The table below presents the raw frequencies (f) alongside the within-region relative percentages (%) in brackets.

Geographic Region	VOC (f / %)	BECE (f / %)	WASSCE (f / %)	COLLEGE (f / %)	Total Regional Sample (N)
Western Region	4 (5.56%)	15 (20.83%)	38 (52.78%)	15 (20.83%)	72
North-West Region	15 (34.88%)	12 (27.91%)	9 (20.93%)	7 (16.28%)	43
North-East Region	18 (41.86%)	9 (20.93%)	12 (27.91%)	4 (9.30%)	43
Southern Region	10 (13.89%)	18 (25.00%)	35 (48.61%)	9 (12.50%)	72
Eastern Region	5 (14.29%)	18 (51.43%)	9 (25.71%)	3 (8.57%)	35
National Aggregate	52 (21.14%)	63 (25.61%)	103 (41.87%)	38 (15.38%)	265

Table 4.2 shows that WASSCE holders constituted the largest proportion of respondents nationally (41.87%), followed by BECE (25.61%), Vocational qualifications (21.14%), and College education (15.38%). Regionally, the Western (52.78%) and Southern (48.61%) regions recorded the highest proportions of WASSCE holders, while the North-East (41.86%) and North-West (34.88%) regions had relatively more vocational graduates. The Eastern Region was distinct, with over half of the respondents (51.43%) possessing only BECE qualifications. The findings suggest that education enhances female footballers' ability to communicate, advocate for themselves, and participate in leadership and decision-making within football institutions. The high proportion of WASSCE holders indicates that most players possess the educational foundation needed to engage effectively with coaches, administrators, and other stakeholders. However, the low proportion of college-educated respondents (15.38%) suggests limited progression into higher education, which may reduce women's representation in coaching, administration, and football governance. The regional disparities further reflect unequal access to educational opportunities, which may influence women's voices and agency within football. Overall, the findings indicate that education is an important source of empowerment that strengthens female participation, leadership, and inclusion in Sierra Leonean football, while highlighting the need to support girls in pursuing both higher education and football careers.

Table 4.3: Regional Ethnic Frequencies & Proportions

Geographic Region	TEMNE (f / %)	MENDE (f / %)	LIMBA (f / %)	KRIO (f / %)	MADING O (f / %)	Total Regional Sample (N)
Western Region	30 (41.67%)	20 (27.78%)	3 (4.17%)	15 (20.83%)	4 (5.56%)	72
North-West Region	33 (76.74%)	2 (4.65%)	5 (11.63%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (6.98%)	43
North-East Region	30 (69.77%)	0 (0.00%)	8 (18.60%)	0 (0.00%)	5 (11.63%)	43
Southern Region	8 (11.11%)	58 (80.56%)	2 (2.78%)	0 (0.00%)	4 (5.56%)	72
Eastern Region	2 (5.71%)	30 (85.71%)	3 (8.57%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	35
National Aggregate	103 (38.87%)	110 (41.51%)	21 (7.92%)	15 (5.66%)	16 (6.04%)	265

Table 4.3 presents the ethnic distribution of the 265 female football players across Sierra Leone. Nationally, Mende respondents constituted the largest proportion (41.51%), followed closely by Temne (38.87%), while Limba (7.92%), Madingo (6.04%), and Krio (5.66%) accounted for smaller proportions. Regionally, the North-West (76.74%) and North-East (69.77%) were predominantly Temne, whereas the Southern (80.56%) and Eastern (85.71%) regions were largely Mende. The Western Region exhibited the greatest ethnic diversity, with representation from all five ethnic groups and the entire Krio sub-sample (20.83%).

In relation to the study, *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, the findings indicate that female football participation reflects Sierra Leone's ethnic and linguistic diversity. The concentration of major ethnic groups within their traditional regions suggests that participation is largely community-based, while the ethnic diversity of the Western Region reflects greater social integration and interaction within football. This diversity creates opportunities for intercultural communication and promotes inclusive participation. From a language and power perspective, the findings suggest that football provides a platform where women from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact, negotiate identities, and build social networks. However, regional and ethnic differences may also influence communication patterns, access to football opportunities, and representation within football institutions. Overall, the results indicate that women's football in Sierra Leone has the potential to foster social inclusion and national cohesion while amplifying the voices of women across diverse ethnic communities.

Table 4.4: Regional Marital Frequencies & Proportions

GEOGRAPHIC REGION	SINGLE (f/%)	MARRIED (f/%)	TOTAL REGIONAL SAMPLE (N)
Western Region	65 (90.28%)	7 (9.72%)	72
North –West Region	38 (88.37%)	5 (11.63%)	43
North – East Region	35 (81.40%)	8 (18.60%)	43
Southern Region	57 (79.17%)	15 (20.83%)	72
Eastern Region	29 (82.86%)	6 (17.14%)	35
National Aggregate	224 (84.53%)	41 (15.47%)	265

Table 4.4 presents the marital status of the 265 female football players across Sierra Leone. The findings show that 224 respondents (84.53%) were single, while 41 (15.47%) were married. Across all regions, single respondents constituted the majority, with the Western Region recording the highest proportion of single players (90.28%), followed by the North-West (88.37%), Eastern (82.86%), North-East (81.40%), and Southern Region (79.17%). The Southern Region recorded the highest proportion of married respondents (20.83%). The findings suggest that female football participation is largely concentrated among unmarried women, most of whom are at a stage of life that allows greater involvement in competitive sport. This reflects the age profile of the respondents, who are predominantly adolescents and young adults. From a language and power perspective, marital status may influence women's participation through societal expectations and cultural discourse surrounding women's roles. Married women often face greater domestic responsibilities and social expectations that may limit their involvement in football. Consequently, the dominance of single participants suggests that family obligations and gender norms continue to shape women's opportunities to participate and sustain their voices within football. The findings therefore highlight the need for supportive policies and community attitudes that encourage women's participation in football regardless of marital status, thereby promoting greater gender inclusion within the sport.

Table 4.5: Assessment Of Level Of Participation Of Females In Football By Region (Players)

REGION	NUMBER OF MALE PLAYERS	INITIAL NUMBER OF FEMALE PLAYERS	CURRENT NUMBER OF FEMALE PLAYERS	% OF MALE PLAYERS	% OF FEMALE PLAYERS	%INCREASE/DECREASE IN NUMBER OF FEMALE PLAYERS	TOTAL ACTIVE PLAYERS
Western Region {Urban & Rural}	2040	215	290	87.55%	12.45%	+34.88	2330
North – West Region	500	151	180	73.53%	26.47%	+19.21%	680
North– East Region	950	127	135	87.56%	12.44%	+6.30%	1085
Southern Region	1340	205	260	83.75%	16.25%	+ 26.83	1600
Eastern Region	850	103	135	86.29%	13.71%	+31.07%	985
National Aggregate	5680	801	1000	85.03%	14.97%	+24.84%	6680

Table 4.5 assesses the level of female participation in football across the five regions of Sierra Leone by comparing the current number of female players with both the initial number of female players and the current number of male players. Nationally, there were 5,680 male players (85.03%) and 1,000 female players (14.97%), giving a total of 6,680 active players. Although female participation remained substantially lower than male participation, the number of female players increased from 801 to 1,000, representing an overall growth of 24.84%. Regionally, the Western Region recorded the largest number of active players (2,330) and the highest increase in female participation (34.88%), followed by the Eastern Region (31.07%) and the Southern Region (26.83%). The North-West Region recorded the highest proportion of female players relative to male players (26.47%), indicating comparatively greater gender representation. In contrast, the North-East Region recorded the lowest growth in female participation (6.30%), suggesting slower progress in expanding women's involvement in football. The findings indicate that while women's participation in football is steadily increasing, significant gender disparities persist. The dominance of male players reflects existing power structures that continue to favour men's football in terms of participation and resource allocation. However, the consistent increase in female players across all regions demonstrates growing acceptance of women's football and the gradual expansion of opportunities for girls and women.

From a language and power perspective, the regional differences suggest that institutional support, public attitudes, and socio-cultural discourses influence women's participation. Regions with greater female growth are likely benefiting from more supportive football structures, advocacy, and inclusive communication that encourage girls to participate. Conversely, the slower growth observed in the North-East may reflect stronger cultural barriers and gendered perceptions that continue to restrict women's involvement. Overall, the findings reveal that although female football in Sierra Leone is experiencing positive growth, sustained institutional support, inclusive policies, and gender-sensitive communication are required to reduce participation gaps and strengthen women's voices within the country's football landscape.

Table 4.6: Factors That Influence Level Of Female Participation In Football By Region {Players}

FACTORS	WESTERN AREA	NORTHERN REGION	SOUTHERN REGION	EASTERN REGION	MEAN
Access to facilities and Equipment	28	13	19	23	20.8
Parental and family support	21	15	17	20	18.3
Physical fitness and social health	11	11.6	11	06	9.9
Interest and Passion	17	13.9	11	11	13
Self-Employment	04	27.9	14	11	14
Social Stereotype and Stigmatization	19	18.6	28	29	24
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4.6 presents the major factors influencing female participation in football across the four regions of Sierra Leone. The findings reveal regional variations but consistently show that social stereotypes and stigmatization, limited access to facilities and equipment, and inadequate parental support are the dominant factors affecting women's participation in football. The Western Region identified limited access to facilities and equipment (28%) as the most significant challenge, followed by parental and family support (21%) and social stereotypes (19%). Interview responses indicated that many players travel long distances to access the few available training grounds, while inadequate equipment, high transportation costs, and the temporary closure of the National Stadium due to renovation further limited training opportunities. These findings suggest that infrastructural

challenges continue to restrict female participation despite the relatively high concentration of football activities in the region. In the Northern Region (North-East and North-West), self-employment (28%) emerged as the leading factor influencing participation, followed by social stereotypes (19%), interest and passion (14%), and limited access to facilities (13%). Respondents explained that involvement in petty trading, farming, and other income-generating activities often conflicted with training schedules because football provides limited financial support. This indicates that economic realities significantly shape women's ability to sustain participation in football.

The Southern Region reported social stereotypes and stigmatization (28%) as the greatest barrier, followed by limited access to facilities (19%) and lack of parental support (17%). Players explained that many parents discouraged their involvement in football, viewing the sport as incompatible with girls' educational and future aspirations. Such attitudes often resulted in limited financial assistance, emotional support, and attendance at matches, reflecting the influence of cultural beliefs on female participation. Similarly, the Eastern Region identified social stereotypes and stigmatization (29%) as the most influential factor, followed by limited access to facilities and equipment (23%) and parental support (20%). Physical fitness and health (6%) were considered the least influential factor, indicating that socio-cultural and institutional barriers pose greater challenges than physical capability.

In relation to the study, *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, the findings demonstrate that female participation is influenced not only by infrastructure and economic conditions but also by language, cultural beliefs, and power relations. Social stereotypes, expressed through family, community, and societal discourse, continue to discourage girls from participating in football, while limited institutional support further constrains their opportunities. The regional differences also show that women's experiences are shaped by local socio-economic and cultural contexts. Overall, the findings underscore the need for improved football infrastructure, greater parental and community support, economic empowerment initiatives, and gender-sensitive communication strategies to strengthen women's voices and promote equitable participation in football across Sierra Leone.

Table 4.7: Factors Responsible For The Low Level Of Female Participation At The Administrative Level

FACTORS	WESTERN AREA	NORTHERN REGION	SOUTHERN REGION	EASTERN REGION	MEAN
Discrimination	37.5	25	20	12.5	24
Safety and Mobility	12.5	17	0	0	7
Limited Access to Sporting Facilities	25	25	0	25	19
Lack of Education and Finance	12.5	08	20	37.5	20
Gender Stereotype	12.5	08	40	12.5	18
Cultural and Societal Norms	0	17	20	12.5	12
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4.7 presents the factors responsible for the low level of female participation in football administration across the four regions of Sierra Leone. Overall, discrimination (24%) emerged as the leading barrier, followed by lack of education and finance (20%), limited access to sporting facilities (19%), gender stereotypes (18%), cultural and societal norms (12%), and safety and mobility challenges (7%). The findings reveal that women's under-representation in football administration is driven by institutional, socio-cultural, and economic barriers, although the dominant constraints vary across regions. In the Western Region, discrimination (37.5%) was the

principal challenge, followed by limited access to sporting facilities (25%), indicating that women are often excluded from leadership despite their qualifications. In the Northern Region, discrimination (25%) and inadequate sporting facilities (25%) were equally significant, while safety, mobility, and cultural expectations (17% each) further restricted women's participation. In the Southern Region, gender stereotypes (40%) emerged as the greatest barrier, reflecting persistent beliefs that football leadership is a male responsibility. Discrimination, limited education and finance, and cultural norms each accounted for 20%. In the Eastern Region, lack of education and finance (37.5%) was the leading constraint, followed by inadequate sporting facilities (25%), demonstrating the impact of limited resources on women's leadership opportunities. In relation to Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone, these findings show that women's under-representation is reinforced by discriminatory discourses, gender stereotypes, and unequal access to education, resources, and decision-making. Addressing these barriers requires gender-inclusive policies, leadership development, educational support, and institutional reforms that promote equitable participation in football governance.

Table 4.8: Regional Assessment Of Level Of Dedication /Performance And Effectiveness Of Female Administrators In Performing Their Roles In Football

REGION	LEVEL OF DEDICATION			
	Less Effective	Moderately Effective	Effective	Very Effective
Western Region	0	6	20	46
Northern Region	0	8	30	48
Southern Region	0	5	22	45
Eastern Region	0	8	6	21
Total	0	27	78	160
Percentage	0%	11%	29%	60%

Table 4.8 presents players' assessment of the level of dedication, performance, and effectiveness of female administrators in carrying out their responsibilities across the four regions of Sierra Leone. The findings reveal an overwhelmingly positive evaluation of female administrators. Nationally, 60% of respondents rated female administrators as very effective, 29% rated them as effective, while only 11% considered them moderately effective. Notably, no respondent (0%) rated any female administrator as less effective. Regionally, the Northern Region recorded the highest proportion of respondents who rated female administrators as very effective (48 respondents), followed closely by the Western Region (46) and the Southern Region (45). In the Eastern Region, although the number of respondents was comparatively smaller, the majority also perceived female administrators as very effective (21), with only a few rating them as moderately effective or effective. These findings indicate a consistent perception across all regions that female administrators perform their responsibilities competently and effectively.

From the interviews, players consistently rejected the common perception that women are less committed to football administration than men. Most respondents described female administrators as approachable, committed, transparent, and supportive, noting that they maintained regular communication with players, coordinated team activities effectively, and frequently advocated for players' welfare despite limited institutional resources. Several interviewees emphasized that female administrators often demonstrated greater empathy and responsiveness to players' concerns than their male counterparts.

One player from the Western Region remarked that:

"Our female administrator is always available whenever we have problems. She encourages us, follows up on our welfare, and ensures that our concerns reach the club management."

Similarly, respondents from the Southern Region reported that female administrators played key roles in organizing training, resolving conflicts, and motivating young girls to remain in football despite family and community pressures. In the Northern Region, participants further noted that female administrators served as mentors, promoting discipline, teamwork, and educational advancement alongside football participation. These findings indicate that women's low representation in football administration cannot be attributed to poor performance or lack of commitment. Rather, the consistently positive evaluations challenge gender stereotypes that question women's leadership capabilities.

In relation to Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone, the findings show that although women remain underrepresented in football governance, those in administrative positions are widely regarded as effective leaders. From a language and power perspective, this reveals a gap between gendered societal discourse and actual performance, suggesting that barriers to women's leadership stem from perceptions rather than competence. The findings therefore support merit-based institutional reforms to increase women's representation and strengthen inclusive football governance in Sierra Leone.

Table 4.9: Reasons For Playing Football

REGION	FACTORS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENT
Western Region (Urban and Rural)	Social Interaction motive	20	08
	Fame	34	13
	Promotion of sound health	10	04
	Strength and vitality	08	03
Northern Region (NW & NE)	Livelihood	48	18
	Leisure and fun	05	02
	Promotion of sound health	08	03
	Strength and vitality	25	09
Southern Region	Social Interaction motive	34	13
	Leisure and fun	10	04
	Promotion of sound health	25	09
	Strength and vitality	03	01
Eastern Region	Livelihood	16	06
	Promotion of sound health	10	04
	Strength and vitality	06	02
	Fame	03	01
TOTAL		265	100

Table 4.9 presents the motivations influencing female participation in football across the four regions of Sierra Leone. The findings indicate that participation is driven by economic, social, health, and personal aspirations, with regional variations in the dominant motivations. In the Western Region, fame (13%) was the leading motivation, reflecting aspirations for public recognition, national team selection, scholarships, and professional opportunities, while social interaction (8%) also featured prominently. In the Northern Region, livelihood (18%) emerged as the primary motivation, followed by strength and vitality (9%), as players viewed football as a source of financial support through match allowances, bonuses, and sponsorship. The Southern Region recorded social interaction (13%) as the principal motivation, followed by promotion of sound health (9%), highlighting football's role in fostering teamwork, belonging, and physical and mental well-being. In the Eastern Region, livelihood (6%) remained the main motivation despite limited financial returns and investment. Across all regions, participants described football as a platform for empowerment, self-expression, and social mobility that enhanced confidence, leadership, communication, and resilience while challenging traditional gender stereotypes. In relation to *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, these findings demonstrate that women's motivations reflect both personal aspirations and socio-economic realities, reinforcing football as a space for visibility, empowerment, and the negotiation of gendered power relations.

Type Of Functions Performed By Officials In The Different Regions

This objective examines the roles performed by female football administrators across clubs in the Western, Northern, Southern, and Eastern regions by comparing the responsibilities assigned to them when they first joined their clubs with the roles they currently perform. The findings indicate that although women's participation in football administration has improved over time, they continue to be concentrated in minor administrative roles, with relatively few occupying major leadership and decision-making positions. In the Western Region, most female administrators initially performed minor roles or were completely excluded from administrative responsibilities. Over time, some progressed to undertaking both major and minor roles, particularly within the Sierra Leone U-17 Women's National Team and the SLFA U-15 Girls' Youth League. However, the majority continued to perform supporting rather than strategic leadership functions.

The Northern Region exhibited a similar trend. In the North-West, women who were initially excluded from club administration later assumed minor administrative roles, while in the North-East, a few administrators advanced to performing both major and minor roles. Nevertheless, women remained underrepresented in senior decision-making positions across most clubs. In the Southern Region, there was modest progress, with some female administrators moving from minor roles to major leadership responsibilities, particularly in clubs such as Mogbewmo Queens and Ram Kamara Football Club. However, other clubs continued to assign women only supporting roles or excluded them from administrative responsibilities altogether. In the Eastern Region, the limited number of female administrators meant that most continued to perform minor administrative functions, with little evidence of progression into senior leadership.

Interview responses revealed that many female administrators believed their limited responsibilities were not due to lack of competence but rather to institutional practices and gender bias. Several respondents explained that important decisions were often reserved for male officials, while women were assigned responsibilities such as player welfare, logistics, record keeping, and communication. One administrator observed that:

"We are trusted to support the team, but when it comes to making important decisions, the men are usually given those responsibilities."

Players who participated in the discussions, however, expressed strong confidence in the competence of female administrators. Many described them as committed, organized, approachable, and effective, noting that they maintained good communication with players, resolved conflicts, and advocated for players' welfare. The majority of players believed that women were capable of occupying senior administrative positions if given equal opportunities. In relation to the study, *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, the findings demonstrate that women's voices within football administration remain constrained by unequal power relations rather than limited capability. Although female administrators have gradually gained greater involvement, their participation is still largely confined to supportive roles, while

strategic leadership remains male-dominated. From a language and power perspective, the continued assignment of women to minor roles reflects organizational discourses and institutional cultures that associate leadership with men. The positive perceptions expressed by players, however, challenge these stereotypes and suggest that expanding women's participation in football governance requires institutional reforms that prioritize competence, merit, and gender equality over traditional gender norms. Overall, the findings indicate that increasing women's representation in leadership and decision-making positions is essential for strengthening their voices and promoting inclusive football governance in Sierra Leone.

Summary of Challenges to Female Participation in Football

Regions	Factors	Frequency	Percentage of Respondents
WESTERN REGION (URBAN & RURAL)	Financial constraint	18	06
	Educational Pursuit	10	03
	Lack of stakeholder support	10	03
	Lack of facilities and Equipment	14	05
	Intimidation from fans	07	02
	Low Remuneration	24	08
NORTHERN REGION (NW & NE)	Lack of funding	20	07
	Limited media coverage	10	03
	Cultural and social norms	10	03
	Lack of facilities and Equipment	14	05
	Intimidation from fans	06	02
	Commercial Activities	40	13
SOUTHERN REGION	Financial constraint	24	08
	Limited media coverage	13	04
	Cultural and social Norms	15	05
	Lack of facilities and Equipment	20	07
	Intimidation from fans	05	02
	Domestic work	06	02
EASTERN REGION	Lack of finance	12	04
	Limited media coverage	04	01
	Lack of support from stakeholders	08	03
	Lack of facilities and Equipment	10	03

	Intimidation from fans	02	01
	Educational Pursuit	04	02
TOTAL		306	100

Table 4.10 summarizes the major challenges affecting female participation in football across the four regions of Sierra Leone. The findings show that although the challenges vary by region, financial constraints, inadequate facilities and equipment, limited institutional support, socio-cultural barriers, and low economic incentives remain the dominant obstacles to women's participation.

In the Western Region, low remuneration (8%) and financial constraints (6%) emerged as the leading challenges, followed by lack of facilities and equipment (5%). Respondents indicated that inadequate financial rewards and poor training infrastructure reduced their motivation and ability to participate consistently. In the Northern Region, commercial activities (13%) were identified as the greatest challenge, followed by lack of funding (7%) and limited access to facilities (5%). Players explained that many women prioritized income-generating activities over football because of the limited financial benefits associated with the sport. The Southern Region reported financial constraints (8%) and lack of facilities and equipment (7%) as the most significant barriers, while cultural and social norms (5%) also limited women's participation by discouraging girls from pursuing football. In the Eastern Region, financial constraints (4%), lack of stakeholder support (3%), and limited access to facilities (3%) were the major challenges, with educational commitments and limited media coverage also affecting participation.

Interview responses revealed that players across all regions viewed inadequate funding and poor institutional support as the greatest obstacles to the growth of women's football. Many noted that limited sponsorship, poor media visibility, and inadequate football infrastructure restricted opportunities for training, competition, and career progression. In relation to the study, *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, the findings suggest that women's participation is constrained by the interaction of economic, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. Financial limitations and weak institutional support reduce opportunities for women, while cultural beliefs and limited media attention diminish the visibility and recognition of female football. Overall, the findings highlight the need for increased investment, improved facilities, stronger stakeholder support, and inclusive communication strategies to strengthen women's voices and promote equitable participation in football across Sierra Leone.

Table 4.11: Description Of Level Of Intervention Made By Club Authorities In Mitigating The Challenges

Region	Level of Intervention	Number of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Southern Region	Very High	0	0
	High	05	7
	Low	26	36
	Very Low	34	47
	Not at all	07	10
Total		72	100

Table 4.11 presents respondents' assessment of the level of intervention by club authorities in mitigating the challenges faced by female footballers in the Southern Region. The findings indicate that intervention was generally perceived as inadequate. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) rated the level of intervention as very low, while 36% described it as low. Only 7% considered the intervention to be high, and 10% reported that club

authorities had not intervened at all. No respondent rated the level of intervention as very high. Interview responses reinforced these findings, with players stating that club authorities provided only limited support in addressing challenges such as inadequate funding, poor training facilities, transportation difficulties, and players' welfare. Many respondents acknowledged that although some clubs attempted to provide basic assistance during competitions, these efforts were irregular and insufficient to address the broader structural challenges confronting women's football.

In relation to the study, *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, the findings suggest that weak institutional intervention continues to undermine female participation. From a language and power perspective, the limited response from club authorities reflects unequal institutional commitment to women's football, thereby reducing opportunities for female players to have their concerns heard and addressed. Overall, the findings underscore the need for stronger institutional support, increased investment, and responsive leadership to enhance women's participation and strengthen their voices within football in Sierra Leone.

Table 4.12: Description Of Level of Intervention Made by Club Authorities in Mitigating the Challenges

Factors	Western Area	Northern Region	Southern Region	Eastern Region	Mean
Very High	0	02	0	06	02
High	17	05	07	06	09
Low	66	58	36	11	43
Very Low	07	29	47	57	35
Not At All	10	06	10	20	11
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4.12 presents respondents' assessment of the level of intervention by club authorities in addressing the challenges affecting female participation in football across the four regions of Sierra Leone. The findings indicate that interventions were generally perceived as inadequate, with the majority of respondents rating them as either low (43%) or very low (35%). Only 9% considered the interventions to be high, 2% rated them as very high, while 11% stated that club authorities had not intervened at all. Regionally, the Western Region recorded the highest proportion of respondents rating interventions as low (66%), while the Northern Region also reported predominantly low (58%) and very low (29%) levels of intervention. In the Southern Region, 47% of respondents described the interventions as very low, compared with 36% who rated them as low. Similarly, the Eastern Region recorded the weakest institutional support, with 57% rating interventions as very low and 20% indicating that there had been no intervention at all. Only a small proportion of respondents in the Northern (2%) and Eastern (6%) regions perceived the interventions as very high.

Interview responses supported these findings, with players explaining that club authorities often lacked the financial capacity and institutional commitment to address persistent challenges such as inadequate funding, poor training facilities, limited equipment, transportation difficulties, and players' welfare. Many respondents acknowledged that assistance was usually limited to competition periods and did not provide sustainable support for women's football development. In relation to the study, *Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone*, the findings indicate that weak institutional intervention continues to limit women's participation and development in football. From a language and power perspective, the limited response from club authorities reflects unequal institutional priorities, where women's concerns receive insufficient attention and resources. Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening female participation requires greater investment, improved infrastructure, stronger stakeholder commitment, and more responsive institutional policies that amplify women's voices and promote gender equity in Sierra Leonean football.

Players` Triangulated Findings and Recommendations in Female Football Participation

This section presents triangulated findings from interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaire responses on female participation in football across the four regions of Sierra Leone. The findings indicate that regional differences are collectively shaped by socio-cultural beliefs, economic constraints, institutional practices, and discursive influences affecting women's participation and recognition. In the Western Region, inadequate training facilities, limited equipment, insufficient sponsorship, and personal responsibility for kits and transportation constrained participation, with available facilities often prioritising men's teams. In the Northern Region, socio-economic pressures, including farming and petty trading, competed with football commitments, while limited recognition and institutional support further restricted participation. In the Southern Region, cultural expectations, parental attitudes, and limited media coverage discouraged girls' involvement, reinforcing the perception that football is inappropriate for women. In the Eastern Region, educational demands, inadequate facilities, and the shortage of female coaches and administrators emerged as major challenges. Overall, the findings demonstrate that female participation is shaped by the interaction of material conditions and gendered discourses. Unequal opportunities, stereotypes, and limited representation continue to restrict women's voices within football. Strengthening infrastructure, investment, inclusive policies, community engagement, media visibility, and female leadership pathways is essential to promote equitable participation and recognition in Sierra Leonean football.

Administrators` Triangulated Findings And Recommendations In Female Football Participation

The triangulated findings from interviews with female football administrators across the four regions of Sierra Leone reveal that women's participation in football administration is constrained by organisational, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges, although these barriers vary by region. In the Western Region, administrators identified inadequate training facilities, limited equipment, insufficient sponsorship, and weak organisational support as the major constraints. Although participation was relatively moderate, respondents stressed the need for increased funding, improved facilities, and equitable pitch allocation to strengthen football organisation and administration. In the Northern Region, administrators reported that existing facilities were disproportionately allocated to male teams, limiting women's access to training and competitions. This reflected organisational inequalities in resource distribution and decision-making. Respondents recommended enforcing equal pitch allocation policies to promote fairness and improve the organisation of women's football. In the Southern Region, parental resistance and cultural beliefs were identified as the main barriers. Many parents discouraged or withdrew their daughters from football because of concerns about pregnancy, academic performance, and negative community perceptions. These findings indicate

DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWEES

The findings revealed that female participation in football in Sierra Leone has increased across all regions, indicating gradual progress in the development of women's football. However, participation remains significantly lower than that of men, confirming that football continues to be male-dominated. The Western Region recorded the highest level of participation, while the North-East Region showed the least growth, reflecting regional disparities in access to football opportunities and institutional support.

The study identified gender stereotypes, inadequate facilities and equipment, financial constraints, and limited parental support as the major factors influencing female participation. While these challenges varied across regions, they consistently reflected socio-cultural norms and institutional inequalities. Respondents from the Southern and Eastern regions emphasised gender stereotypes and parental disapproval, whereas those from the Northern Region highlighted economic activities and livelihood demands as major constraints. The findings further showed that women remain under-represented in football administration and leadership, with most occupying minor administrative roles despite being rated highly for their competence and commitment. This suggests that their limited representation results from institutional and socio-cultural barriers rather than poor performance. Women also participated in football for livelihood opportunities, social interaction, fame, physical fitness, and personal development, demonstrating football's role as a platform for empowerment and social

inclusion. Across all regions, interventions by football clubs and stakeholders were perceived as inadequate because of limited funding, poor infrastructure, weak institutional commitment, and insufficient media coverage. Triangulated evidence from questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions showed that unequal power relations, discriminatory cultural beliefs, and weak institutional support remained the principal barriers. Participants therefore recommended increased investment, improved facilities, equitable resource allocation, stronger stakeholder commitment, community sensitisation, and greater representation of women in football leadership to promote sustainable participation.

Summary

This study examined Voices on the Pitch: Language, Power and Female Football Participation in Sierra Leone. It investigated the level of female participation, the socio-cultural and institutional factors influencing participation, the roles performed by women in football administration, and the challenges limiting their involvement. A mixed-methods approach involving questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions was employed. The findings showed that female participation in football has increased across all regions but remains significantly lower than male participation. Major barriers identified include financial constraints, inadequate facilities and equipment, gender stereotypes, cultural norms, limited parental support, and weak institutional commitment. Although women remain underrepresented in football administration, female administrators were widely perceived as competent, committed, and effective. The study also found that football provides women with opportunities for social interaction, livelihood, personal development, and empowerment, despite the challenges they face.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that female participation in football in Sierra Leone is growing but continues to be constrained by socio-cultural, institutional, and economic barriers. Language and gendered power relations remain important factors shaping women's opportunities, visibility, and leadership within football. While women have demonstrated competence both on and off the field, unequal access to resources, leadership positions, and institutional support continues to limit their participation. The study therefore concludes that promoting women's football requires greater investment, improved infrastructure, inclusive policies, stronger stakeholder support, and sustained efforts to challenge discriminatory gender stereotypes in order to achieve equitable and sustainable football development in Sierra Leone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends that the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA), government, and private sector increase investment in women's football by improving training facilities, equipment, transportation, and player welfare. Gender-inclusive policies should promote women's recruitment and representation in coaching, refereeing, administration, and leadership. Public awareness campaigns involving families, schools, traditional and religious leaders, and the media should challenge gender stereotypes and encourage girls' participation. Media organisations should provide regular coverage of women's football to enhance visibility and attract sponsorship. Scholarships and financial support should enable female footballers to combine education with sport. The SLFA and regional associations should establish girls' football academies and youth development programmes across all regions. Government, football institutions, educational institutions, corporate organisations, and development partners should collaborate to implement sustainable development initiatives. Football authorities should also ensure equal access to competitions, resources, sponsorship, career opportunities, and gender-sensitive decision-making processes that strengthen women's voices in Sierra Leonean football.

REFERENCES

1. Adeyanju, J., & Stephen, S. (2020). Factors influencing low participation of girls in football. (unpublished research report) University of Zambia, Department of Physical Education and Sport.

2. Baxter, H., Hoye, R., & Kappelides, P. (2021). Female Volunteer Coaches in Community Sport: A scoping review and research agenda. *Journal of Amateur Sport*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.17161/jasv//11.13774>.
3. Charway, D., & Strandbu, A., (2023) Participation of Girls and Women in Community Sports in Ghana: Cultural and Structural Barriers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sports*. 59(4), 559-578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902231214955>.
4. Cleland, J., Pope, S., & Williams, J. (2020). “I do worry that football will become over-feminized”. Ambiguities in fan reflections on the gender order in men’s professionals’ football in the United Kingdom. *Sociology of Sports Journal*, 37(4), 366-375. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj2019-0060>.
5. Coakley, J. (2016). *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies* (12th et) Boston Mc Graw Hill Practical Philosophy of Sport Human Kinetics Publication.
6. Downward, P., and Muniz, C. (2023) The Opportunities and Challenges facing Participation in different types of Women’s Football in England. *Sports Management Review*, 28(3), 498-522 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2925.2467473>.
7. FIFA Ethics and Registration Watch (2025) Gender Politics and FIFA: Advancing Women’s Football and Gender Equality.
8. Gaffney, P. (2015). The nature and meaning of teamwork. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 42(1), 1–22.
9. John Pahoni Stevens; Abu Bakarr Sheriff (2025) Multilingual Practices and their Pedagogical Implications for ESL Instruction at Njala University and Eastern Technical University in Sierra Leone. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(7), 3150-3159. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25jul1567>
10. Stevens, J. P., & Sheriff, A. (2025) ESL Oral Proficiency Inapt in Senior Secondary School Learners. *Creative Education*, 16, 555-570. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2025.164033>
11. Stevens J. P., Challay, S., & Thulla, P. F. Y., (2025) Improving oral English fluency in senior secondary school ESL learners of multilingual backgrounds in southern Sierra Leone. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)* Volume 12, Issue 4 www.jetir.org (ISSN-2349-5162)
12. Sheriff, A. B., Stevens, J. P., Prof. Challay, S., Prof. Thulla, F. P. Y., (2025) Lexical Transfer from Mende and Kàthemne in English Proficiency: A Comparative Lexico-Semantic Analysis INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN APPLIED SCIENCE (IJRIAS) Volume X Issue VII July 2025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2025.100700003>
13. Yu, D.; Che, X.; Wang, H.;Ma, N.; Wan, Z.; Wan, B.; You, X.;Zhang, K.; Li, N.; Shui, Y. (2024). The Relationship between Football Participation and Sport TraitConfidence for Adolescents: A Chain-Mediated Effect of Collective Self-Esteem and Self-Esteem. *Behav.Sci.* 2024,14, 656. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14080656>
14. Zhao, Z., Che, X., Wang, H., Zheng, Y., Ma, N., Gao, L., & Shui, Y. (2025). The Relationship Between Soccer Participation and Team Cohesion for Adolescents: A Chain-Mediated Effect of Athlete Engagement and Collective Self-Esteem. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(2), 155. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15020155>.