

Pragmatics of Female Participation in Football: Sierra Leonean Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Female participation in football has received increasing attention globally; however, women in many developing football contexts continue to experience barriers that limit their participation as players, coaches, administrators, and officials. In Sierra Leone, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the factors influencing the status and level of female participation in football. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the factors that influence female participation in football in Sierra Leone, with particular focus on female players, referees, coaches, and football administrators. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A sample of 327 respondents was selected from a total population of 1,000 using Slovin's sample size formula. The sample comprised 286 female football players and 41 female football administrators and officials, including coaches, managers, and referees. Simple random sampling was used to select female football players, while purposive sampling was employed to select female administrators, coaches, and referees. The study utilized questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions as research instruments. The instruments were validated, and reliability tests were conducted prior to data collection. The questionnaire data were cleaned, coded, and analyzed quantitatively, while interview and focus group discussion data were analyzed thematically using a qualitative approach. The response rate was 97%, and the Slovin calculation was based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error.

The findings revealed that female participation in football in Sierra Leone is influenced by a combination of enabling and limiting factors. While there has been growth in the number of female players and increased institutional support through football development initiatives, participation remains constrained by gender stereotypes, stigmatization, discrimination, inadequate sporting facilities, economic limitations, limited media visibility, and weak public acceptance. The study further found that women remain significantly underrepresented in football leadership and technical roles, particularly as coaches, administrators, and referees. The study concludes that female participation in football in Sierra Leone is increasing but remains structurally constrained. The development of women's football is therefore characterized by progress that is emerging but fragile, requiring sustained and coordinated interventions from government, football governing bodies, communities, and other stakeholders. It is recommended that government and sporting organizations develop and implement gender-inclusive national sports policies, increase public investment in women's football development, strengthen pathways for female coaches and officials, and integrate female sports development into national education and youth development policies.

Keywords: Female Participation, Gender Barriers, Sports Policy, football, Sierra Leone,

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in football has expanded considerably over the past three decades due to international advocacy for gender equality, policy reforms, and changing societal attitudes toward women in sport. Despite

this progress, participation remains uneven across countries and regions because access to football is shaped not only by institutional opportunities but also by socio-cultural beliefs, gender ideologies, and communicative practices that define who is considered an appropriate participant. From a pragmatic perspective, football participation extends beyond physical involvement to include the language, beliefs, values, and social interactions that influence how women are perceived, accepted, or excluded within football communities. Pragmatics therefore provides a valuable framework for examining how discourse constructs gender identities, reinforces or challenges stereotypes, and shapes women's opportunities in football (Stevens & Sheriff, 2025).

Historically, organised sport developed as a predominantly male institution, with dominant cultural discourses associating masculinity with strength, competitiveness, and athletic ability, while femininity was linked to domesticity and physical weakness. Although formal barriers to women's participation have largely been removed, these gendered assumptions continue to influence attitudes through everyday communication, media representation, and institutional practices (Linus, 2003). Consequently, women's participation is determined not only by policy but also by the meanings society attaches to gender and sport. Globally, football has become one of the world's most influential social institutions, serving as a platform where identities are negotiated and social values reproduced (Coakley, 2016). International organisations, particularly FIFA, have expanded women's football through development programmes, international competitions, and strategic policies, resulting in increased participation and professional opportunities (FIFA, 2023). Nevertheless, women continue to receive substantially less investment, sponsorship, media coverage, and institutional support than men (Charway & Strandbu, 2023; FIFA, 2023). This disparity demonstrates that barriers to women's football extend beyond financial resources. Institutional discourses frequently promote gender equality while organisational practices continue to prioritise men's football. Similarly, media narratives often portray women's football through themes of struggle rather than sporting excellence, reinforcing perceptions of its secondary status (Adeyanji & Stephen, 2020; Baxter, Hoyer, & Kappelides, 2021).

Across Africa, female participation is further constrained by patriarchal norms, religious beliefs, and traditional gender expectations. Football is often constructed as a masculine activity, while women are expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities. Such cultural discourses discourage girls from participating because football is perceived as incompatible with acceptable feminine behaviour (Adeyanji & Stephen, 2020). Although countries such as Nigeria and South Africa have made significant progress through stronger institutional investment, the Confederation of African Football (CAF, 2024) reports that inadequate funding, weak governance, limited youth development, and poor media visibility continue to hinder women's football across much of the continent. Sierra Leone reflects many of these continental challenges. Although women's football has expanded following the establishment of the Girls' Football League in 2012 and the growth of female competitions, women continue to face inadequate facilities, limited sponsorship, restricted competitive opportunities, and underrepresentation in football administration. Prevailing socio-cultural beliefs further discourage participation, as football is often viewed as incompatible with femininity or perceived to threaten women's appearance, reproductive health, or marriage prospects. These beliefs are reinforced through family interactions, religious teachings, community expectations, and everyday discourse, limiting women's participation without formal exclusion (Stevens & Sheriff, 2025).

Despite growing scholarship on women's football, empirical research in Sierra Leone remains limited. Existing studies have primarily examined the historical development of women's football or general gender inequalities, with little attention to how language, discourse, socio-cultural beliefs, and institutional practices interact to shape women's participation. This gap limits evidence-based policy development and strategic planning for the sustainable growth of women's football. This study is anchored in Feminist Sport Theory and complemented by a barriers-and-enablers perspective, which together explain how gendered power relations, socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and communicative processes influence women's opportunities in football. Guided by these frameworks, the study examines the pragmatics of female participation in football from global, African, and Sierra Leonean perspectives. Specifically, it determines the level of female participation, identifies the pragmatic and socio-cultural factors influencing participation, examines the roles performed by women in football organisation, and investigates the communicative, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges constraining women's participation. The findings are expected to contribute to evidence-based policy formulation and support the sustainable development of women's football in Sierra Leone.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Feminist Theory and Gender Theory, which provide a framework for understanding how language, culture, and social interaction influence female participation in football in Sierra Leonean contexts. Feminist Theory explains that women's participation in football is shaped by patriarchal structures, gender stereotypes and unequal power relations. Neys and Juskowiak (2023) argue that political commitment, institutional support, funding and gender equality policies are essential for promoting women's football. Similarly, Taylor and Leslie-Walker (2024) maintain that eliminating social and cultural barriers creates equal opportunities for women in football. In Sierra Leone, the theory explains how cultural beliefs, family expectations and societal discourse continue to portray football as a male sport, thereby limiting women's participation, leadership and recognition.

Gender Theory argues that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. In sport, opportunities are often shaped by cultural expectations rather than ability. Charway, & Strandbu. (2023) state that gender equality requires equal access to participation, coaching, officiating, leadership and sporting resources. In Sierra Leone, traditional gender norms and everyday communication continue to influence girls' participation in football and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in football administration and decision-making. Together, Feminist Theory and Gender Theory provide a suitable framework for examining how language, discourse and socio-cultural practices shape female participation in football.

Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualises female participation in football as being influenced by pragmatic and socio-cultural factors such as language use, gender stereotypes, cultural beliefs, media discourse, parental attitudes, institutional communication and football policies. These factors determine the level of female participation, the roles delegated to women in football organisation and administration, and the challenges they encounter, including discrimination, inadequate funding, limited media coverage and weak institutional support. Within the Sierra Leonean context, patriarchal norms and societal discourse continue to shape public perceptions of women's football. The study therefore assumes that positive communication, inclusive policies and supportive institutional practices will enhance female participation, while negative stereotypes and discriminatory discourse will continue to hinder women's involvement in football.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design using a mixed-methods approach to generate 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 allowed quantitative findings obtained from questionnaires to be complemented by qualitative evidence from key informant interviews and focus group discussions, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised registered female football stakeholders in Sierra Leone 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 official records obtained from the SLFA, the target population consisted of 1,041 respondents, comprising 1,000 registered female football players, 26 female referees, 7 female coaches, and 8 female football administrators. These categories were selected because they represent the principal actors involved in the organization, management, and participation of women's football in Sierra Leone.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The sample size for female football players was determined using Slovin's Formula: $n = \frac{1 + Ne^2}{N}$ where n represents the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the margin of error. Using a population of 1,000

registered female players and a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error ($e = 0.05$), the calculated sample size was 286 respondents. This confidence level was considered appropriate because it provides a reasonable balance between sampling precision and the practical constraints associated with field data collection. Given the relatively small populations of female referees (26), coaches (7), and football administrators (8), a census approach was adopted by including all members of these categories in the study. Consequently, the total sample comprised 327 respondents, consisting of 286 players, 26 referees, 7 coaches, and 8 administrators. Simple random sampling was employed to select the 286 female football players to ensure that every registered player had an equal probability of being selected, thereby minimizing sampling bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample. In contrast, purposive sampling was used to select referees, coaches, and administrators because of their specialized responsibilities, professional experience, and relatively small population sizes. Their inclusion was considered essential for obtaining detailed information on football administration, officiating, coaching, and policy implementation.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using three complementary instruments: a structured questionnaire, key informant interview guides, and focus group discussion guides. The questionnaire generated quantitative data on the level of female participation in football, the factors influencing participation, the organizational roles performed by women, and the challenges affecting their involvement. The key informant interviews were conducted with coaches, referees, and football administrators to obtain in-depth information on institutional practices, policy implementation, and leadership experiences. Focus group discussions with female football players provided further insights into participants' lived experiences, socio-cultural perceptions, and the communicative practices influencing their participation in football. The combination of these instruments facilitated triangulation of data and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The research instruments were subjected to both validity and reliability testing before the main data collection exercise. To establish content validity, the questionnaire, interview guide, and focus group discussion guide were reviewed by three experts in linguistics, sports studies, and research methodology. Their observations focused on the relevance, clarity, and adequacy of the items in relation to the study objectives. Based on their recommendations, ambiguous and repetitive items were revised, while a small number of questions that did not adequately address the study objectives were removed to improve the overall quality of the instruments.

A pilot study was subsequently conducted using respondents with characteristics similar to those of the study population but drawn from women's football clubs that were not included in the final sample. The pilot study assessed the clarity of the instruments, the sequencing of questions, and the estimated time required for completion. Responses obtained from the pilot survey were analyzed to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The questionnaire produced an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84, indicating good internal consistency and confirming that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for the study. Minor modifications were made following the pilot exercise before the instruments were administered in the main study.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were employed. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and tables, were used to summarize and present the findings. Where appropriate, charts were generated to facilitate the interpretation of the results. Qualitative data obtained from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The transcripts were carefully read and coded, after which related codes were grouped into broader themes corresponding to the objectives of the study. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled the researcher to provide a richer interpretation of the pragmatics of female participation in football in Sierra Leone.

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) Analyzing 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 Sample Weight of
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%

The findings indicate that the Western and Southern regions accounted for the largest share of the sample, jointly contributing over 54% of the 265 players surveyed. Although the North-East and Eastern regions recorded a slightly higher average age of 18 years, compared with an average of 17 years in the Western, Southern, and North-West regions, the national sample-weighted mean age was 17.29 years. This weighted mean is lower than the simple arithmetic mean of 17.40 years because the regions with younger players constituted a substantially larger proportion of the sample than the older regions. The results therefore suggest that female football in Sierra Leone is predominantly composed of players who are approximately 17 years old, indicating that most participants are at the transitional stage between junior football development programmes and senior-level competitive football.

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

An analysis of educational attainment across 265 respondents reveals a dominant WASSCE qualification rate nationally, with significant regional variations, particularly a higher concentration of vocational training in the northern regions compared to the southern coastal areas. The Eastern region serves as a distinct outlier with a majority holding only basic education certificates, while overall data analysis is limited by minor inconsistencies in the baseline dataset.

Table 4.3: Regional Ethnic Frequencies & Proportions

Geographic Region	TEMNE (f / %)	MENDE (f / %)	LIMBA (f / %)	KRIO (f / %)	MADINGO (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

This table illustrates the distribution of 265 survey respondents across five geographic regions in Sierra Leone. It maps respondents across five major ethnic groups: Temne, Mende, Limba, Krio, and Madingo. An assessment of the demographic profile reveals a highly polarized ethno-regional distribution across the sampled population (N = 265). Nationally, the sample is dominated by Mende (41.51%) and Temne (38.87%) respondents, who collectively constitute over four-fifths of the total cohort. Regionally, clear geopolitical clustering is evident: Temne respondents are heavily concentrated in the North-West (76.74%) and North-East (69.77%) quadrants, whereas Mende respondents exhibit overwhelming majorities in the Eastern (85.71%) and Southern (80.56%) provinces. Conversely, the Western Region serves as a critical locus of ethnic pluralism; it represents the most diverse demographic subset and contains the entirety of the Krio sub-sample (n = 15); (20.83%), underscoring the historically heterogeneous composition of the metropolitan capital area.

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

An evaluation of the marital status distribution across the surveyed sample (N = 265) demonstrates an overwhelming convergence toward singlehood, with unmarried respondents constituting the vast majority (84.53%, n = 224) of the national aggregate. This trend remains pronounced across all geographical strata but reaches its apex within the Western Region, where single individuals account for 90.28% of the local cohort. Conversely, marital density peaks within the Southern Region sample (20.83%, n = 15), followed closely by the North-East (18.60%) and Eastern (17.14%) provinces. Overall, these findings highlight a relatively homogenous demographic baseline dominated by unmarried participants, though subtle variations persist between metropolitan and provincial subsystems.

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

SOURCE: SLFA Office Freetown and Branch Offices in Makeni, Bo and Pujehun.

Table 4.5 was used to do an analysis in relation to the assessment of level of participation of females in football. The focus here was that the current number of female players was compared relative to the current number of male players and the initial number of females at the club when the respective respondents initially joined the club. A cross-sectional macro-analysis of the institutional player ecosystem (N = 6,680) reveals a glaring,

structurally persistent gender disparity characterized by heavy masculine saturation across all administrative zones. Globally, male participants constitute the overwhelming core of the demographic profile (85.03%), (n = 5,680), while female players occupy a marginal baseline representation of (14.97%) (n = 1,000). Regionally, the Western Area functions as the primary demographic locus, capturing (34.88%) of the national sample pool with a total active ecosystem of 2,330 players. Interestingly, while the North-West Region maintains a smaller aggregate footprint (n = 680), it demonstrates the highest relative gender equity in the study, with female participation peaking locally at (26.47%). Conversely, the North-East and Western Area provinces present the most severe gender stratification, with male participation exceeding (87.5%) in both geopolitical strata.

Analysis of Female Cohort Expansion

Despite the baseline structural imbalances, longitudinal assessment indicates a robust upward trajectory in female institutional integration. Over the observed period, the aggregate national female player base expanded by (24.84%), scaling from an initial baseline of (801) to a current registry of (1,000) active individuals. This developmental shift was asymmetric across regions; the highest relative growth acceleration occurred within the Western Area (+34.88%) and the Eastern Region (+31.07%). This localized surge points toward a high elasticity of female engagement within urban metropolitan networks and specific provincial clusters. In contrast, the North-East Region exhibited the lowest relative vertical trajectory, stagnating at a minor (+6.30%) expansion rate (n = +8). This regional sluggishness suggests localized systemic bottlenecks or cultural-institutional barriers that impede the symmetric distribution of gender-inclusive administrative sports or gaming interventions.

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

Western Region

From Table 4.6, Players from each region were requested from the questionnaire to state six main factors that influence the level of their participation in football. The western region cited their six factors as stated in Table 4.3. 28% of the respondents stated lack of access to facilities and equipment as the major cause that negatively influence their participation in football. 21% ticked parental /family support. 19% also ticked social stereotypes and stigmatization. 11 % stated that physical fitness and sound health influence their level of participation. Barely 4% stated that they are influenced by self – employment activities. From Interviews conducted, the players revealed that a good number of them are not residing in the central parts of the city. It was also revealed that there are only few training fields located in the City suburb and that training equipment available at these training fields is quite minimal. They cited the on-going construction works at the main National Stadium as a major factor that has contributed to lack of access to training equipment or a conducive training environment. The surge in transportation cost for these players to move from the outcasts or far ends of the city to access few

training grounds that are at the central of the city was also reported as a major challenge. This finding is consistent with those of Wangari et al (2017) and Zhou and Liu (2025) who argued that training environment and equipment available at these training fields are challenges faced by female footballers globally.

Northern Region (North East And West)

For the Northern Region, (North – East & North –West), 13% of the respondents stated that lack of access to facilities and equipment as a factor that influence female participation in football. 19% cited social stereotypes against female players as a limiting factor while 14% stated the issue of interest and passion as a factor that influence their level of participation 28% attributed low level of female participation to self-employment activities being the lead factor. They submitted that their personal engagement in petty-trading, agricultural activities and other businesses mostly interfere with their schedule for practices and matches. They need to undertake those activities (they said) in order to assist them in taking care of themselves and families. Some said they only have tips from their club management and supporters when matches or tournaments are fast approaching and during same.

Southern Region

On a similar note, lack of access to facilities and equipment was selected by 19% of the respondent in the South as one of the main factors that influence female participation in football, 17% said they had received very little or no parental support towards the playing of football. Self-employment and Interest and passion each accounted for 14 % and 11% respectively. The highest number of respondents (28%) stated that social stereotype and stigmatization is the limiting factor that influences the level of female participation in football. In their explanation, during personal interview, they described parental support to include both financial and moral support. Most of them said that their parents are normally not happy to see them engaged in football; and that they rarely go to cheer them up during matches. They further disclosed that their parent interprets their participation in football as a total lack of focus and even mock them by comparing them to their mates/peers that are fully engaged in academics at Universities.

Eastern Region

For the Eastern region, 23% of the players selected lack of access to facilities and Equipment while the issue of parental and family support was also selected by 20% of the respondents (players) as factors that do influence their level of participation in Football. Self-Employment, Interest and Passion each were selected by 11% of the respondents. Physical Fitness and Sound Health accounted for the least percentage (6%). Social stereotype and stigmatization stood out as the most major factor.

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 4.8: 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	-	6	20	46
NORTHERN REGION	-	8	30	48
SOUTHERN REGION	-	5	22	45
EASTERN REGION	-	8	6	21
TOTAL	-	27	78	160
Percentage	0%	11%	29%	60%

It is being argued that some male authorities mostly give less strategic administrative roles to females because of their lack of dedication. As a result of this allegation/concept, the level of dedication and effectiveness of females in performing their roles was investigated. Neither the male administrators nor the female administrators were contacted for this particular information; instead, the players were the respondents in order to ensure independency of the results. Four variables/parameters were used in describing the level of dedication / Performance and effectiveness of females. These include: Less effective, moderately effective, effective and Very effective. From the cumulative figures by regions, it was shown that for all the regions, the female players rated level of their female administrators between the ranges of moderately effective to very effective. Impliedly, no female administrator from any region was described as less effective. About 1/11 of the respondents (11%) rated their female administrators as moderately effective. While 29% and 60% of the respondents rated them as being effective and very effective respectively, on regional basis.

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 4.10: Type Of Functions Performed By Officials In The Different Regions

REGION	NAME OF FOOTBALL CLUB	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	<u>AVERAGE TYPE OF FUNCTIONN</u>	
			INITIAL	CURRENT
WESTERN REGION {URBAN}	F C Kallon	1	Minor roles	Minor roles only
	Correctional Service Football Club	1	Minor roles	Minor roles only
	Sirrea Leone Police Football Club	1	Totally left out	Minor roles
	Sierra Leone U-17 Women's National team	1	Minor roles	Minor/Major roles
	Sierra Leone U-20 Women's National team	0	0	0
	S.L.F.A U-15 Girls Youth League Team	1	Minor/Major roles	Minor/major roles
	S.L.F.A U-17 Girls Youth League Team	0	0	0
	Rising Queens F.C	1	Totally left out	Minor roles
	Port Authority F.C	0	0	0
WESTERN REGION {RURAL}	Vem Buck Girls F.C	1	Minor roles	Minor roles
	Ascentionians F.C	0	0	0
NORTHERN REGION {NORTH-WEST}	Sella Queens	0	0	0

	Katara Ladies	0	0	0
	Patricia Umu Football Club	1	Totally left out	Minor roles
	Koya Queens	0	0	0
	Future/Lungi/Marampa Youth Queens	0	0	0
	Central Queens	0	0	0
	Vem Buck Football Club	1	Totally left out	Minor roles
NORTHERN REGION {NORTH-EAST}	Mena Queens	1	Minor/Major roles	Major/minor roles only
	German Queens	0	0	0
	Masoya Queens	0	0	0
	Koinadugu Albitaya Queens	1	Totally left out	Minor roles only
	Kabombor Queens	0	0	0
	Pandoi Academy	0	0	0
SOUTHERN REGION	Mogbewmo Queens	1	Minor roles	Major roles only
	Ram Kamara Football Club	1	Minor roles	Minor/Major roles
	Malen Queens F.C	0	0	0
	Bah Female F.C	0	0	0
	J.C.C F.C	0	0	0
	Tikonko F.C	0	0	0
	Shebro Queens F.C	0	0	0
	Jong Queens F.C	1	Totally left out	Minor roles
	Moriba Town Queens F.C	0	0	0
	Kayamba Ladies F.C	0	0	0
	Rosarians Queens F.C	0	0	0

EASTERN REGION	Malema Queens	0	0	0
	Kahunla Queens	0	0	0
	Local Female Community Teams	0	-	-
	Diamond Queens	1	Minor roles	Minor roles
	KDFA Female Teams	0	-	-

The study examined trends in female participation in football administration by comparing the roles assigned to female administrators when they first joined their clubs with the roles they currently perform, while taking their length of service into account. Respondents were asked to classify these roles into four categories: minor roles only, major roles only, both minor and major roles, or totally left out. The findings revealed that female administrators remained underrepresented in major decision-making and leadership positions across all regions. In the Western Area, approximately 71% of respondents indicated that female administrators were assigned mainly minor roles. This finding supports the persistent perception that women are often excluded from key responsibilities in football administration. In the Northern Region, about 75% of female administrators reported that they were initially excluded from any delegated responsibilities when they joined their clubs. Although their participation had improved over time, most reported being assigned only minor roles, while approximately 25% indicated that they currently perform both major and minor administrative functions.

Similar patterns were observed in the Southern and Eastern regions, where women continued to perform predominantly minor administrative duties despite their increasing involvement in football administration. These findings suggest that although opportunities for female administrators have expanded, meaningful participation in leadership and strategic decision-making remains limited. The results are consistent with the studies of Whitaker et al. (2023) and Hayes and Donovan (2022), who found that women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership and decision-making roles within sports organizations. However, evidence collected from the players presented a contrasting perspective. More than 80% of the players stated that female officials demonstrated a high level of commitment, competence, and dedication in carrying out their responsibilities. This suggests that the limited delegation of major roles is not a reflection of women's performance or capability. The findings further support Arami (2016), who concluded that there are no significant differences between male and female managers in leadership behaviour, indicating that the continued underrepresentation of women in football administration is more likely attributable to institutional and socio-cultural barriers than to differences in leadership ability.

Summary of Challenges to Female Participation in Football

REGIONS	FACTORS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENT
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 4.12: 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

Similar to the findings obtained from the North, 36% of the respondents in the South also describe the level of intervention as low and only 7% describe as high.

Table 4.13: 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

The existing situation of the Eastern Region appears to be similar to the other regions too. For the East, 6% are of the view that the level of intervention is high while the rest feel otherwise. In conclusion, it can be inferred that the general trend with particular reference to interventions in mitigating the challenges that are negating female participation is still on the low side.

Table: 4.13 Triangulated Findings And Recommendations In Female Participation In Football By Regions In Sierra Leone (Players)

REGION	INTERVIEW GUIDE FINDINGS	FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION FINDINGS	TRIANGULATED INTERPRETATION	REGION SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION
WESTERN AREA	During the interview, players revealed that irregular training due to lack of training facilities and equipment and sponsorship. Most players self – fund kits and transport were used.	During the discussion respondents agreed that a female exists but pitch allocation favors male teams and also the ongoing rehabilitation work at the national stadium worsen the situation.	Moderate participation with structural constraints. Access exists but support is limited.	Improved training facilities and equipment. Increase football funding and sponsorship for female clubs. Enforce equal pitch allocation policies.
NORTHERN REGION	During the interview the respondent cited Commercial activities and that their personal engagement in pity trading and agricultural activities and other business mostly interfere with their schedule for practices and matches. They further disclosed that they need to undertake these activities in order to assist them in taking care of themselves and families. Some said they only have tips from their club management	During focus group discussions with some of the respondents, they stated that recognition in any given society is pivotal in career improvement and that their aim is not only to play football at the national level but even at the international level if given the opportunity.	Moderate participation Constrained by socio-economic and institutional factors.	• Increase public funding for women's football development • Increase media coverage on women's football • Ensure equity in pay, training, opportunities and competition exposure

	and supporters when matches and tournament are fast approaching.			
SOUTHERN REGION	During personal interview the respondent stated parental disapproval and cultural norms as factor affecting their participation rate. They further disclose that their parents interpret their participation in football as a total lack of focus and even mock them by comparing them to their peers that are fully engaged in academics at universities.	During focus group discussion the group consensus was that football is socially perceived as a male sport in their communities. The also noted that female matches receive minimal media coverage and institutional recognition.	Low participation driven by socio- cultural barriers. Low participation due to institutional neglect. Lack of role models and visibility.	Community sensitization campaigns involving parents, chiefs, and religious leaders to change the narrative/ perceptions. Mandate media coverage for female league matches.
EASTERN REGION	During the interview, players revealed that Education, irregular training due to lack of training facilities and equipment.	During group discussion they collectively identified lack of female coaches and managers as a deterrent.	Very low participation linked to weak institutional structures, infrastructure and governance gaps are evident.	Established regional female football academics and provide basic sporting facilities and equipment.

Table 4.14: Triangulated Findings And Recommendations In Female Participation In Football By Regions In Sierra Leone (Administrators)

REGION	INTERVIEW FINDINGS	GUIDE	TRIANGULATED INTERPRETATION	REGION SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION
WESTERN AREA	During the interview, the administrators revealed that irregular training due to lack of training facilities and equipment and sponsorship.		Moderate participation with structural constraints. Access exists but support is limited.	Improved training facilities and equipment. Increase football funding and sponsorship for female clubs. Enforce equal pitch allocation policies.
NORTHERN REGION	During the interview respondents agreed that a female exists but pitch allocation favors male teams		Moderate participation with structural constraints.	Enforce equal pitch allocation policies.
SOUTHERN REGION	During the interview respondent revealed that parents withdraw their girls due to fear of pregnancy and poor academic performance.		Low participation due to deep –rooted cultural discrimination and lack of support structures.	Parental and community sensitization to change the perceptions.
EASTERN REGION	During interview the respondents cited lack of administrators to organize leagues and to scout talent. They also stated low		Institutional neglect towards equal opportunities. Administrative gaps	Recruit and train more administrators. Promote mixed and female only tournaments. Enforce equal opportunities for both male and female football.

	remuneration and assign with only minor roles.	affect talent development.	
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DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWEES

The discussions and interview findings complemented the quantitative results by providing deeper insight into the pragmatic realities surrounding female participation in football in Sierra Leone. Most interviewees acknowledged that public attitudes towards women's football have improved considerably over the past decade. Nevertheless, they unanimously agreed that football continues to be socially constructed as a masculine activity. Many participants explained that everyday conversations within families and communities frequently discourage girls from pursuing football because it is considered inappropriate for women or inconsistent with cultural expectations of femininity. Such communicative practices continue to influence girls' decisions regarding football participation. Several interviewees observed that parents remain reluctant to support their daughters' football careers because of fears relating to marriage prospects, reproductive health and social acceptance. Female players further indicated that they often encounter negative comments from spectators and community members, which reduce their confidence and motivation. Administrators and coaches equally noted that women's football receives considerably less media attention than men's football, thereby reducing sponsorship opportunities, public recognition and institutional support. Overall, the interview findings supported the quantitative results by revealing that cultural beliefs, language use and everyday discourse continued to shape public attitudes towards women's football in Sierra Leone. Most interviewees stated that football was still widely perceived as a male sport, leading many parents and communities to discourage girls from participating. Participants also reported inadequate media coverage, limited sponsorship and insufficient institutional support for women's football. Although respondents acknowledged recent improvements in women's football, they emphasized the need for stronger public awareness, greater investment and increased representation of women in football leadership.

Summary

This study examined the pragmatics of female participation in football from global, African and Sierra Leonean perspectives. It investigated the level of female participation, the pragmatic and socio-cultural factors influencing participation, the roles delegated to women in football organization, and the challenges limiting their participation. The findings revealed that although female participation in football had increased, women remained underrepresented as players, coaches, referees and administrators. The study found that gender stereotypes, discrimination, inadequate funding, limited sporting facilities, weak institutional support, and poor media representation were the major factors influencing female participation. It also revealed that female administrators were generally perceived as effective despite occupying relatively few leadership positions. Furthermore, women participated in football mainly for livelihood, career development, physical well-being and personal fulfilment. However, these motivations were constrained by persistent socio-cultural beliefs and institutional barriers.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that female participation in football in Sierra Leone has improved over time but remains constrained by pragmatic, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Although the expansion of female football clubs, youth competitions, and increased stakeholder support has created greater opportunities for women and girls, progress remains uneven. Women continue to be underrepresented as coaches, referees, and administrators, indicating that increased participation as players has not translated into equitable representation in leadership and decision-making. The findings revealed that gender stereotypes, discriminatory discourse, inadequate funding, limited sporting infrastructure, weak institutional commitment, and restricted access to development opportunities continue to shape women's experiences in football. These barriers reinforce existing inequalities and limit women's progression into leadership and professional roles. The study further demonstrated that language, communication practices, and societal perceptions significantly influence attitudes towards women's football. Negative narratives and limited public visibility reduce acceptance, motivation, and opportunities for women to occupy influential positions within the sport. The study extends existing scholarship

by showing that the development of women's football in Sierra Leone depends not only on participation levels but also on the interaction of cultural beliefs, organizational practices, resource availability, and communication systems. It concludes that sustainable progress requires a multidimensional approach that addresses both material and symbolic barriers. Improving women's football therefore demands coordinated institutional reforms, inclusive policies, greater investment, effective communication strategies, stronger female representation in leadership, and sustained efforts to transform societal attitudes. Such measures will strengthen gender equity, institutional accountability, and the long-term development of an inclusive football system in Sierra Leone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that the Government of Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone Football Association should strengthen gender-inclusive sports policies and increase investment in women's football. Greater opportunities should be provided for women to serve as players, coaches, referees and football administrators. Grassroots football programmes should be expanded through schools and communities to encourage early participation among girls. The study further recommended increased media coverage of women's football to challenge gender stereotypes and improve public awareness. Community sensitization programmes involving parents, traditional leaders, religious leaders and educational institutions should be strengthened to promote positive attitudes towards girls' participation in football. Finally, adequate funding, improved sporting facilities, leadership development programmes and safeguarding policies should be implemented to create an enabling environment for the sustainable development of women's football in Sierra Leone.

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