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The State of Female Leadership in SAI Sierra Leone

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents an analytical reflection on the challenges and opportunities for increasing female participation in leadership within **SAI Sierra Leone**, the impact of relevant norms and policies, and the institution's existing measures to promote equity. Drawing on insights from ProInter's workshops, particularly the increasing global emphasis on gender equality and inclusive governance, has placed Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) at the center of advancing accountability frameworks that reflect the needs of both women and men. In recent years, national and international commitments, especially the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), INTOSAI mandates, and the UNDP Gender Equality Seal, have encouraged SAIs to promote greater participation of women in leadership, strengthen gender-responsive auditing practices, and embed equity into institutional culture. Against this backdrop, the **ProInter Programme-Women in Leadership** provided an important platform for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and reflection on how leadership intersects with gender equality, diversity, inclusion, and public sector oversight on gender-responsive budgeting, leadership development, and the UNDP Gender Equality Seal. The report examines how both structural and cultural factors influence women's pathways to leadership. It also highlights practical experiences from external control activities focused on gender equality, as well as the efforts required to integrate a gender lens into audit planning, execution, and reporting.

The objective of this work is to analyze the current landscape, identify gaps and opportunities, and propose actions that strengthen SAI Sierra Leone's ability to advance women's empowerment internally and through its oversight mandate. This reflection aligns with the ProInter guidelines and contributes to ongoing institutional efforts to build a more inclusive, equitable, and gender-responsive public accountability system. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that leadership within the SAI and in the broader public sector embodies the principles of fairness, representation, and sustainable development.

DEVELOPMENT

1. Contextualization: The State of Female Leadership in SAI Sierra Leone

Female participation in leadership within SAI Sierra Leone has gradually improved over the past decade, yet structural barriers remain. Historically, public-sector leadership in Sierra Leone has been male-dominated due to cultural norms, limited opportunities for women in technical fields, and insufficient mentorship structures. Within the SAI, women are increasingly represented in middle management roles such as team leads, audit supervisors, and divisional heads, but their presence in senior and strategic positions remains significantly lower.

National policies, including the **Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (GEWE Act, 2022)**, have created new opportunities by mandating gender representation standards, promoting workplace equality, and strengthening protections against discrimination. Regionally, AFROSAI-E continues to encourage gender mainstreaming in SAI's governance systems, while INTOSAI frameworks emphasize inclusiveness as a principle of good public auditing. These developments create an enabling environment for SAI Sierra Leone, but effective implementation requires internal structural adjustments, leadership commitment, and sustained capacity building.

2. Theoretical Framework: Gender, Leadership, and Institutional Transformation

Gender equality in leadership is not merely a representation issue, it influences organizational culture, decision-making, productivity, and oversight quality. The ProInter course reinforced that **leadership begins with self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the ability to motivate and engage others**, rather than occupying a formal position. Women leaders often face the “double bind”, expected to be assertive yet judged negatively for assertiveness, reflecting deep-rooted social norms.

The **sociological threshold of 20%**, as presented during the programme, explains that minorities must reach at least this proportion to influence institutional culture meaningfully. This concept is relevant to SAI Sierra Leone, where increasing the percentage of women in senior roles would enable stronger collective influence on audit priorities, strategic planning, and workplace equity.

Additionally, the UNDP Gender Equality Seal provides a structured model for institutional transformation through capacity building, accountability mechanisms, HR reforms, and gender-responsive practices. This framework supports SAIs in aligning with SDGs 5 and 16, while promoting ethical leadership and effective public oversight.

3. Relevant Policies, Laws, and Regional/International Norms

Several policy instruments shape SAI Sierra Leone's approach to gender equality:

- **National Frameworks**

GEWE Act (2022): Mandates gender representation, prohibits workplace discrimination, and encourages institutions to adopt gender-sensitive practices.

National Gender Policy: Provides a roadmap for mainstreaming gender into public systems, including oversight bodies.

- **Regional Frameworks**

AFROSAI-E Gender Strategy promotes institutional equity and gender-responsive audit methodologies.

ECOWAS Gender Policy encourages state institutions to advance women's leadership in governance.

- **International Norms**

SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and **SDG 16 (Strong Institutions)** set global expectations for inclusive governance.

UNDP Gender Equality Seal offers a certification process that integrates gender across HR, governance, audits, and budgeting.

INTOSAI-P 12 emphasizes that SAIs must model integrity, inclusiveness, and transparency.

These frameworks collectively influence both the internal operations of SAI Sierra Leone and its external auditing responsibilities.

4. Internal Measures of SAI Sierra Leone

SAI Sierra Leone has begun taking steps to strengthen diversity and inclusion:

4.1 Workforce Development and Training

- Regular capacity-building programs encourage women to pursue specialist audit areas such as financial, performance, IT, and compliance auditing.
- Participation in regional programs like ProInter, AFROSAI-E governing board meeting. etc. enhances women's leadership and technical expertise.

4.2 Equity and Gender Committees

- The institution has initiated informal gender discussions and HR-led sensitization activities.
- Women officers increasingly contribute to audit planning, execution, reporting and quality assurance reviews.

4.3 HR and Recruitment Measures

- Efforts are underway to ensure transparent, merit-based recruitment and promotion processes.
- Women are encouraged to take up acting leadership roles, which build confidence and experience.

While progress is visible, the institution still requires more structured gender policies, dedicated mentorship programs, and systematic gender mainstreaming across its governance processes.

5. Case Study / Practical Experience: Gender-Responsive Oversight

SAI Sierra Leone has undertaken select oversight activities relevant to gender equality. For instance, audits assessing service delivery in health and education sectors have highlighted gender disparities in access, safety, and resource allocation. These findings informed recommendations on improving access for women and girls, addressing staff shortages, and ensuring equitable distribution of public resources.

However, the institution has not yet fully adopted gender-responsive audit frameworks. The insights from ProInter, particularly the methodologies shared on **gender-based violence**

audits, gender-responsive budgeting, and coordinated audits in AFROSAI-E, provide practical guidance that can significantly improve the SAI's external control activities.

6. Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Leadership in SAI Sierra Leone

6.1 Main Challenges

- Cultural and societal expectations are reducing women's access to leadership pathways.
- Underrepresentation in strategic roles inhibits the ability to reach the 20% influence threshold.
- Balancing family responsibilities with demanding audit workloads.
- Lack of formal gender equality policies within the SAI.

6.2 Key Opportunities

- The GEWE Act 2022 creates legal backing for increased female leadership.
- ProInter training strengthens women's leadership skills, confidence, and networks.
- Implementing the UNDP Gender Equality Seal can institutionalize gender policies.
- AFROSAI-E tools provide gender-responsive audit templates ready for adoption.
- Greater female leadership can enhance audit diversity, innovation, and organizational culture.

CONCLUSION

This analytical reflection demonstrates that advancing female leadership within SAI Sierra Leone is both an institutional necessity and an opportunity for strengthening public accountability. While progress has been made in increasing women's participation and access to training opportunities, significant gaps remain, particularly in senior leadership representation. A compliance audit on gender may be considered necessary especially on the implementation of national gender laws and the formalization of diversity and equity policies.

National frameworks such as the GEWE Act 2022, regional strategies under AFROSAI-E, and international programs such as the UNDP Gender Equality Seal all provide a strong foundation for meaningful change. The lessons from the ProInter Programme highlight that leadership development begins with individual empowerment but must be supported by institutional transformation. Increasing women's representation to the sociological threshold of 20%, mainstreaming gender into audit processes, and establishing structured mentorship and equity programs are essential steps for the SAI.

Moving forward, SAI Sierra Leone can strengthen gender equality by adopting gender-sensitive HR policies, initiating the Gender Equality Seal process, expanding training opportunities, and embedding gender audit analysis into its audit cycle. These actions will not only promote women's empowerment but also enhance audit quality, institutional integrity, and alignment with SDGs 5 and 16. With commitment, collaboration, and continuous learning, the SAI can become a model of inclusive leadership and equitable public oversight.

REFERENCES

- GEWE Act, 2022 (Sierra Leone).
- AFROSAI-E Gender Mainstreaming Strategy.
- UNDP Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions Framework.
- INTOSAI-P 12: The Value and Benefits of SAIs.
- ProInter Programme-Women in Leadership Training Materials (2025).
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 and SDG 16).
- Workshop presentations and notes from TCU, UNDP, and AFROSAI-E.