During the postwar rebuilding and reconciliation efforts of many countries, affirmative action policies are put in place to help ensure minority groups, such as women, are adequately accounted for and represented in political and public affairs.

In Sierra Leone’s case, however, such gender-equality measures were largely resisted until eight years after the end of their civil war. There were some policy initiatives that actively tried to improve women’s empowerment within the country’s local and national government structures – notably during the 2000-2004 period – but it was not until 2010 that (then) President Ernest Koroma finally acquiesced to demands for 30% female representation in politics and promised it would be included in the following electoral cycle (2012-2017).

Today, nearly five years later, women’s role and representation in the political arena is still far from reaching its desired goal. Among other factors, this is largely a result of entrenched cultural and traditional belief systems and practices, coupled with the limited political will to transform the role and position of women in Sierra Leone.

Consequently, there is still much work to do in engaging the state and political actors to effectively address the needs gaps in the promotion of women’s participation at the district and community governance levels.

Action Plus, an organization working to support the welfare of poor and vulnerable groups and communities, embarked on an 18-month project to support a broad range of women leaders – from elected representatives, activists, gender experts and CSOs – to engage with the government on the development of gender-sensitive policies.

They set out three broad activities, including six quarterly reviews, formulation and advocacy sessions with community actors and policy makers to develop practical recommendations on issues such as inheritance, succession, sexual and gender-based violence and property rights.

Three workshops with 50 elected women leaders (including women parliamentarians, counselors, members of chiefdom, ward and village development committees and women’s group leaders) helped train on the core functions of parliament and local council in Kenema and Kailahun districts. Three other seminars targeting 60 decision-makers were used to enhance public awareness on gender issues and improve communication and leadership skills.

Doris E. Kalil is Regional Coordinator for the Women’s Forum in the Eastern Region:

“The training has increased my knowledge and capacity on issues of communication, advocacy and leadership. As head of Women’s Forum in the Eastern Province, I am using these skills to promote the interest and welfare of women in governance and providing them from violence. Furthermore, the knowledge acquired from the training has been passed on to other women and has helped me sensitize them on their rights, roles and responsibilities in the governance of their communities. During the Ebola outbreak, we went round communities in Kenema sensitizing people on best health practices and acceptance of survivors.”

In any country, it is difficult to incorporate gender and women’s rights values into governance structures through policy change. In a country such as Sierra Leone, which remains largely patriarchal in most areas and is compounded by widespread poverty, this task becomes even more challenging. There are several other factors to consider, namely the risk that mere lip service would be paid to such initiatives or that resistance would be felt by political and traditional authorities.

Action Plus ensures that men at the district and community levels continue to play a central role in the design and implementation of project activities. They engage community structures to make commitments followed by concrete and regular monitoring actions to facilitate women’s participation in the projects, as well as community-level engagement and processes.

Action Plus

Addressing barriers that limit women’s participation in Sierra Leone’s governance
Violence against women remains a serious problem in Guinea affecting an estimated 80% of the female population. It is also a highly sensitive topic—a cultural taboo to discuss—which means it is often overlooked or ignored both publicly and privately. For a country that witnessed an atrocity of unprecedented scale during the September 2009 massacre, during which at least 150 people were murdered by the presidential guard and scores of women were raped and sexually abused, the issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a grave matter that persists often without redress.

Guinea has several legal and institutional instruments in place to defend the rights of women, including being signatory to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and has a Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Children. Nevertheless, the lack of awareness and understanding of SGBV coupled with deeply engrained socio-cultural norms and impunity mean it is both widespread and difficult to counter.

In January 2010, a national strategy against SGBV was adopted. This came on the heels of a country-wide study conducted the year before that revealed that an estimated 86–93% of women in Guinea experience some form of violence. In reaction to these alarming numbers, Alliance des Femmes pour l’Egalite et le Genre en Guinee (AFFEGGUI), began sensitization campaigns to increase women’s awareness of their rights.

In 2013, they began a year-long project to promote and protect the rights of women in the regions of Mamou and Labe, where the prevalence of SGBV is the highest. They created a booklet on the legal provisions against SGBV and presented these in the form of training sessions targeting the primary “awareness-raising agents”: women.

They also opened two information centers to provide counselling and legal assistance, which are run by women beneficiaries of AFFEGGUI’s sensitization training.

One of the key results of these efforts has been the empowerment of women to actively seek support and justice. In both Mamou and Labe, individual women have come forward to seek judicial and medical help that led to legal action against their perpetrators. This in itself marks a notable step forward, as prior to this program it was essentially unheard of for victims of violence to speak out in Guinea.
Côte d’Ivoire, as in a majority of West African countries, has all the legal tools in place to guarantee the principles of equality and non-discrimination between men and women. Gender rights are safeguarded by the Constitution, which states that “All human beings are born free and equal before the law. They enjoy the right to liberty, to the development of their personality and respect for their dignity. These rights are inviolable.” But having the legal frameworks in place and ensuring they are respected in everyday life are two different aspects. Unfortunately, in the case of Côte d’Ivoire, a large proportion of women (and especially those living in rural parts in the north and west of the country) are subject to all kinds of abuse. This ranges from female genital cutting (FGC), early and forced marriage, and physical and verbal violence – all of which are backed by traditional beliefs that position women as subordinate to men. These women may be subject to the will of their husbands, or any man for that matter.

In 2013, l’organisation nationale de l’enfant, la femme et la famille (ONEF) launched a two-year project targeting 47 villages in the Mankono department in the Midwest region of the country. This area was selected after a 2009 ONEF study determined that women in this area were particularly lacking in rights awareness and promotion. ONEF’s project put in place literacy, outreach and advocacy activities targeting men, women, traditional leaders and local authorities to help educate on women’s rights and child (girls’) protection.

Four women who participate in the ONEF project share their own stories:

**Tiene Magai**

My life is better today thanks to the ONEF project, because I got to keep what was left to me in my late husband’s will. My name is Tiene Magai, and I’m from Kamoro village in the prefecture of Bouandougou.

In 2003, when my husband died, this happened to coincide with a mass awareness campaign in our local village on the topic of women’s rights and inheritance. This awareness-building workshop prompted my late husband’s parents to agree to leave me a hectare of his cashew field. Today I’ve remarried in another village, Guesso Bonosso (Bouandougou), and I continue to reap the benefits of what I’ve inherited. This would have been impossible before the project.

**Fatoumata Kamagate**

My name is Mrs. Fatoumata Kamagate, I live in Bouandougou in the department of Mankono. I had always hoped to work in small business, but my husband forbade me saying that my place is at home and to take care of the family.

But now my life has changed thanks to the project of ONEF. My husband allowed me to fulfill my dream and even gave me 100,000 CFA ($200 USD) after he sold his cashew farm in March 2014. I sell attiééké, the local Ivorian grain. I am very fulfilled and will never cease to thank ONEF enough for helping me.

**Nakissi Kande**

My name is Akissi Kande and I am President of the Village Women of Ouedallah, a sub-prefecture of Tiéningboué. At my old age (of 62), the ONEF project helped me realize one of my wishes, which is to learn how to write my name.

I thank them with all my heart because through literacy I know how to read and write my name; I can dial phone numbers and I no longer need my children to help me. In addition, it allows me to call them to get news when they are too busy to come visit. Again, thank you.

**Assita Cé**

I’m Assita, a student in the second level of High School in Tiéningboué. I am 17 years old and my parents wanted to give me away in marriage, which meant I had to stop studying. But now, thanks to this project my father gave up this idea, and I continue to go to school. I am very happy because I intend to do a lot of schooling.
Association des Femmes Juristes de Côte d’Ivoire (AFJCI)

Defending against gender-based violence in Côte d’Ivoire

Côte d’Ivoire’s decade long socio-political crisis plunged the country into a brutal conflict that had particularly nefarious effects on women. Gender-based violence, in any form, is an infringement on human rights, and the protection of its victims, mainly women and children, requires strong response systems and processes. Today, in post conflict Côte d’Ivoire, sexual violence and other rights violations continue to be a prevalent issue. Strengthening justice mechanisms, empowerment initiatives and restitution for survivors are all part of action plans needed to address and promote human rights, and the protection of its victims, especially women in Côte d’Ivoire is severely lacking. Assessment reports over the past few years show that women in the suburban community of Abobo and the areas around Abidjan’s city center, Plateau, are regularly denied their rights and subject to violence. This shows that sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) is not an individual problem, but a social, economic and political problem of national proportions that harms families across generations; impoverishes communities; and reinforces other forms of violence and inequalities. This has implications for the rule of law, governance and democracy in Côte d’Ivoire. Further aggravating this situation is the fact that most of these women are ignorant about their human rights or are terrified to claim their rights.

In 2014, the nonprofit Association des Femmes Juristes de Côte d’Ivoire (AFJCI) began a project to strengthen and revitalize its frontline legal services for women and children, including providing legal aid and psychosocial support in Abidjan-Plateau and Abobo (which suffered some of the worst post-electoral violence). They embarked on an 18-month initiative to train legal advisors, conduct awareness campaigns and educate the public, provide legal aid assistance, open a new clinic in Abobo and develop an Ivorian-specific paralegal training manual.

Three beneficiaries of the AFJCI project share their own stories:

**Assa Fabrice Assa**

My name is Assa Fabrice Assa and I am a paralegal on the AFJCI project. I participated in the general public sensitization campaigns, but my real role is as an actor in our theater group. I also write the skits for the group and do public presentations every Thursday on topics such as the various matrimonial regimes and the new Ivorian law on marriage. I also distribute flyers. What I’ve noticed from this work is that people tend to approach me to get more information and even thank me directly for helping them better understand their options and the legal implications.

On a personal level, this project has helped me a lot – first, by allowing me to gain legal knowledge and second, motivating me to continue my studies to become a lawyer. It has also helped build my confidence in speaking before an audience and communicating more easily. In the group, colleagues affectionately call me “the private secretary” of the Coordinator since I am always available to help on anything with the project. It goes straight to my heart because I like to put myself at the service of people, earn their trust.

**Edith Kouame**

My name is Edith Kouame. I live in commonlaw with my partner and am a mother of two. I am a paralegal and was an actress in a theatre group that did public awareness raising campaigns with AFJCI. I played several roles – even when I was sick – and found it so gratifying. I saw the profound effect we were having on the public – they got very emotional after our sketches, which made it the right time to then delve into the issues of violence against women at much greater depth.

As an actress, the first time I played with the cast it was in the role of a widow whose in-laws took all the property left to her by her late-husband. We were all so surprised at the end to see that women in the audience had tears in their eyes. Many were remembering painful memories of when their own husbands died. These are the moments that make it so rewarding – people congratulating us afterwards and agreeing to break their own silences by going to see the women lawyers association. This project allowed me to grow in maturity and it opened my mind. I was able to assert my rights to my landlord. When I presented him with my own paralegal status and a copy of the text of legislation on my lease, I had peace since that day I assure you.

As a battered woman myself and a victim of all kinds of violence, the father of my children finally became aware of the evil he was putting me through and pulled himself together. Since December 25, 2013 I have not suffered a single beating from him. We are trying as much as possible to save our relationship for the good of our children. I was also able to convince my cousin to go to the legal clinic to seek advice. She got pregnant from a Lebanese man who refused to recognize the child. With the advice of the clinic, she was able to assert her rights for him to assume financial responsibility by granting alimony.

**Delphine Dago**

My name is Delphine Dago. I am the wife of Tanoh and a mother of three. We live in Abobo where I work as a paralegal, helping sensitize the public. I especially like doing awareness-building going door-to-door. Very recently, I visited the families in my neighborhood and surrounding neighborhoods to make them aware of their rights, and especially gender-based violence. This direct approach has helped build my reputation in the community. When women in my neighborhood have problems, they approach me for legal help. I’ve helped one lady get her baby’s birth certificate from the father, who refused maternity. With the Coordinator of the Legal Clinic of Abobo’s intervention, the father finally recognized the child, allowing them to take his last name and even make the monthly child payments of 20,000 FCFA ($40 USD) to the mother.

On a personal level, this project has brought me legal knowledge, because now I know my rights and duties as a citizen and as a wife. Moreover, in the neighborhood when I pass they call me “Madame Justice”. My husband now knows that he cannot violate my rights, as he did in the past.

Awareness training by AFJCI in Côte d’Ivoire.