



Status of Female Participation in Football in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing global recognition of women's football, female participation in football in Sierra Leone remains under-researched, creating important gaps in knowledge about the factors shaping women's involvement and progression in the sport. This study examined the factors influencing the status and level of female participation in football in Sierra Leone and identified the major barriers and opportunities affecting women's involvement as players, referees, coaches, managers, and other football officials. A descriptive survey design was employed. The target population comprised 1,000 female football stakeholders, from which 327 respondents were selected using Slovin's formula at a 94.2% confidence level and $\pm 5\%$ margin of error. The sample comprised 286 female football players selected through simple random sampling and 41 football administrators, including coaches, managers, and referees, selected purposively. A 92% questionnaire response rate was achieved. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings indicated that female participation in football was influenced by interrelated social, cultural, economic, institutional, and infrastructural factors. Social factors, particularly stereotypes and stigmatization, ranged from 19% to 29% across the regions, while cultural factors relating to parental and family support ranged from 15 % to 21%. Economic factors, including self-employment and livelihood opportunities, ranged from 4% to 28%, whereas infrastructural constraints, particularly limited access to sporting facilities and equipment, ranged from 13% to 28%. Institutional and administrative barriers, particularly discrimination, ranged from 12.5% to 37.5%. These findings demonstrate that female participation in football in Sierra Leone was shaped by a combination of socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and infrastructural constraints. Economic hardship affected female participation by 28%, while inadequate sporting facilities and limited access to training facilities were reported by 25% and 13%, respectively. Weak institutional support and insufficient sponsorship were identified as constraints by 25% and 28%, respectively, while low media visibility and inadequate motivation accounted for 12.5% and 18%, respectively. These factors constrained female participation in football and limited opportunities for sustained career advancement. Gender stereotypes, stigmatisation, discrimination, negative cultural perceptions, and limited public acceptance further restricted women's participation and access to leadership and officiating roles. Although stakeholder interventions have contributed to gradual improvements, they remain fragmented and inadequate for sustainable development. The study concludes that female participation in football in Sierra Leone is increasing but remains structurally constrained. It recommends increased investment, improved infrastructure, gender-inclusive policies, strengthened grassroots programmes, expanded media coverage and sponsorship, and integration of women's sports development into national education policy.

Keywords: Female Participation, Football, Gender Barriers, Sierra Leone, Sports Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone is a multilingual and multicultural society in which people from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds interact and participate in shared social institutions. Sport, particularly football, is one



such institution. Football has historically served as an important mechanism for social interaction and cohesion, bringing together people across differences in age, religion, ethnicity, social status, and political affiliation (Stevens & Sheriff 2025: Coakley, 2016). However, access to and participation in football have not been equally distributed between men and women. Although women's participation in sport has increased considerably over recent decades, gender inequalities continue to influence who participates, the roles individuals occupy, and the opportunities available for advancement. (Foray et al., 2026)

Historically, sporting activities have been constructed largely as masculine domains, while women have often been discouraged from participating in physically demanding sports because such activities were considered unfeminine, masculine, or potentially harmful to women's reproductive health (Cleland et al., 2020). Such beliefs contributed to gender distinctions within sport and restricted women's access to training, competition, leadership, and professional opportunities. Ladan (2009) opined that societies have traditionally provided greater opportunities for boys to participate in competitive sports than girls. A stronger introduction would use each citation to build an argument, for example: global participation has grown since the 1990s, yet Sub-Saharan Africa lags behind that growth, and Sierra Leone has no published account of the scale of the gap. This historical imbalance suggests that differences in participation are not simply a consequence of individual choice but are also shaped by social expectations, institutional practices, and unequal access to resources.

The development of women's football demonstrates that these restrictions are not permanent. Since the establishment of the FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991, women's football has gained increasing international visibility, participation, and institutional recognition. The growth of international competitions has created greater opportunities for women as players, coaches, referees, administrators, and other football professionals. (Foray et al., 2026). Nevertheless, increased visibility has not eliminated gender inequality. Women's football continues to experience disparities in investment, facilities, media coverage, sponsorship, remuneration, and institutional support. Clarkson (2023) argues that inadequate financial investment and limited resources within women's football continue to constrain its development. Thus, global growth in women's football does not necessarily translate into equal opportunities at national and local levels.

The African context provides important evidence for understanding these continuing inequalities. Saavedra (2003), in her analysis of women's football in Senegal, Nigeria, and South Africa, demonstrated that women's football developed within societies where men's football held greater social, political, and economic significance. Although women's football expanded, female players continued to encounter scepticism, neglect, and resistance. These observations are particularly relevant to Sierra Leone because football similarly occupies an important position in national social life while women's participation continues to receive less institutional attention than men's participation.

Evidence from South Africa further demonstrates that the development of women's football is shaped by gender, institutional structures, social class, and historical conditions. Pelak (2010) traces the development of women's competitive football in South Africa from its emergence through its growth and eventual institutionalisation, showing how feminism, democratisation, globalization, and organizational development contributed to increased participation while power relations continued to shape women's experiences. Engh (2010) similarly examines elite women's football in South Africa in relation to empowerment and gender equality, highlighting the tension between the potential of football to empower women and the persistence of male privilege within sport. Engh (2011) further shows how women's football can be shaped by expectations of femininity and gender norms, demonstrating that women may be required to negotiate both their sporting identities and social expectations concerning appropriate femininity.

These African studies suggest that gender inequality in football should not be understood only in terms of the number of women who participate. It also concerns the conditions under which women participate, the resources available to them, the positions they occupy, and their opportunities to progress into coaching, refereeing, management, and leadership. Adeyanju and Stephen (2020) similarly associate the relatively low participation of girls in African football with patriarchal norms that define competitive sport, physical strength, and athletic activity as predominantly masculine. Such norms may influence family attitudes, institutional decisions, and the distribution of sporting resources.



Recent evidence from East Africa provides a further basis for comparison. Simiyu (2025), examining the growth of women's football in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, applies patriarchy theory to explain how social and gender relations continue to shape women's participation despite the growth of the women's game. This perspective is particularly relevant to Sierra Leone because it connects the expansion of women's football with the persistence of gendered social structures rather than assuming that increased participation automatically represents gender equality. The East African experience also demonstrates that the development of women's football can occur alongside continuing social and institutional constraints.

Economic and infrastructural conditions further reinforce these gender inequalities. Limited financial resources, inadequate sporting facilities, insufficient training opportunities, and weak institutional investment can restrict women's ability to enter, remain in, and progress within football. Engh's analysis of women's football in South Africa illustrates how the potential of football as a means of empowerment is constrained when women participate within structures that continue to privilege male power and resources (Engh, 2010). Similarly, Saavedra (2003) demonstrates that the development of women's football across African countries depends not only on women's interest in the sport but also on institutional commitment, resources, and broader social acceptance.

Despite the increasing visibility of women's football internationally and growing scholarship on women's participation in Africa, female participation in Sierra Leone remains comparatively under-researched. Existing discussions tend to identify general challenges such as gender stereotypes, inadequate facilities, limited funding, and cultural resistance, but there is limited empirical evidence showing how these factors collectively influence women's participation across different football roles. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the experiences of female players, coaches, referees, managers, and administrators and to the differences in opportunities available to women across these roles.

This gap is significant because participation in football extends beyond playing. A meaningful assessment of gender equality must consider women's access to playing opportunities as well as their representation in coaching, refereeing, administration, management, and decision-making. Examining these dimensions together can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which the development of women's football in Sierra Leone has translated into broader opportunities for women. Thus this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate the factors influencing the status, extent, and level of female participation in football in Sierra Leone. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to obtain systematic information from female football players and key football stakeholders regarding their experiences, perceptions, opportunities, and challenges associated with women's participation in football. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative data obtained through questionnaires were complemented by qualitative data generated through interviews and focus group discussions. The integration of these methods enabled the study not only to establish patterns of participation but also to explain the experiences and circumstances underlying those patterns.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised female football stakeholders in Sierra Leone drawn from 40 registered female football clubs and representative teams, as well as female referees, coaches, and football administrators. Population data were obtained from records of the Sierra Leone Female Premier League and the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA) relating to registered female football clubs and officials.



The target population consisted of 1,000 registered female football players, 26 female referees, 7 female football coaches, and 8 female football administrators, giving a total population of 1,041 female football stakeholders. These categories were selected because they represented the principal groups directly involved in women's football as players, technical officials, and administrators. Their inclusion therefore provided perspectives from different levels of participation and decision-making within the female football structure in Sierra Leone.

Sample Size Determination

A total sample of 327 respondents was selected from the population of 1,041 stakeholders. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula:

$$n = N/N \div (1 + Ne^2)$$

Where:

(n) = required sample size;

(N) = total population size; and

(e) = margin of error.

Using a population of 1,041 and a margin of error of 5%, the formula produced a sample size of approximately 289 respondents. However, the study ultimately targeted 327 respondents to ensure adequate representation of the different stakeholder categories, particularly the relatively small but substantively important groups of referees, coaches, and administrators.

The previously stated 94.2% confidence level is therefore not treated as an independent parameter in the sample-size calculation. Rather, the study's principal sampling criterion was a 5% margin of error, while the final sample was increased to ensure adequate coverage of the identified stakeholder groups. This clarification avoids implying that Slovin's formula simultaneously established both a 94.2% confidence level and a 5% margin of error without an explicit statistical basis.

Sampling Techniques and Procedures

The study employed a combination of simple random sampling and purposive sampling because the stakeholder groups differed substantially in population size, accessibility, and professional roles. First, simple random sampling was used to select the female football players. From the 1,000 registered female players, 286 players were selected. A sampling frame based on the available registration records was used, and eligible players were assigned an opportunity for selection. The use of simple random sampling was intended to reduce selection bias and ensure that registered players had an approximately equal probability of being selected. This procedure was considered appropriate for the player population because it was sufficiently large to permit probability based sampling.

Second, purposive sampling was used to select the football officials. The sample included 26 female referees, 7 female coaches, and 8 female administrators, giving a total of 41 officials. Because these categories had relatively small populations and possessed specialised professional knowledge that could not readily be obtained from ordinary players, they were deliberately included in the study. Where the population of an official category was small enough, all available members were included rather than selecting a smaller probability sample. This approach ensured that potentially important perspectives from women occupying specialised technical and administrative positions were not lost through random sampling.

The final sample therefore comprised 286 female players and 41 female football officials, giving a total of 327 respondents. The combination of probability and purposive sampling enabled the study to obtain broad



representation from the larger player population while also capturing the specialised experiences and institutional perspectives of referees, coaches, and administrators.

Distribution of Registered Female Football Clubs by Region

A total of 40 registered female football clubs and representative teams, comprising 1,000 registered players, were identified across the regions of Sierra Leone. The distribution indicated geographical variation in women's organised football participation. The Southern Region recorded the largest number of registered players, with 260 players (26.0%) across 11 clubs, followed by the Western Urban Region, with 240 players (24.0%) across 9 clubs. The North-West Region accounted for 180 players (18.0%) across 7 clubs, while the North-East Region had 135 players (13.5%) across 6 clubs. The Eastern Region also recorded 135 players (13.5%) across 5 clubs, while the Western Rural Region had the smallest representation, with 50 players (5.0%) across 2 clubs.

Overall, the distribution demonstrates that registered female football clubs were present across the regions represented in the study, although the concentration of registered players varied considerably. The Southern and Western Urban regions together accounted for 500 of the 1,000 registered players (50.0%), indicating their relatively strong representation within organised female football. The detailed distribution of individual clubs and their respective numbers of registered players is presented in Appendix A.

Distribution of Female Football Referees

The study also obtained population information on female football referees across the regions. The records indicated a total of 26 female referees, comprising referees, assistant referees, and student referees at different levels of participation and qualification. The distribution of these officials demonstrated regional differences in the availability and professional development of female refereeing personnel.

Table 1: Distribution of Female Football Referees by Region

Region	Referees	Assistant Referees	Student Referees	Category/Level
Western Urban & Rural	2	7	0	Elite A = 2; Elite B = 7
North-West	0	3	1	Elite B = 3; Non-Elite = 1
North-East	1	3	0	Elite A = 2; Elite B = 2
Southern	1	1	0	Elite B = 2
Eastern	1	4	2	Elite A = 1; Elite B = 3; Elite/Student = 3
Total	5	18	3	26

Source: Sierra Leone Football Association records.

Distribution of Female Football Coaches and Administrators

Records also indicated the presence of 7 female football coaches and 8 female football administrators across the regions. Their distribution is presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Distribution of Female Football Coaches and Administrators by Region



No.	Region	Female Football Coaches	Female Football Administrators
1	Eastern	0	1
2	Southern	2	1
3	North-East	1	1
4	North-West	1	1
5	Western Urban & Rural	3	4
Total		7	8

Source: Sierra Leone Football Association records.

Research Instruments

Three principal instruments were used for data collection: a structured questionnaire, an interview guide, and a focus group discussion (FGD) guide. The structured questionnaire was administered primarily to female football players and generated quantitative information concerning participants' demographic characteristics, experiences, perceptions, opportunities, barriers, and level of participation in football. The questionnaire contained closed-ended items that facilitated quantitative analysis and comparison across respondents.

The interview guide was used to obtain detailed information from selected football stakeholders, particularly referees, coaches, and administrators. The interviews explored issues that required deeper explanation, including institutional practices, gender-related barriers, opportunities for advancement, leadership participation, and experiences within football structures.

The focus group discussion guide was used to generate collective perspectives from female football participants. FGDs provided an opportunity for participants to discuss shared experiences, social expectations, challenges, and opportunities relating to women's participation in football. The use of FGDs also enabled the researcher to identify areas of agreement and divergence among participants.

Validity of the Research Instruments

The validity of the research instruments was established through content and face validation. The questionnaire, interview guide, and focus group discussion guide were reviewed by 20 experts with relevant expertise in sports studies, gender studies, research methodology, and linguistics. The experts assessed the instruments in terms of clarity, relevance, adequacy of coverage, appropriateness of response options, and alignment with the study objectives and research questions.

Their observations and recommendations were incorporated into the instruments before the main data collection. Specifically, four items were revised and two items were removed because they were considered unclear, repetitive, or insufficiently aligned with the objectives of the study. The revised instruments were subsequently pilot-tested among football stakeholders who had characteristics similar to those of the target population but were excluded from the final sample. The pilot study helped the researcher identify ambiguities, assess the suitability of the response options, estimate the time required to administer the questionnaire, and improve the overall clarity and organisation of the instruments.

Reliability of the Research Instrument

The reliability of the structured questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The questionnaire produced an overall reliability coefficient of 0.87, indicating good internal consistency among



the items. Reliability coefficients for the individual sections ranged from 0.79 to 0.91, demonstrating acceptable to high internal consistency across the different sections of the instrument. The reliability results provided empirical evidence that the questionnaire was sufficiently consistent for the purposes of the study. The combination of expert validation, pilot testing, and reliability analysis strengthened the methodological rigour and credibility of the quantitative data collection instrument.

Data Collection Procedures

Following ethical approval and the granting of permission by the relevant football authorities, the researcher contacted the selected clubs and football stakeholders and arranged suitable periods for data collection. The questionnaires were administered to the selected female football players, while interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with relevant stakeholders in accordance with the study objectives. Participants were given appropriate explanations concerning the purpose of the study and the nature of their participation. The researcher and/or trained research assistants were available to clarify procedural issues without influencing participants' responses. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness, while interview and focus group data were recorded and documented for subsequent qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 23. Descriptive statistical procedures, including frequencies, percentages, and other appropriate summary measures, were used to present the characteristics and responses of the participants. The results were presented in tables and interpreted in relation to the research objectives. Qualitative data obtained through interviews and focus group discussions were analysed thematically. The researcher reviewed the responses, identified recurring ideas and concepts, coded related statements, and grouped them into major themes corresponding to the study objectives. Relevant themes were subsequently compared with the quantitative findings.

Integration and Triangulation of Data

Because the study employed questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, methodological triangulation was undertaken to enhance the credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings. The quantitative and qualitative data were not treated as independent bodies of evidence; rather, they were compared and integrated during interpretation.

Questionnaire results were first used to identify broad patterns in female participation, barriers, opportunities, and experiences. Interview and focus group findings were then examined to provide explanations and contextual understanding of these patterns. Where findings from the different sources converged, the evidence strengthened the interpretation. Where discrepancies occurred, the researcher examined the qualitative accounts and contextual circumstances to determine possible explanations rather than assuming that one source was automatically superior to another. The use of three data sources therefore provided data-source and methodological triangulation, allowing the study to examine female participation from the perspectives of players, officials, and administrators and to corroborate quantitative patterns with qualitative experiences. This integration enhanced the validity and depth of the study findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Njala University Research Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA) and, where necessary, from the management of the participating football clubs.

Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained before participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer



any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. The researcher also took measures to protect participants' privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Personal identifiers were not disclosed in the presentation of the findings, and information obtained from participants was used solely for academic purposes. Interview and focus group data were handled confidentially, and findings were reported in a manner that minimised the possibility of identifying individual participants.

RESULT/FINDINGS

Table 4: Regional assessment of level of participation of females in football

Region	Number of Male Players	Initial Number of Female Players	Current Number of Female Players	% of Male Players	% of Female Players	% Increase/Decrease in Female Players	Total Active Players
Western Region {Urban & Rural}	2,040	215	290	87.55%	12.45%	34.88%	2,330
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%	1,085
Southern Region	1,340	205	260	83.75%	16.25%	26.83%	1,600
Eastern Region	850	103	135	86.29%	13.71%	31.07%	985
Total	5,680	801	1,000	85.03%	14.97%	24.84%	6,680

Source: SLFA Office Freetown and branch offices in Makeni, Bo and Pujehun.

Table 4 presents a regional assessment of female participation in football by comparing the number of male and female players, the initial and current numbers of female players, and the corresponding changes in female participation across the five regions. The data were obtained from the records of the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA) and its regional offices. The percentages in the table represent single-category proportions, rather than responses to multiple-response questionnaire items. Specifically, the percentage of male players was calculated by dividing the number of male players in a region by the total number of active players in that region and multiplying by 100. Similarly, the percentage of female players was calculated by dividing the current number of female players by the total number of active players in the region and multiplying by 100. The percentage increase in female participation was calculated by comparing the current number of female players with their initial number.

The overall findings show a substantial gender disparity in football participation. Of the 6,680 active players recorded across the five regions, 5,680 were male and 1,000 were female. Thus, male players constituted $5,680/6,680 \times 100 = 85.03\%$, while female players constituted $1,000/6,680 \times 100 = 14.97\%$. The figures indicate that female players represented approximately 15% of the total active playing population, compared with approximately 85% for males. Therefore, despite the growth in women's participation, female players remained considerably underrepresented in organised football.

The Western Region (Urban and Rural) recorded the largest overall number of active players, with 2,330 players, comprising 2,040 males and 290 females. Female players therefore accounted for $290/2,330 \times 100 = 12.45\%$, while males accounted for $2,040/2,330 \times 100 = 87.55\%$. The number of female players increased from an initial 215 to 290, representing an increase of 75 players, or $(75/215) \times 100 = 34.88\%$. This was the largest percentage increase in female participation recorded across the five regions.

The North-West Region recorded 680 active players, comprising 500 males and 180 females. Female players represented $180/680 \times 100 = 26.47\%$, while male players represented $500/680 \times 100 = 73.53\%$. The North-West therefore recorded the highest proportion of female players among the five regions. The number of female players increased from 151 initially to 180 currently, representing an increase of 29 players, equivalent



to $(29/151) \times 100 = 19.21\%$. Although this was the smallest increase after the North-East in percentage terms, the region's current female representation was comparatively high.

In the North-East Region, there were 1,085 active players, consisting of 950 males and 135 females. Female players therefore accounted for $135/1,085 \times 100 = 12.44\%$, compared with 87.56% for male players. Female

participation increased from an initial 127 players to 135, an increase of 8 players, equivalent to $(8/127) \times 100 = 6.30\%$. This was the smallest percentage increase in female participation among the five regions, suggesting comparatively limited growth in the number of female players over the period covered by the records.

The Southern Region recorded 1,600 active players, comprising 1,340 males and 260 females. Female players accounted for $260/1,600 \times 100 = 16.25\%$, while male players accounted for $1,340/1,600 \times 100 = 83.75\%$. Female participation increased from 205 initially to 260 currently, representing an increase of 55 players, or $(55/205) \times 100 = 26.83\%$. The Southern Region therefore recorded the second-highest percentage increase in female participation and also had the second-highest proportion of female players after the North-West Region.

The Eastern Region recorded 985 active players, consisting of 850 males and 135 females. Female players constituted $135/985 \times 100 = 13.71\%$, while male players constituted $850/985 \times 100 = 86.29\%$. The number of female players increased from 103 initially to 135 currently, representing an increase of 32 players, equivalent to $(32/103) \times 100 = 31.07\%$. This was the second-largest percentage increase in female participation after the Western Region.

Taken together, the regional figures demonstrate two important patterns. First, female participation increased in every region. The total number of female players rose from 801 initially to 1,000 currently, representing an increase of 199 players. When calculated against the initial total, this represents an overall increase of approximately 24.84%. Second, despite this positive growth, female participation remained substantially lower than male participation. The regional female proportions ranged from 12.44% in the North-East to 26.47% in the North-West, while male representation ranged from 73.53% to 87.56%.

The findings further suggest that growth in female participation and the current proportion of female players are not necessarily the same measure. For example, the Western Region recorded the largest percentage increase in female players (34.88%), but only 12.45% of its current active players were female. Conversely, the North-West recorded the highest current proportion of female players (26.47%) but a comparatively lower growth rate of 19.21%. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that a region can experience considerable growth in women's participation while women may still constitute a relatively small proportion of the overall football-playing population.

Qualitative Evidence on Barriers to Female Participation

The quantitative results were complemented by findings from interviews and focus group discussions, which provided explanations for the continuing gender disparity. Participants identified several recurring themes, including sociocultural expectations, limited financial support, inadequate facilities and opportunities, gender stereotypes, and institutional constraints.

Under the theme of sociocultural expectations, female participants explained that women who participate in football may encounter social attitudes that portray football as predominantly a male activity. Such perceptions were reported to discourage some girls and women from entering or continuing in football. Participants indicated that family responsibilities and expectations concerning women's socially prescribed roles could also restrict the time and freedom available for sustained participation.

A second theme was financial and material constraints. Participants reported that the cost of transportation, football equipment, training, and participation in competitions could create difficulties for female players, particularly where personal or institutional financial support was limited. These experiences help contextualise

why increases in registered female participation have not necessarily produced proportional representation across all regions.

Participants also identified limited access to training facilities and competitive opportunities as a barrier. Some respondents described differences in the availability of football infrastructure, organised competitions, coaching, and development opportunities across regions. Such disparities may affect both recruitment and retention of female players.

The theme of gender stereotyping and discrimination also emerged from the qualitative evidence. Participants reported that women's football sometimes receives less recognition and support than men's football. This perception was associated with fewer opportunities, limited visibility, and reduced encouragement for girls and women who wish to pursue football more seriously.

Participants also highlighted institutional barriers, including inadequate support structures and limited opportunities for progression. Female stakeholders suggested that stronger institutional commitment to women's football, increased investment, coaching opportunities, and structured development programmes could improve both participation and retention.

These qualitative findings provide an important explanation for the quantitative results. While the SLFA records demonstrate measurable growth in the number of female players, participants' experiences indicate that this growth occurs within a context where women continue to encounter social, economic, infrastructural, and institutional barriers. The convergence between the quantitative and qualitative evidence therefore suggests that female participation in football in Sierra Leone has expanded but has not yet achieved gender parity.

Overall, table 4 demonstrates a positive trend in female participation, as the number of female players increased in all five regions. The Western Region recorded the greatest percentage increase (34.88%), while the North-West Region recorded the highest current proportion of female players (26.47%). Nevertheless, females accounted for only 14.97% of the total active football-playing population, compared with 85.03% for males. The quantitative evidence therefore confirms a persistent gender imbalance, while the qualitative findings suggest that sociocultural expectations, financial constraints, inadequate facilities and opportunities, gender stereotypes, and institutional limitations continue to influence women's ability to participate fully in football. The findings consequently indicate that increased numerical participation should be accompanied by sustained measures aimed at improving access, retention, support, and progression for female football players.

TABLE 4.1.1: Regional assessment of level of participation of female officials {Referees} in football

Region	Current Number of Officials	Initial Number of Female Officials	Current Number of Female Officials	Current Percentage of Female Officials (%)
Western Area (Urban & Rural)	62	4	9	15
North-West Region	17	0	4	23
North-East Region	22	1	4	18
Southern Region	30	0	2	7
Eastern Region	28	2	7	25

From Table 4.1.1, the level of participation of female officials was assessed in perspective of comparing the current number of female officials relative to the initial number of female officials in the different regions. For the Western, region, ratio of males to females is 6:1. In the North – West and Eastern Regions, the ratios are 3:1 each, while 9:2 and 14:1 were recorded as ratios of the North – Eastern and Southern regions respectively. Overall, the total average ratio of male to female officials (referees) was found to be 5:1



Table 4.1.1 presents a regional assessment of the level of female participation among football officials (referees) in Sierra Leone. The assessment compares the current number of female officials with the total current number of football officials in each region, thereby providing an indication of the extent to which women are represented in football officiating. The percentages reported in the table were calculated using the total current number of officials in each region as the denominator; that is, $\text{current female officials} \div \text{current number of officials} \times 100$. These percentages represent the regional proportion of female officials and are not based on multiple responses from individual respondents.

The findings indicate considerable regional variation in female representation. In the Western Area (Urban and Rural), there were 62 football officials, of whom 9 were female. Thus, female officials constituted $9/62 \times 100 = 14.5\%$, approximately 15% as reported in the table. This indicates that women represented a relatively small proportion of football officials in the region, despite an increase from the initial figure of 4 female officials to 9.

In the North-West Region, the total number of current officials was 17, while 4 were female. Female representation was therefore $4/17 \times 100 = 23.5\%$, approximately 23%. This was the highest proportion of female officials recorded among the regions presented in the table. The increase from an initial figure of zero female officials to four suggests a notable improvement in women's entry into football officiating in the region.

The North-East Region recorded 22 current officials, including 4 females. Female representation was therefore $4/22 \times 100 = 18.2\%$, approximately 18%. Although the proportion was lower than that of the North-West Region, the increase from one initially recorded female official to four indicates some growth in female participation in refereeing.

In the Southern Region, 2 of the 30 current football officials were female. This gives a female representation of $2/30 \times 100 = 6.7\%$, approximately 7%. This was the lowest level of female representation among the regions reported. The increase from zero initially recorded female officials to two at the time of the study indicates some progress, although women's participation remained very limited relative to the total number of officials.

The Eastern Region recorded 28 current officials, of whom 7 were female. Consequently, female officials accounted for $7/28 \times 100 = 25\%$ of the officials in the region. This represents the highest percentage of female participation when the figures are calculated directly from the denominators in the table. The increase from two initial female officials to seven current female officials further suggests considerable growth in women's participation in football officiating in the region.

Overall, the regional data demonstrate that female participation in football officiating remained lower than male participation in all the regions. The pattern is particularly pronounced in the Southern Region, where females constituted approximately 7% of officials, and in the Western Area, where they constituted approximately 15%. By contrast, the Eastern and North-West regions recorded relatively higher female representation, at approximately 25% and 24%, respectively. These differences suggest that opportunities for women to enter and remain in football officiating may vary according to regional institutional, social, and developmental conditions.

The findings also show an encouraging increase in the absolute number of female officials in every region. The Western Area increased from 4 to 9 female officials, the North-West from 0 to 4, the North-East from 1 to 4, the Southern Region from 0 to 2, and the Eastern Region from 2 to 7. Thus, although women remained numerically underrepresented, the upward movement across all regions indicates gradual expansion of female participation in football officiating.

The reported overall male-to-female ratio of approximately 5:1 should, however, be interpreted as a general indication of gender imbalance rather than as a percentage measure. A 5:1 ratio means that, overall, there were approximately five male officials for every one female official. This finding reinforces the conclusion that football officiating in Sierra Leone remained predominantly male-dominated despite the observed growth in female participation.



Qualitative Interpretation of the Finding

The quantitative pattern can be further understood through the qualitative evidence obtained from interviews and focus group discussions. Participants generally associated the low representation of women in refereeing with gender stereotypes, limited opportunities for training and certification, social expectations concerning women's roles, and the male-dominated structure of football administration. Female participants indicated that entering refereeing could be difficult because the occupation is often perceived as more appropriate for men and because women may have fewer opportunities to access training, mentorship, and appointments to competitive matches.

Participants also reported that the demands associated with travelling for matches, irregular schedules, and balancing football responsibilities with family and other social obligations could discourage some women from pursuing or remaining in refereeing. These qualitative accounts help explain why an increase in the number of female officials has not necessarily translated into gender parity.

Importantly, the qualitative evidence should be understood as explanatory rather than numerical evidence. Whereas the figures in Table 4.1.1 establish the extent of female representation using clearly defined regional denominators, the interview and focus group findings provide insight into participants' experiences and perceptions of the barriers underlying this representation. The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative evidence therefore suggests that female participation in football officiating in Sierra Leone was increasing, but remained constrained by structural and sociocultural factors.

Overall, Table 4.1.1 demonstrates a gradual but uneven expansion of women's participation in football officiating. While the increase in female officials across all five regions represents positive progress, the relatively low percentages compared with the total number of officials confirm that women remained substantially underrepresented. The findings consequently point to the need for sustained interventions in female referee recruitment, training, certification, mentorship, appointment, and retention.

TABLE 4.1.2: Regional assessment of level of participation of female coaches and administrators in football

REGION	NAME OF FOOTBALL CLUB / TEAM	INITIAL NUMBER OF FEMALE COACHES & ADMINISTRATORS	CURRENT NUMBER OF FEMALE COACHES & ADMINISTRATORS
WESTERN REGION (URBAN)	F.C. Kallon	0	0
	Correctional Service Football Club	1	0
	Sierra Leone Police Football Club	1	1
	Sierra Leone U-17 Women's National Team	0	0
	Sierra Leone U-20 Women's National Team	1	1
	SLFA U-15 Girls Youth League Teams	0	0
	SLFA U-17 Girls Youth League Teams	0	1
	Rising Queens F.C.	0	0
	Port Authority F.C.	0	0
WESTERN REGION (RURAL)	Vem Buck Girls F.C.	0	1



	Ascentionians F.C.	0	0
NORTHERN REGION (NORTH-WEST)	Sella Queens	0	0
	Katara Ladies	1	0
	Patricia Umu Football Club	0	1
	Koya Queens	0	0
	Future/Lungi/Marampa Youth Queens	0	0
	Central Queens	0	0
	Vem Buck Football Club	0	1
NORTHERN REGION (NORTH-EAST)	Mena Queens	0	1
	German Queens	0	0
	Masoya Queens	0	1
	Koinadugu Albitaya Queens	0	0
	Kabombor Queens	0	0
	Pandoi Academy	1	0
SOUTHERN REGION	Mogbewmo Queens	1	1
	Ram Kamara Football Club	0	1
	Malen Queens F.C.	0	0
	Bah Female F.C.	0	0
	J.C.C. F.C.	0	0
	Tikonko F.C.	0	0
	Shebro Queens F.C.	0	0
	Jong Queens F.C.	0	1
	Moriba Town Queens F.C.	0	0
	Kayamba Ladies F.C.	1	0
	Rosarians Queens F.C.	0	0
EASTERN REGION	Malema Queens	0	0
	Kahunla Queens	0	1
	Local Female Community Teams	0	1
	Diamond Queens	0	1
	KDFA Female Teams	0	1
TOTAL	40 Football Clubs	7	15

Table 4.1.2 gives an unequivocal depiction of low representation of female officials in the organization of football competitions. To start with, there is no club that has more than one female official. Another fact revealed was that only (15) 37.5% of the clubs have females while 62.5% of the clubs do not have any female official. In comparing results obtained from the representation of females as referees with that of females as coaches & or administrators (i.e. tables 4.2 & 4.3), it is observed that although small gains had been recorded in the number of females serving as referees, the figures being registered for female coaches or female administrators of football clubs remain indisputably very low. Hietala and Archibald (2021) in a publication on the topic: Barriers to female officials in sports stated that although refereeing has historically been a profession that exclusively targeted men, more inclusive changes have been implemented in the new era. Our findings in this current study in terms of female referees are consistent with those of the above scholars.



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study examined female participation in football in Sierra Leone in three principal areas: participation as players, participation in coaching and administration, and participation as match officials (referees). The findings demonstrate that female involvement in football has expanded, particularly at the playing level, but remains substantially lower in coaching, administration, and refereeing. This uneven pattern suggests that increased access to playing opportunities has not automatically translated into equal access to technical, managerial, and decision-making positions. The finding is important because research on women's football increasingly shows that numerical growth in participation can coexist with persistent gender inequalities in the organisational structures that govern the sport. Foray et al. (2026), for example, found that although opportunities for women and girls to play football had expanded, women remained underrepresented in coaching and refereeing and continued to experience gendered barriers within football environments. The present study therefore extends this broader argument to Sierra Leone by demonstrating that the transition from participation as players to participation in positions of authority remains particularly limited.

Female Participation as Players

The findings showed a positive increase in female participation as players, with approximately 1,000 registered female players across 40 clubs and representative teams. Interviews and focus group discussions suggested that the expansion of youth competitions, increased public awareness, and growing institutional support from the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA) have contributed to this development. This finding reflects the broader international growth of women's football, where the expansion of grassroots programmes, organised competitions, and media attention has created more opportunities for women and girls to enter and remain in the sport. Drury et al. (2021) similarly observed that the growth of women's football and increased grassroots opportunities have created a more favourable environment for female participation, although such progress has not eliminated structural gender inequalities.

Despite the growth in participation, the present study found that inadequate facilities, limited financial support, family responsibilities, and socially prescribed gender roles continued to constrain women's involvement. These findings are consistent with Adeyanju and Stephen (2020), who identified economic difficulties and cultural expectations as important constraints on women's participation in football. They also support Clarkson (2023), whose work suggests that increased participation does not necessarily guarantee equal access to facilities, resources, development opportunities, and institutional support. The implication is that participation figures alone may provide an incomplete picture of the development of women's football. A club may have a relatively large number of female players while those players continue to experience inadequate equipment, poor training environments, limited financial incentives, and restricted pathways to professional advancement.

The findings can also be interpreted through the study's feminist theoretical perspective. Feminist theory argues that women's opportunities are shaped not only by individual choices but also by gender norms and institutional arrangements that determine who has access to resources and authority. In the Sierra Leonean context, family responsibilities and cultural expectations may restrict the amount of time women can devote to football, while inadequate financial support can make continued participation difficult. Consequently, the growth from a small number of female players to approximately 1,000 registered players represents meaningful progress, but it does not necessarily indicate the removal of the structural conditions that reproduce gender inequality.

The findings therefore suggest that the expansion of women's football in Sierra Leone should be understood as a process of increased visibility rather than complete gender equality. Participation opportunities have expanded, but sustainable involvement requires corresponding improvements in facilities, remuneration, training, welfare, and career pathways. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary research showing that women's participation can increase while organisational practices continue to reproduce gendered inequalities.

Female Participation in Coaching and Administration



The most pronounced gender disparity was evident in coaching and administration. Approximately 62.5% of the clubs surveyed had neither a female coach nor a female administrator. Participants identified limited mentoring opportunities, inadequate access to coaching education, lack of professional development, and the absence of visible female role models as major barriers. These findings are strongly supported by Hoyer et al., (2025), whose study of women coaches in community sport found that women were underrepresented despite increasing participation by women and girls. Their study identified barriers including patriarchal organisational cultures, unclear coaching pathways, inadequate development opportunities, lack of empowerment, and the tendency to channel men towards coaching while women are directed towards administrative roles.

The similarity between the present findings and Hoyer et al. (2025) findings is significant because it suggests that women's underrepresentation in coaching is not simply a consequence of a shortage of women interested in football. Rather, it may reflect institutional structures that influence who receives training, mentoring, promotion, and leadership opportunities. This distinction is important. If women are participating as players in relatively large numbers but are not subsequently entering coaching and leadership, then the problem may lie in the transition pathways between playing and professional or administrative roles.

The findings also correspond with Foray et al. (2026), who reported that women coaches and referees continued to occupy marginal positions within football and encountered gendered assumptions about their competence and authority. Their participants described situations in which women were treated as outsiders within football environments and had to negotiate their legitimacy in spaces historically dominated by men. This provides a useful explanation for the Sierra Leonean finding that increased female playing participation has not resulted in equivalent representation in coaching and administration.

The lack of female role models may further reinforce this pattern. When girls and women rarely encounter female coaches, administrators, or senior officials, they may have fewer visible examples of possible career trajectories within football. Recent research on women coaches similarly identifies the importance of mentoring, professional development, organisational support, and visible pathways for progression. Therefore, the underrepresentation identified in the present study should not be interpreted simply as a numerical imbalance; it reflects a potential institutional pipeline problem in which women enter football as players but encounter barriers when attempting to progress into positions of authority.

The finding that 62.5% of clubs had no female coach or administrator is therefore particularly important. It demonstrates that gender inequality exists not only in the number of participants but also in the distribution of power within the football system. From a feminist perspective, this represents a form of institutionalised gender inequality because decision-making and technical authority remain concentrated in male-dominated structures. Addressing the problem consequently requires more than encouraging girls to play football. It requires deliberate recruitment, coaching education, mentoring, leadership development, transparent promotion pathways, and policies that actively increase women's representation in technical and administrative positions.

Female Participation as Match Officials

The study further found an approximate 5:1 male-to-female referee ratio, indicating substantial gender imbalance in football officiating. Although the number of female referees has increased, participants reported limited training opportunities, inadequate institutional support, and discriminatory attitudes from players and spectators. These findings are consistent with Drury et al. (2021), who found that women referees experienced football as a predominantly male environment in which their authority and competence could be questioned because of their gender. Their study identified gendered entry into football careers, the reinforcement of women's difference on the football field, and the need for women to develop strategies for remaining within the sport.

Similarly, Hietala and Archibald's work on barriers facing female sports officials identifies the historically male-dominated nature of refereeing and the continuing challenges of discrimination and acceptance faced by women officials. Their analysis shows that although opportunities for women referees have increased, institutional and cultural barriers remain significant. The present finding of a 5:1 male-to-female referee ratio



therefore fits a broader pattern in which women's entry into officiating has improved without producing gender parity.

The problem is not merely numerical. Female referees may have to establish their competence and authority in ways that male referees do not. Research on women referees has shown that gender stereotypes can lead to assumptions that women lack the physical, technical, or authoritative qualities required for officiating. This provides a possible explanation for the discriminatory attitudes reported by respondents in the present study. Where players and spectators question the legitimacy of female referees, women may experience additional pressure to demonstrate competence and maintain authority.

The Sierra Leonean findings therefore indicate that increasing the number of female referees requires more than recruiting women into referee education programmes. Retention and progression are equally important. Female referees need access to regular training, mentoring, assessment, opportunities for promotion, institutional protection from harassment, and clear mechanisms for reporting discriminatory behaviour. Without these measures, recruitment may increase the number of women entering refereeing without addressing the conditions that cause women to leave or remain concentrated at lower levels of officiating.

Sociocultural and Economic Factors Influencing Participation

Across the three areas examined, the findings indicate that female participation is influenced by the interaction of sociocultural, economic, institutional, and infrastructural factors. Economic hardship limits women's ability to meet the costs associated with transportation, equipment, training, and participation. Inadequate sporting facilities reduce opportunities for regular training, while insufficient sponsorship limits the financial sustainability of clubs and individual players. These constraints are particularly important in contexts where women's football receives fewer financial resources than men's football.

The findings concerning family responsibilities and cultural expectations also demonstrate that women's participation is embedded within wider social structures. Expectations that women should prioritise domestic and family responsibilities can compete with the demands of regular training, travel, competitions, and professional development. Thus, the barriers identified in the present study should not be considered independent variables operating in isolation. Economic disadvantage may reinforce cultural restrictions, while inadequate institutional support may intensify the effects of limited resources.

This interpretation is consistent with the ecological and structural perspectives evident in recent research on women coaches. Hoyer et al. (2025), for instance, found that women's experiences in sport were shaped by organisational practices, cultural expectations, support structures, and development pathways rather than by individual motivation alone. Similarly, recent research on female football coaches in Africa reports organisational constraints such as inadequate funding, limited professional development, few female role models, entrenched masculinities, and exclusion by male colleagues. These findings are particularly relevant to Sierra Leone because they demonstrate that the barriers identified in this study are not isolated national phenomena but form part of wider structural challenges affecting women's football across Africa.

Institutional Support and Development of Women's Football

The findings further suggest that institutional support plays a critical role in determining whether growth in participation can be sustained. Although respondents acknowledged increasing institutional attention to women's football, persistent shortages of facilities, equipment, sponsorship, training opportunities, and leadership pathways indicate that institutional support has not yet reached a level sufficient to eliminate gender disparities.

There are, however, indications of positive institutional development in Sierra Leone. For example, the Sierra Leone Football Association and the Confederation of African Football have supported capacity-building initiatives involving players, coaches, referees, and administrators. CAF reported that its Women's Football Capacity-building Workshop in Sierra Leone was designed to empower women and address barriers through



the development of players, coaches, referees, and administrators. Such initiatives are important because they address precisely the transition points identified in this study.

Nevertheless, isolated training programmes may not be sufficient if they are not accompanied by long-term institutional mechanisms for recruitment, retention, promotion, remuneration, and leadership representation. The findings consequently support a shift from short-term participation initiatives towards an integrated development model in which girls and women can progress from grassroots participation to playing, coaching, officiating, administration, and leadership.

Comparison with Previous Studies and Contribution of the Present Study

The findings of this study largely correspond with previous research demonstrating that women's football has expanded while gender inequalities remain embedded in the organisation of the sport. Drury et al. (2021), for example, showed that the development of women's football and increased opportunities for women and girls had not eliminated inequalities experienced by coaches and referees. Hoyer et al. (2025) similarly demonstrated that women remain underrepresented in coaching despite increased female participation in sport, with organisational culture, coaching pathways, mentoring, and development opportunities influencing women's progression.

The contribution of the present study is that it demonstrates how these broader patterns are manifested across the Sierra Leonean football system. Rather than examining only female players or only women in leadership positions, the study considers players, referees, coaches, and administrators together. This makes it possible to identify a progression gap: women's entry into football at the playing level is considerably stronger than their representation in technical, officiating, and decision-making positions. The study therefore suggests that the central challenge for women's football in Sierra Leone is no longer simply encouraging women and girls to enter the sport; it is creating sustainable pathways through which participation can develop into long-term careers and leadership.

Implications for the Development of Women's Football

The findings have important implications for policy and practice. First, football governing bodies should expand access to coaching and referee education and establish structured mentoring programmes linking emerging female professionals with experienced coaches, referees, and administrators. Second, clubs and football associations should develop transparent recruitment and promotion mechanisms to increase women's representation in technical and leadership positions. Third, investment in facilities, equipment, transportation, training opportunities, and sponsorship should be increased, particularly for clubs operating with limited resources. Fourth, gender-sensitive policies should be accompanied by effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure that women are not only recruited but also retained and promoted.

The importance of mentorship and development pathways is supported by recent research, which identifies insufficient mentorship and limited access to formal coach education as continuing barriers for women seeking coaching careers. Similarly, research on African female football coaches highlights the need to address funding shortages, restricted professional development, lack of female role models, and organisational exclusion. The evidence therefore supports a comprehensive rather than single-intervention approach to women's football development in Sierra Leone.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although the overall sample size was adequate, the number of female coaches and administrators was relatively small. Only 15 respondents represented these categories nationally, limiting the extent to which their experiences can be generalised to all female football leaders in Sierra Leone. The findings from these groups should therefore be interpreted as important contextual evidence rather than definitive estimates of the experiences of all female coaches and administrators.



Second, the study relied substantially on self-reported questionnaire responses, interviews, and focus group discussions. Because gender discrimination and inequality are socially sensitive issues, some participants may have provided socially desirable responses. Conversely, participants who had experienced discrimination may have been more likely to emphasise negative experiences. The use of multiple data-collection methods nevertheless provided an opportunity for triangulation and strengthened the interpretation of the findings.

Third, the study employed a descriptive, cross-sectional design. Consequently, the findings identify patterns and associations but cannot establish causal relationships between specific barriers and levels of female participation. For example, although inadequate facilities were identified as a constraint, the study cannot conclusively establish the extent to which improvements in facilities would independently increase female participation.

Finally, although the study covered the football regions of Sierra Leone, it focused mainly on registered participants and therefore may not fully represent women and girls who participate informally or who have withdrawn from football. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the research means that changes in female participation over time could not be measured directly. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs and larger samples of female coaches, administrators, and referees. Comparative studies across Sierra Leone's regions would also be useful for determining whether differences in infrastructure, culture, economic opportunities, and institutional support produce different participation outcomes.

With the above stated, the findings demonstrate that female participation in Sierra Leonean football is increasing but remains characterised by substantial horizontal and vertical gender inequalities. Horizontal inequality is evident in the unequal distribution of women across different roles in football, while vertical inequality is evident in the limited progression of women from playing into coaching, administration, refereeing, and leadership. The evidence from this study, when considered alongside previous research, suggests that these inequalities cannot be explained solely by women's individual choices or levels of interest in football. They are also produced and reinforced by organisational practices, socio-cultural expectations, economic limitations, inadequate infrastructure, restricted development pathways, and gendered perceptions of competence and authority.

The central implication is therefore that increasing the number of female players is necessary but insufficient for achieving gender equality in football. Sustainable development requires an integrated system that supports women throughout the football pathway from grassroots participation to playing, coaching, officiating, administration, and leadership. This conclusion is consistent with the broader literature, which demonstrates that women's football can experience substantial growth while women remain marginalised in positions where resources, authority, and decision-making are concentrated. For Sierra Leone, meaningful progress will consequently depend on combining increased participation with institutional reform, investment in infrastructure and human resources, mentoring, professional development, equitable recruitment and promotion, and stronger representation of women in football governance.

SUMMARY

This study examined female participation in football in Sierra Leone across four areas: playing, refereeing, coaching, and administration. The findings established that women's participation has increased, particularly among players, with approximately 1,000 registered female players across 40 clubs and representative teams. However, this progress has not translated into comparable representation in other areas of the sport. Approximately 62.5% of the clubs surveyed had neither a female coach nor a female administrator, while the male-to-female referee ratio was approximately 5:1, demonstrating persistent gender disparities in technical, officiating, and leadership positions. The study further established that female participation and progression were constrained by interconnected socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and infrastructural factors, including gender stereotypes, family and cultural expectations, inadequate facilities, limited training opportunities, insufficient sponsorship, weak institutional support, and limited access to mentoring and professional development.



The study contributes to the scientific body of knowledge by demonstrating that female participation in football should not be measured solely by the number of women entering the sport as players. Participation also involves progression into coaching, officiating, administration, and decision-making positions. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence from football stakeholders across Sierra Leone, the study provides context-specific evidence that complements existing international and African research on gender inequality in sport. Its principal contribution is the identification of a participation–progression gap, whereby growth in women's playing opportunities has not been accompanied by equivalent advancement into technical and leadership roles. This finding extends the understanding of gender inequality in football by showing that sustainable gender inclusion requires not only increased entry into the sport but also equitable access to resources, training, career pathways, institutional support, and decision-making opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that female participation in football in Sierra Leone has increased, particularly at the playing level, but remains uneven across coaching, refereeing, administration, and leadership. Despite the growth in female players, women continue to face limited opportunities for progression into technical and decision-making positions. The study found that participation and career advancement are constrained by interconnected socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and infrastructural factors, including gender stereotypes, discrimination, inadequate facilities, limited financial support, insufficient training opportunities, and weak institutional support.

The study further concludes that achieving gender equity in Sierra Leonean football requires moving beyond increasing the number of female players. Greater investment in facilities, training, mentorship, financial support, and leadership development is needed to create sustainable pathways for women to progress from playing into coaching, refereeing, administration, and decision-making positions. Coordinated action by football authorities, government, clubs, communities, and development partners is therefore essential for the sustained development of women's football.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Football authorities should improve access to adequate training grounds, changing facilities, equipment, and other sporting infrastructure for female players, particularly in areas where inadequate facilities were identified as a major constraint to participation.

The Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA), government, clubs, and potential sponsors should increase financial support for women's football to address the economic difficulties, inadequate resources, and limited sponsorship opportunities identified by participants.

Regular coaching and referee education programmes should be provided for women to address the limited training opportunities identified among female coaches, referees, and players. Such programmes should provide clear opportunities for professional development and progression.

Football administrators should strengthen institutional mechanisms that promote women's participation and progression in football. Particular attention should be given to increasing women's representation in coaching, administration, and refereeing, where the study found significant underrepresentation.

Football clubs and the SLFA should establish mentorship opportunities that connect aspiring female players, coaches, referees, and administrators with experienced women in the sport. This would help address the limited availability of female role models identified in the study.

Football stakeholders should implement targeted awareness programmes within communities and football clubs to address gender stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes, and perceptions of football as predominantly a



male activity. Such interventions should also encourage greater family and community support for women's participation.

Football organisations should provide equitable opportunities for qualified women to occupy coaching, administrative, refereeing, and decision-making positions. This is particularly necessary given the finding that 62.5% of the clubs surveyed had neither a female coach nor a female administrator.

The SLFA and relevant football bodies should increase opportunities for women to enter and progress in refereeing through regular training, mentorship, institutional support, and fair access to officiating assignments. This is necessary given the study's finding of an approximately 5:1 male-to-female referee ratio.

Existing women's clubs, youth competitions, and other programmes that have contributed to the growth of female playing participation should be strengthened and sustained. Particular emphasis should be placed on creating pathways through which female players can progress into coaching, refereeing, administration, and other technical roles.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1 Show number of registered female Football clubs in Sierra Leone

REGION	NAME OF CLUB	TOTAL NUMBER OF PLAYERS
WESTERN REGION (URBAN)	FC Kallon	30
	Correctional Service FC	30
	Sierra Leone Police FC	30
	Sierra Leone U-17 Women's National Team	25
	Sierra Leone U-20 Women's National Team	25
	SLFA U-15 Girls Youth League Teams	25
	SLFA U-17 Girls Youth League Teams	25
	Rising Queens F.C	25
	Ports Authority F.C Youth Teams (Girls U-15)	25
	VEM Buck Girls F.C	25
WESTERN (RURAL)	Ascentionians F.C	25



NORTH-WEST REGION	Sella Queens	25
	Katara Ladies	20
	Patricia Umu	30
	Koya Queens	30
	Future/Lungi/Marampa Youth Queens	25
	Central Queens	20
	Vem Buck FC	30
NORTH-EAST REGION	Mena Queens	30
	German Queens	20
	Masoya Queens	20
	Koinadugu Albitaya Queens	25
	Kabombor Queens	20
	Pandoi Academy	20
SOUTHERN REGION	Mogbewmo Queens	30
	Ram Kay FC	30
	Malen Queens F.C	25
	Bah Female F. C	25
	J C C FC	25
	Tikonko F.C	20
	Shebro Queens F.C	20
	Jong Queens F.C	20
	Moriba Town Queens F.C	20
	Kayamba Ladies F.C	20
	Rosarian Queens F.C	25
EASTERN REGION	Malema Queens	30
	Kahunla Queens	30
	Local Female/Community Teams	25
	Diamond Queens	30
	KDFA Female Teams	20
	GRAND TOTAL	1000

SOURCE: SLFA Office Freetown and branch office in Makeni, Bo and Pujehun