Advancing women’s financial inclusion in Sierra Leone: A strategic analysis and action plan

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Photos from “Women’s access to finance” roundtable, June 2025

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

actb	ACTB Savings and Loans
ACF	Agricultural Credit Fund
BDS	business development services
BSL	Bank of Sierra Leone
CAC	Corporate Affairs Commission
CB	community banks
COMFI	credit-only microfinance institutions
CRB	Credit Reference Bureau
CU	credit union
DTMFI	deposit-taking micro finance institution
FSA	financial services association
FSP	financial services provider
GEWE	gender equality and women's empowerment
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFC	International Finance Corporation
KYC	know your customer
MFI	microfinance institution
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs
NFIS	National Financial Inclusion Strategy
NSFI	National Strategy for Financial Inclusion
NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RCB	Rokel Commercial Bank
RFI	Rural finance institutions
SLADF	Sierra Leone Agribusiness Development Fund
SLCB	Sierra Leone Commercial Bank
SME	small and medium enterprises
SMEDA	Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VSLA	Village savings and loans association
WoE	Women-owned enterprises

Executive summary

Women in Sierra Leone face significant barriers to financial inclusion, limiting their ability to start or expand businesses, invest in education and improve their livelihoods.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Social institutions and Gender Index 2019, 1 put Sierra Leone among the 10% of countries worldwide that exhibit the highest levels of gender discrimination.

This Women's Financial Inclusion desk review study was commissioned by Invest Salone. It seeks to explore the multifaceted challenges that hinder women's financial inclusion and identify the key enablers that could bridge the gap. The report is also intended to aid the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MGCA).

This report aims to provide insights and actionable strategies that the MGCA can implement to enhance women's access to finance. The desk review focused on:

- The financial sector ecosystem and how various key actors affect access to finance for women
- Identifying and understanding the barriers and enablers in financial access
- Identifying and assessing available financial products and services for women
- Recommendations for enhancing financial inclusion for women, with a particular focus on those engaged in agriculture.

Study approach and report structure

Since women-owned businesses do not operate in isolation, the study went deeper by examining the whole financial sector ecosystem and the stakeholders that directly and indirectly affect access to finance generally and for women, specifically.

After providing some background in Section 2, this report comprises reviews of:

- The legal and regulatory environment (Sections 3)
- The supply side, i.e. financial institutions/providers of finance (Section 4)
- The demand-side, i.e. the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) section 5
- Women-owned businesses (Section 6)
- Barriers and Enablers of Women's Access to finance – Literature Review (section 7)
- Comparisons with other African countries (Section 8).

From these, the report provides key findings and recommendations (Sections 9 and 10).

Key findings

There were perhaps few, if any, surprises in the key findings.

The findings included non-gender-specific challenges, such as stringent collateral requirements, high cost of borrowing, inappropriate products and so forth. Gender-specific challenges included

[1] Ferrant, G., L. Fuiret and E. Zambrano (2020) *The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2019: A revised framework for better advocacy.* OECD Development Centre Working Papers, No. 342.

discrimination that prevents women from owning assets (such as land) and cultural practices such as early marriage that limits access to education. Women generally are also less financially literate. All of these lead to lack of confidence in approaching financial institutions for financial services.

The study found that steps have been taken to counter some of these challenges. These include legislation such as the recent Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act 2022 (GEWE) Act, the three 'Gender Acts',2 the Customary Land Rights Act 2022 and the establishment of the Collateral Registry to lessen the collateral burden.

There is a wide range and fairly high number of financial service providers (not limited to credit) ranging from commercial banks to mobile money operators and even discount houses.

However, gender disparities exist largely because:

- Most women operate as micro and small enterprises
- The types of entities which serve this target group, such as microfinance institutions (MFIs), financial services associations (FSAs) and village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), though operating in rural areas, have limited funds for lending
- Commercial banks, which are adequately capitalised, prefer to cater for medium and large businesses (whether women-owned or not) and very few of them have women-specific financial products.

The barriers are categorised as:

- Lack of collateral and credit history
- Lack of financial literacy and awareness
- Gender bias in financial institutions.

The enablers are grouped as:

- Microfinance and community-based initiatives
- Digital financial services
- Policy and regulatory reforms.

This review also examined access to finance in three other African countries: Nigeria, Ghana and Rwanda. The findings were that, not unexpectedly, the challenges of access to finance for women were not unique to Sierra Leone and that these three countries face or have faced, similar problems. Rwanda, in particular, has made great strides in increasing access to finance for women.

Recommendations

Recommendations are summarised below.

1. Undertake a more comprehensive study on the subject of women's access to finance

Objective: To establish a definitive understanding of the issues affecting women's access to financial services and how best to address them for meaningful results.

[2] The Domestic Violence Act 2007; The Devolution of Estates Act 2007 and The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009.

Suggested actions to include:

- Disaggregate women-owned (and all) businesses by size, i.e. micro, small and medium. MGCA should work with the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SMEDA) on this initiative
- Disaggregate data on women by location, i.e. rural and urban.

2. Improve funding and other support from the Ministry of Finance (MoF), the Bank of Sierra Leone (BSL) and development partners

Objective: To create funding mechanisms led by the MoF and BSL that enhance financial access for women.

Suggested actions to include:

- Establish a Credit Guarantee Fund to incentivise financial service providers (FSPs) to offer women-specific loans. Development partners should be included in this initiative
- Investigate the processes involved in and the possibility of creating a local currency Gender Bond. Again, development partners could be included in this initiative
- Seek financial support for the capitalisation of non-bank FSPs (e.g. MFIs, FSAs, VSLAs, etc.) especially those that serve rural areas to enable them to expand their services and lending abilities.

3. Develop BSL policies on financial products targeting women

Objective: To develop policies through the BSL that encourage financial institutions to offer tailored financial products for women, supporting increased access to finance for women-owned businesses.

Suggested actions to include:

- Mandate financial institutions to offer products specifically catering to women-owned businesses. This must consider business sizes
- Encourage FSPs, especially commercial banks, to make use of the Collateral Registry for female borrowers
- Provide incentives to institutions offering gender-sensitive products.
- Reduce the capital requirements to establish a women's bank or encourage starting as a deposit-taking MFI[3]
- Mandate periodic submission by BSL-regulated FSPs of gender-disaggregated, financial and non-financial data on financial inclusion from banks and all BSL-regulated financial institutions.

4. Tailor financial products for distinct categories of women-owned businesses

Objective: To develop a categorisation system for women-owned businesses that enables financial institutions to tailor financial products and services to meet the distinct needs of each category, thereby supporting more effective and inclusive financial access for women entrepreneurs.

[3] The Women's Green Bank is in the process of being set by Ms. Naasu Fofanah.

Suggested actions to include:

- Develop tailored financial products specific to each category of women-owned businesses, including larger, small-scale, subsistence and cooperative groups
- Develop sensitisation and capacity-building programmes for FSPs on gender-specific financial needs.

5. Leverage technology

Objective: To expand mobile banking and digital financial services specifically for rural women by leveraging partnerships with FinTech companies, the BSL and telecommunications providers to create accessible, gender-responsive financial solutions.

Suggested actions to include:

- Collaborate with FinTech companies through BSL's Sandbox to develop digital solutions tailored to women's financial needs in various economic sectors
- Encourage telecommunications providers, such as Africell and Orange, to integrate mobile banking solutions with options for short-term, low-interest loans for women entrepreneurs
- Counter infrastructural challenges with technology and agency banking to ensure more appropriate and expanded delivery of financial services to remote locations.

6. Enhance financial literacy programmes through partnerships and collaborations

Objective: To empower women with the knowledge and skills to use financial products and services effectively through collaboration with BSL, between financial institutions, government bodies, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and development agencies.

Suggested actions to include:

- Working with the BSL's national strategy for financial inclusion (NSFI) programme, implement comprehensive financial literacy programmes covering essential financial management to advanced financial planning training
- Tailor financial education materials and training sessions to address the specific challenges faced by women
- Promote awareness and outreach programmes to inform women about available financial products
- Collaborate with NGOs, community organisations and FSPs to deliver these programmes at the grassroots level
- Increase outreach and support for women-led agricultural and business activities.

7. Advocate for policy reforms and supportive frameworks

Objective: To engage policymakers to create supportive gender-specific legislation and regulatory frameworks.

Suggested actions to include:

- Advocate for policy reforms that empower women generally, giving them the confidence and self-assurance to seek financial services
- Push for the codification of cultural laws and norms that disenfranchise women.

8. Monitor and evaluate

Objective: To continually assess the impact of financial products on women's financial inclusion and economic empowerment.

Suggested actions to include:

- Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the effectiveness of financial products and programmes
- Collect and analyse data to refine and improve offerings based on women's feedback and evolving needs
- Regularly review and adjust strategies to ensure that financial products and services meet women's needs effectively
- Share findings widely with all stakeholders at least, regionally and even across the African continent.

1. Introduction

Women's access to finance is a critical driver of social and economic empowerment and sustainable development, yet significant disparities especially between genders persist, particularly in low-income countries such as Sierra Leone. Despite their vital roles in households and in the economy, women in Sierra Leone face significant barriers to financial inclusion, limiting their ability to start or expand businesses, invest in education and improve their livelihoods. Apart from gender biases, socio-cultural norms and structural limitations within the financial sector compound these barriers.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019[4] put Sierra Leone among the 10% of countries worldwide that exhibit the highest levels of gender discrimination with an assessment of "high" or "very high" in all of the categories evaluated based on four social institutions – discriminatory family code, restricted physical integrity, restricted resources and assets, and restricted civil liberties

This Women's Financial Inclusion report, commissioned by Invest Salone, seeks to explore the multifaceted challenges that hinder women's financial inclusion and identify the key enablers that could bridge the gap. The scope of this research encompasses a comprehensive desk review to identify the primary factors enabling and blocking women's access to finance, a sample mapping[5] of existing financial products and services to uncover gaps and opportunities, and the development of strategic recommendations to expand and deepen women's access to finance, with a particular focus on the agricultural sector.

In a 2023 report,[6] the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported that "women represent 52 percent of the population in rural areas" in Sierra Leone. The agricultural sector is critical for Sierra Leone's economic development and the role of women is crucial to that sector. The agricultural sector has historically experienced poor access to finance, especially at the on-farm stage of the agricultural value chain, which is where women are most involved. The dual issue of the economic sector and gender exacerbates the difficulties of women's access to finance. Further, rural businesses generally also have poor access to finance.

Importantly, since women-owned businesses do not operate in isolation, the study went deeper, examining the whole financial sector ecosystem, to consider the stakeholders that directly and indirectly affect access to finance generally. Similarly, business size and geographic locations, especially of women-owned businesses, were examined.

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[4] Ferrant, G., L. Fuiret and E. Zambrano (2020) *The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2019: A revised framework for better advocacy.* OECD Development Centre Working Papers, No. 342.
[5] As exclusively desktop research and given more than a hundred financial institutions exist in Sierra Leone, only a sample mapping could be done.
[6] UNDP (2023) *Barriers and Enablers of Women's Participation in Revenue Generation in Sierra Leone.*

1.1 Objectives and scope

This report aims to provide insights and actionable strategies that the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MGCA) can implement to enhance women's access to finance. Particular focus is on:

- Exploring the financial sector ecosystem and how various key actors affect access to finance for women
- Identifying and understanding the barriers and enablers in financial access
- Identifying and assessing available financial products and services for women
- Making recommendations for enhancing financial inclusion for women, with a particular focus on those engaged in agriculture.

2. Background

In recent years, the Government of Sierra Leone and various private sector and international partners have recognised the need to address gender disparities in financial access. The **Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act 2022**, the **Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Regulations 2024** and the **National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (NSFI) 2022–2026** seek to improve women's financial access as a pathway to gender equity and economic empowerment. However, translating these laws and policies into actionable and impactful change remains a challenge, with significant gaps in practical implementation and support structures.

Women in Sierra Leone, play a crucial role in households and the economy.[7] The challenges to accessing finance are well known and include high transaction costs, stringent collateral requirements, limited access points and reliance on undercapitalised institutions such as financial services associations (FSAs) and informal savings groups like village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) and "Osusu" groups. Most of these lack formal protections and opportunities for growth.

Meso-level interventions are also needed to, for example, increase financial literacy and alleviate restrictive social norms, particularly for women and youth. These can help strengthen empowerment and expand financial access. By removing social barriers that, among other things, limit access to finance for women, more people can contribute actively to the economy. This would boost household incomes and increase demand for goods and services. This inclusive approach strengthens the workforce, promotes equitable income distribution, and creates a more resilient and sustainable economy. An analysis of the enablers and barriers to women's access to finance is therefore essential to address these challenges.

Through this report, Invest Salone and the MGCA hope to advance Sierra Leone's financial sector ecosystem, creating a supportive environment where women can access and benefit from financial services, thereby promoting economic resilience, gender equality and inclusive growth across the nation.

Given its capacity (especially financial) MGCA's role will include coalition building, coordination and advocacy.

2.1 Research and analysis objectives

In undertaking this work, the following research and analysis methodology was undertaken.

Conduct a desk review

Objectives: To assess and understand the dynamics of the financial sector ecosystem in Sierra Leone and how they affect access to finance for women; to identify critical barriers and enablers of women's access to finance in Sierra Leone.

Activities: Review existing literature, reports and data to understand women's financial access landscape, focussing on regulatory frameworks, financial institutions and their products, socio-cultural barriers, economic conditions and any other factor that affects women's access to finance.

[7] Bank of Sierra Leone (2022) National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (2022–2026).

Identify and assess existing financial products and services for women

Objective: To identify gaps and opportunities for improvements in appropriate financial products and services for women.

Activities: Assess current financial products and services available to women, focussing on those in the agricultural sector. Evaluate their effectiveness and suitability and identify what features are critical for new or improved products to better serve women's needs.

Prepare an options brief

Objective: To outline strategies to widen and deepen women's access to finance, especially in the agriculture sector.

Activities: Develop recommendations for enhancing financial inclusion based on the desktop financial sector ecosystem review. The brief will propose actionable strategies for financial institutions, policymakers and other stakeholders.

2.2 Structure of the report

Access to finance for women involves four key aspects, each critical to accessibility:

- The legal and regulatory environment
- The supply side, i.e. financial institutions/providers of finance
- The target group itself, in this case, women and especially those in agriculture
- The meso interventions; those enablers that facilitate interaction or bridge the gaps between the macro- and micro-level players, or even between two micro-level sides, such as financial institutions and borrowers (e.g. women). Examples of meso-level operators include business development services (BDS) providers.

Based on this understanding, the approach taken in preparing this report was to structure it to examine women's access to finance within the broader and more holistic ecosystem in which all businesses, including those that are women-owned, operate.

Section 3, which follows this introductory overview, examines the financial sector legal and regulatory business environment. This provides the macro-level context of the ecosystem within which women-owned businesses operate and which influences their access to finance. This section analyses how the laws and regulations affect women's ability to access financial services.

This followed by **Section 4** which looks at the supply side. This comprises the providers of financial services. It examines several types, including credit unions, FSAs, FinTechs, microfinance institutions (MFIs), commercial banks and even development partner-financed projects and programmes. The section assesses which type of provider best suits which business size and economic sector.

Section 5 is the first part of the demand side. It examines the nature of the micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) sector in Sierra Leone, especially how business size affects ability to access finance. This is pertinent since micro and small women-owned businesses face the most challenges.

Section 6 continues with the demand-side but focussing on women and their access to financial services.

Based on the foregoing sections, **Section 7** provides a summary of the barriers to accessing finance experienced by women, what can be done to get over them and how. These are the enablers.

Section 8 provides an overview of three other countries in Africa as comparators to Sierra Leone. This is to assess the access to finance challenges in other African countries and, more importantly, what Sierra Leone can learn from their efforts to overcome them.

Section 9 lists the study's key findings.

Section 10 comprises actionable recommendations to widen and deepen women's access to finance in Sierra Leone and close the gender disparity gap, particularly within the agricultural sector. By addressing the barriers identified and leveraging the enablers, these strategies aim to foster a more inclusive financial landscape that empowers women, promotes economic growth and contributes to the overall development of Sierra Leone. While recognising the limitations of the MGCA, it is expected that it should take a leadership role in coordinating implementation of the accepted recommendations.

3. The financial sector legal and regulatory environment

To provide more depth and context to this access to finance analyses for women-owned businesses in Sierra Leone, a review of the laws, policies and frameworks that influence women's financial inclusion is necessary. This focuses on identifying existing regulatory structures, financial policies and strategic initiatives that impact access to finance for women, shedding light on both supportive measures and persistent barriers within the national financial sector ecosystem.

The literature review highlights the central role of policy and regulation in accelerating financial inclusion. An enabling regulatory environment fosters healthy market development, while ensuring financial sector stability, fair practices and consumer protection.

The discussion throughout the section is framed to highlight the implications for MSMEs' access to finance.

We start with an overview of the relevant laws, policies and strategies.

The two most enabling macro-level interventions that could increase women's access to finance are the GEWE Act and the national strategy for financial inclusion (NSFI). However, we shall start with other (maybe peripheral) legislation that affects all businesses, which of course include women.

The **Business Registration Act 2007** sets out the steps required to register a business in Sierra Leone. In its last *Doing Business Report*, *2020*, the World Bank reported significant improvements in the procedure for registering companies, with the time taken for incorporation falling from seven days to two or three days. In that report, Sierra Leone is rated 58th out of 190 countries.[8] That was four to five years ago and it is unclear whether that improvement remains, especially with the incorporation of the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) into the newly created National Investment Board (NIB).

The real crux of this issue, however, is that not all businesses need to register with the CAC. The CAC is mainly for companies, while there are other types of business enterprises including sole proprietorships, partnerships and companies. There are also numerous unregistered enterprises.

The preliminary report of Statistics Sierra Leone *2022 Census of Business Establishments* reported that there were 165,514 business establishments operating in Sierra Leone.[9] Of these, 48,299 were "permanent and regular" while the remaining 117,215 (i.e. 66%!) are "non-permanent, micro-enterprises and Baffas".[10] There can be little doubt that very many in this 66% are women-owned.

This suggests that, whether women-owned or not, registration of small businesses in Sierra Leone may be problematic for many small businesses, i.e. the process is considered bureaucratic and costly for many businesses.

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[8] World Bank (2020) Doing Business 2020. Economy Profile: Sierra Leone. https://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/s/sierra-leone/SLE.pdf
[9] Statistics Sierra Leone (2022) *Census of Business Establishments.*
[10] Tiny businesses operating under a canopy, umbrella or "baffa".

Other relevant laws and regulations are discussed below.

The 2019 Banking Act: This is the principal legislation covering the operation of banks in Sierra Leone. Section 42(3) regulates the security value for any loan.

Section 42(3) Subject to subsection (7) of section 37: a credit exposure shall not be considered as secured unless it is adequately secured by collateral having a market value of at least 120% of the outstanding amount of the credit exposure throughout its term.

Security for a bank loan has always been a major constraint for access to finance for most businesses; more so for those termed micro, small and medium under which most women-owned businesses fall. We shall later discuss (Section 4) the fallacy of treating micro, small and medium enterprises as a homogenous group with similar access to finance challenges. However, loan security requirements are stringent. It is perhaps not so much the BSL-stipulated 120% of the loan amount but more the **nature** of the security that commercial banks request. Typically, banks ask for immovable property, i.e. land and buildings, preferably in the Western Area.

The insistence on landed property as collateral, compounds the difficulties of accessing finance, especially for women who generally have limited access to this type of collateral.

The Credit Reference Act 2011: The provision of financial services by commercial banks is partly constrained by the lack of timely and reliable information on the credit profile of potential borrowers. This is partly due to the weaknesses in the legal environment to strengthen creditors' rights and enforce commercial contracts. These have contributed to the high rate[11] of non-performing loans, high interest rates charged on loans and advances, and subsequent adoption of stringent collateral requirements for lending.

The Credit Reference Bureau (CRB) collects credit information on individuals and business entities to help creditors (financial institutions) make informed decisions based on the credit history of current and potential borrowers. The CRB unit at the BSL is now also accessible to MFIs.

Despite these efforts, commercial banks have not been in full compliance, nor has the CRB been efficiently managed. It is yet to achieve complete and accurate information on customers' credit histories. This has resulted in the Central Bank imposing penalties on banks on several occasions.

While the number of bad borrowers with multiple credit facilities has reduced somewhat, the CRB has not met expectations of significantly increasing lending to the private sector.

This Act is relevant to MSMEs' access to finance because, if the bureau is working well, it should enable banks to obtain MSMEs' credit histories and so make more informed lending decisions.

The implication for the private sector, and of course women, is that credible information that banks and MFIs need on new borrowers may not be available.

Directives on Tiered Know Your Customer (KYC) 2020: The directives state that:

[11] Bank of Sierra Leone *Financial Sustainability Report 2023.*

The objective of this legislation is to promote financial inclusion. The directives are intended to allow for flexible account opening requirements for low value and low risk accounts that subject to cap and restrictions as the amount increases.

In short, opening a bank account is meant to be made relatively easier.

Finance Leasing Guidelines: Finance leasing is a different form of financing. This is a long-term agreement where a business (the lessee) gains the right to use an asset (such as equipment or vehicles) for a fixed period, while the legal ownership remains with the lessor (the leasing company). The lessee makes regular instalment payments for most of the life of the asset. The attraction of a finance lease is that the business has use of the asset for a fairly long period of time. At the end of the term, the lessee has the option to purchase at a pre-determined price.

The advantage for a business is that it eases the business cashflow during the whole term of using the asset. Unfortunately, there are currently no leasing companies operating in Sierra Leone.

The **Borrowers and Lenders Act 2019 and the Regulations 2016**. These govern the operations of the Collateral Registry and apply to security interests in movable property. They establish the framework for lenders to register charges on a borrowers' movable assets. Security by way of fixed or floating charge can be taken over any class of assets, including land, receivables, cash and shares. It also allows the unrestricted use of personal chattels as collateral for increased access to bank credit to catalyse economic growth. It provides for the creation of a security interest in personal property, while ensuring that such interests can be realised with relative ease, promptness and certainty. Further, other creditors or interested third parties can be made aware by public notice of the existence of all prior interests to avoid the inconvenience of multiple coincidences of claims.

The Act also enables individuals and non-incorporated entities that are not licensed and supervised by the BSL to register their security interest.

It was hoped that the Borrowers and Lenders Act 2014 and 2019 would be a gamechanger in access to finance, by providing financial institutions with the confidence that their collateral over movables has a solid legal framework supporting it. The Collateral Registry was launched in 2017. This was later reformed to expand the scope of the legislation to include registration of immovable assets.

As mentioned earlier, security for loans had been a major constraint in access to finance. The Collateral Registry was established to alleviate this by making it safer for financial institutions to accept movable assets as collateral. However, it is unclear whether it has succeeded in doing so.

A 2022 study[12] on the Collateral Registry stated: "Although the Collateral Registry has been operational for more than four years, the volume of registrations in the [Collateral Registry] remains low, with little use being made by banks and other financial institutions."

3.1 Pending and planned legislation and regulations

A revised **Other Financial Services Bill** to ensure microfinance institutions, community banks and other financial institutions operate in line with international best practice has been drafted.

[12] Ministry of Finance (undertaken by ECORYS) (2022) *Market Study on Movable Asset-based Financing to Small and Medium Enterprises in Sierra Leone.*

Small and medium enterprise support

SMEDA: The Sierra Leone Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SMEDA)[13] is a government entity established under SMEDA Act No.11 of 2016. While small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are encouraged to register with it, SMEDA is not a regulatory agency. Instead, its mandate is:

> *to formulate and coordinate policies that will facilitate the integration and harmonisation of various public and private sector initiatives, for the promotion, development and regulation of the micro and small enterprises to become key Industries of tomorrow. The Agency is also mandated with the responsibility to coordinate the implementation of development programmes for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across all related Ministries, Agencies and Associations. The Agency acts as the central point of reference for research and data dissemination on SMEs and entrepreneurs, as well as provides business advisory services for SMEs and entrepreneurs throughout the country.*

In April 2016, SMEDA announced that it would provide loans to SMEs at interest rates below 10% per year without any requirement to provide collateral. In addition, the Government of Sierra Leone intends to establish additional funds to provide medium and long-term capital for SMEs that focus on female and youth empowerment. In this regard, the Government of Sierra Leone allocated Le2 billion[14] to the 2019 capital budget for the Women's Development Fund for female entrepreneurs, to assist with starting small businesses. This fund is named the MUNAFA[15] Fund.

SMEDA is discussed in Section 4, The Supply Side.

Agricultural finance: This study aimed not only to analyse access to finance for women but also for women in agriculture. Agriculture has, traditionally, been the economic sector with the least access to finance in Sierra Leone. Only fairly recently – in the past 5 years – have there been intentional funds or programmes specifically for agriculture.

Over the past five years, there have been two Agricultural Credit Funds (ACF) both managed by BSL. The first fund has ended, and the second began in March 2024.

ACF I targeted agricultural input dealers, such as suppliers of fertilisers and equipment, to finance private sector participation in the agricultural sector. One of the goals of this facility was to move away from a government-led procurement process that was inefficient and plagued by corruption.

For ACF I, an all-inclusive interest rate cap of 5% was set for borrowers.

[13] https://smeda.gov.sl/
[14] Approximately US$90,000.
[15] Munafa means 'to prosper' or 'to improve wellbeing'

Table 1. ACF I

Agricultural Credit Fund Source of funds: The World Bank	US$5 million	Target group is agricultural input dealers To increase domestic food consumption To provide low-interest loans to procurers of agricultural inputs (seeds and agrochemicals) used in the production of rice and vegetables Disbursed through FSPs Loans to be backed by adequate movable and immovable collateral Loaned out by FSPs at an all-inclusive interest rate of 5% per annum calculated on simple interest basis Loan term of 15 months Maximum loan amount US$500,000 Credit risk apportioned: FSPs 30% and government 70%	Ended Was established 2021 for an 18-month duration

Table 2. ACF II

Agricultural Credit Facility II Source of funds: The World Bank	US$10 million	Priority value chains: rice, poultry and onions To cover: production, farm inputs, aggregation, processing, packaging, branding To be backed by adequate movable and immovable collateral Credit risk is 100% borne by FSPs All-inclusive interest rate of 10% Interest rate to be computed as simple interest on total amount lent Loan term: 24 months Maximum loan amount: US$1,000,000	Launched March 2024 and in force for 24 months

Key elements:

- ACF I had interest rates of 5% per annum and 70% credit risk taken up by government. This was in effect a credit guarantee
- The current ACF II at 10% interest is still well below market. This time the financial services providers (FSPs) take up 100% of the risk.

Both funds were for relatively large sums (ACF I US$500,000, ACF II US$1m). There was also the stipulation that interest should be charged a simple interest basis (as opposed to the compound – and more expensive – interest rate basis).

It is not known how well these funds performed but it would be a surprise if the funds had been fully taken up by the FSPs.

Evaluations are not readily available for insights on how the Funds can be improved and make a difference to the target groups. This seems to be a perennial problem with government-related funds.

Financial institutions disclosure requirements: Another relevant regulatory aspect relates to the disclosure requirements for banks, both in their annual reports and regular reporting to the supervision department at the BSL, which are insufficiently detailed. There is, for example, almost no requirement for banks to report more detailed portfolio information, including segmental information that shows, *inter alia*, lending to corporations, SMEs and consumer client groups. Reporting in Sierra Leone is much less detailed than other African countries such as Ghana and Kenya.

3.2 The GEWE Act and accompanying regulations

The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act 2022, has among its aims "to provide for financial institutions to prescribe procedures for the improvement of women's access to finance and to provide for other related matters."

Regulation 11 of the GEWE Regulations 2024 provides for the provision of finance for women. These are expected to be achieved through:

- The establishment of special gender bonds
- The provision of technical support to village savings and loans associations, cooperatives and SMEs at local and national levels
- The expansion of the criteria for collateral for obtaining a loan to include other valuables, such as jewellery, textiles and other movable assets
- The provision that: "A financial institution shall, for the purposes of meeting the prescribed obligations under subsection 1 of Regulation 11, comply with procedures and processes for improving access to finance for women issued by the BSL and the Ministry of Finance."

Having an Act and Regulations is one thing, but the main challenge is enforcement. The GEWE regulations are still new and need time to be implemented. The MGCA is expected to take a prominent role in operationalising GEWE.

3.3 National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (2022–26)

The NSFI's vision is: "A focused approach to increase access to, enhance quality and increase usage of, financial products and services, by prioritising strategic interventions, targeting women, youth, rural populations, and micro, small and medium enterprises."

The Strategy has amongst its three objectives: To promote the development of, and expand access to client-centric financial products and services geared specifically towards key underserved population groups such as women, youth, rural communities, and MSMEs

With about 12–18 months to its end date, the NSFI has not yet been evaluated. Its levels of achievement and effectiveness are therefore not known. There have been several more activities than under the first NSFI, which ended in 2020. Among these have been financial literacy for MSMEs and agricultural finance workshops for banks and other financial institutions.

The implementation of the NSFI has demonstrated its potential to lead to significant policy advancements. However, there is a need to review and update existing regulatory instruments and develop new ones to address the evolving financial sector landscape.

This includes creating policies such as the Microfinance Policy, Digital Financial Services Guidelines, MSME Finance Policy and Financial Education Guidelines.

3.4 Findings on the regulatory environment

The regulatory environment on access to finance has brought about a number of legislations geared towards not only increased access to finance generally, but also specifically, for women.

The government has introduced and updated laws and regulations that, on paper, should make it easier for banks and other financial institutions to provide finance to SMEs.

Notwithstanding these legislative improvements, only the GEWE Act and, to a lesser extent, BSL's NSFI, are specific to women and their ability to access finance.

On paper, this is all good news. However, the reality is that a number of these pieces of legislation have not been effectively implemented and enforced. The collateral registry, for example, is still underutilised by the banks especially.

The GEWE regulations can also be further enhanced by including the following:

- **Mandating financial literacy programmes**. Financial literacy is crucial for effective participation of women in financial services. Regulation 11 could require financial institutions to offer literacy programmes tailored to women, particularly in rural areas, to improve their understanding of available financial products, responsible borrowing and business management
- **Incentivising digital financial solutions**. Given the barriers to physical banking access in many regions, the regulations could encourage financial institutions to provide more digital financial services specifically aimed at women, such as mobile banking and digital savings accounts. This could include provisions for reduced fees on digital transactions or incentives for FinTech companies to create products catering to women
- **Introducing gender-sensitive interest rates and loan conditions**. Financial institutions could be encouraged to offer less stringent collateral requirements or more flexible repayment terms for loans to women-owned businesses or female entrepreneurs, recognising women's unique challenges in managing cash flows and accessing financing
- **Establishing a dedicated fund for women-owned startups**: Regulation 11 could advocate for a dedicated fund or grants for women-led startups to address gaps in access to seed funding for women. This fund could be supported by both public and private sector contributions, focussing on high-potential women entrepreneurs who lack the capital to start or expand their businesses
- **Encouraging public–private partnerships**. To ensure sustainability, the regulation could encourage partnerships between government bodies, financial institutions and NGOs to pool resources for financial inclusion initiatives aimed at women. Public–private collaborations could amplify the reach and impact of financial services provided to women.

3.5 Other women-supportive Acts in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has enacted three acts to improve women's equity, though unrelated to financial access. These were thoroughly evaluated in a 2019 study.[16] These acts are meant to address various aspects of discrimination and unfair treatment of women in Sierra Leone that, indirectly, have an impact on women's ability to access finance.

A further act which should have a very positive effect on women's ability to borrow from formal financial institutions is the Customary Land Rights Act 2022.

We shall briefly examine this and the three Gender Acts.

The Customary Land Rights Act 2022

This act stipulates that citizens should not be refused the right to own or use land based on their gender, tribe, religion, age, marital status, social status or economic status.

While this act was not specific to women, it does, at least on paper, allow them to legally own and use land as they wish. This, of course, has significant implications for the provision of collateral for borrowing. There will still be attendant challenges, but this is a start.

The Gender Acts

1) **The Domestic Violence Act 2007**: The Domestic Violence Act seeks to legally protect women and girls experiencing sexual, physical, emotional, psychological and economic violence in the home or family setting. It criminalises behaviour that had previously been considered acceptable within the domestic setting and establishes a comprehensive regime of court orders designed to protect survivors from further violence by the same perpetrator within this setting.

National statistics from the Sierra Leone Demographic Health Survey 2013 show that 57% of women aged 15–49 have experienced either physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Moreover, half (51%) of married women aged 15–49 have experienced some kind of intimate partner violence, i.e. physical, sexual or emotional violence perpetrated by their husbands or intimate partners.

This act is to give women protection and redress from domestic violence by their male spouses or family members. Such protection has the very real potential of giving women more confidence and feelings of empowerment.

However, a major obstacle to implementation is dominant social norms.

2) **The Devolution of Estates Act 2007**: With its enactment, this act prioritised wives and children as beneficiaries to inherit from the deceased's estate in the case of intestacy (i.e. death without a will) and empowered them to challenge the provisions of a will, where these are inadequate. It also expanded the definition of children to include illegitimate and adopted children, and further allowed a cohabitee of 5 years standing to inherit as though she were a wife. The wife is also empowered to administer the estate irrespective of what type of marriage is contracted, a major change to Islamic law wherein the eldest son or the older brother is required to administer the property.

3) **The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009**: This provides the framework for a unified system of registering customary marriages and divorce across the country and provides a

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[16] Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (2019) *Impact Assessment: The Three Gender Acts in Sierra Leone*.

platform for equal treatment of married women irrespective of whether the marriage contracted is customary or civil, Muslim or Christian. It also allows women who have cohabited continuously for 5 years with a man to have the relationship registered as a marriage. Prior to its enactment, women in a customary marriage were treated as inferior to those in other forms of marriage.

The 2019 study on the impact of Sierra Leone's states that "[t]o date, none of the Gender Acts have the implementing regulations that each of them technically provides for." This review was unable to confirm whether this situation has changed.

Effectively implemented, these acts should have a significant indirect effect on women's access to finance.

4. Access to finance in Sierra Leone: the supply side

This section addresses the financial sector in Sierra Leone and its role in providing credit to the private sector and especially to women-owned businesses. It focuses on MSME financing, the various types of FSPs and the financial products and services available to MSMEs.

To provide an overall context, the section begins with an overview of the financial sector in Sierra Leone.

5.1 Overview of the financial sector in Sierra Leone

Financial institutions in Sierra Leone[17]

The banking sector dominates the financial system, accounting for 85% of total assets. Despite slower growth, high inflation and the rapid depreciation of the Leone amid the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict and geopolitical tensions, Sierra Leone's banking sector generally remained resilient. The sector as a whole was well-capitalised, profitable and liquid.

However, these positive financial indicators are largely attributable to the banking sector's significant exposure to the government, involving assets considered highly liquid and low risk. Government securities offer high nominal returns with a 0% regulatory risk rating for capital. As a result, private sector credit remained very low by both international and regional standards, with further declines observed.

The number of financial institutions in Sierra Leone increased in 2023. These include 14 commercial banks, 5 deposit-taking microfinance institutions (DTMFIs), 69 credit-only microfinance institutions (COMFIs), 17 community banks, 59 FSAs,[18] 2 discount houses and 3 mobile money service providers.

The number of insurance companies regulated by the Sierra Leone Insurance Commission remained at 12 and there is one pension fund (National Social Security and Insurance Trust).

All of these provide financial services to the public. The banks, MFIs and rural financial institutions (RFIs) provide credit, savings and money transfer services. Mobile money providers mainly provide money transfers and savings, and also act as a conduit for lending.[19] Discount houses can be used to raise funds and insurance is critical for business protection.

There is also the NGO sector. NGOs are not commercial providers of finance but some, such as CARE[20] and the UNDP-financed Growth Accelerator Programme, play a vital role in preparing women for business and facilitating their access to credit and other financial services.

Reviewing how they operate and how their operations and performance affect their provision of finance to women, is the main purpose of this review.

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[17] Bank of Sierra Leone (2023) *Financial Stability Report 2023.*
[18] Along with the 17 Community banks, these 76 institutions are known as rural finance institutions (RFIs).
[19] For example, Orange acts as agent for Empire Solutions MFI through which the MFI customers receive and repay their loans.
[20] CARE is the acronym for Co-operative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere

The banking industry

By an Act of Parliament, BSL has the statutory authority to regulate and supervise the banking sector (commercial banks account for about 95% of financial sector assets). BSL also provides general guidelines for other non-banking financial institutions. BSL is therefore the most important institution overseeing the financial sector.

However, the financial sector is relatively shallow, for example, in product development and financing instruments for different customer segments, e.g. SMEs.

In the *2020 Doing Business* report Sierra Leone is rated 165 out of 190 countries in "Getting Credit".

While the sector has remained relatively sound, as evidenced by high capital adequacy, reasonable profitability and robust liquidity, challenges persist in the area of asset quality and business model. The banking sector's current business model is not sustainable over the long term as it relies overly on government financing.

The banking sector's assets became even more heavily concentrated in lending to the government as indicated by the size of its government securities portfolio. Treasury bills and bonds make up the largest share of banks' total assets overtaking loans to the private sector. As a result, banking sector financial intermediation remains low even by regional standards. Consequently, high measured regulatory liquidity and capital has come at the expense of low efficiency and the core role of a banking system to provide credit to the private sector to stimulate higher economic growth.

The following is an overview of the providers of financial services in Sierra Leone. It should be noted that financial access is and should not, be limited to credit. Savings and insurance are two other critical financial services; arguably, more so for women, as they serve as backup and safety nets in the absence of credit or other forms of financing.

There appear to be very few women-specific products among the commercial banks. The relatively few medium or large enterprise women-owned businesses are not specifically catered for. They seem to be treated as a normal segment of the private sector. The offerings of the few banks with dedicated products and services for women, are summarised below.

Sierra Leone Commercial Bank and Rokel Commercial Bank

Sierra Leone Commercial Bank (SLCB) and Rokel Commercial Bank (RCB), the largest government-owned banks in the country, have consistently played a pivotal role in channelling concessional funds from the government and BSL to MSMEs. Their extensive geographical reach and established infrastructure make them key players in facilitating access to affordable financing to these enterprises.

SLCB has established a dedicated MSME development window for agriculture and women. It offers specialised products, such as savings accounts, low-interest agricultural loans and microcredit schemes tailored to support female entrepreneurs. These products have flexible loan terms, low initial deposits and digital banking options, making them more accessible to women.

The bank is actively seeking concessional funding and technical assistance to support its MSME (women's) unit and is trying to mobilise resources from development partners to finance this initiative. It is unclear how much of its own funds the bank has invested or plans to invest in this initiative and why (given it is the most profitable bank in the country) it relies so heavily on donor support.

SLCB also provides capacity-building for the unit staff to ensure effective and efficient management of these units.

Ecobank SL

Ecobank SL has the *Ellevate* product. Ellevate is designed for businesses owned by women or managed by women, businesses with a high percentage of female board members or employees and companies manufacturing products for women.

The Ellevate programme boasts services and tools to help women in business to succeed. It provides non-financial services to customers, such as business and leadership training and networking. Training includes bookkeeping, mentoring and skills development to help business owners gain the necessary knowledge for accessing finance.

The product serves over 800 clients.

Commentary on commercial banks: Based on the desk review findings, only a few commercial banks truly have gender-specific products and services. This may be due to the types of customers banks prefer, i.e. medium to large businesses and especially those who do not need much guidance and can provide immovable property or, at least, valuable movable assets, such as business equipment (industrial) and vehicles.

This is where the issue of segmenting businesses by size becomes important. Medium- or large-scale women-owned businesses may find it less difficult than smaller businesses to obtain credit from commercial banks because of the size of their businesses. This allows them to be able to offer the type of collateral banks prefer. In short and as we shall see when we look at non-bank financial institutions, businesses, female owned or not, have a much better chance of accessing finance if they are formal and at least medium-sized.

As an example, Ecobank SL roughly categorises its SMEs as in Table 3.

Table 3. Categorisation of SMEs by Ecobank SL

Parameters used	No. of employees	Total assets (SLE)[21]	Annual turnover (SLE)	Average loan size (SLE)
SMEs generally	<100	<100,000	50,000,000	< 400,000
Small business	5–25	< 100,000	500,000	500,000
Medium-sized business	26–100	100,000–1,000,000	50,000,000	< 20,000,000

By Sierra Leone standards, these statistics suggest that these amounts are not meant for micro or small businesses, which include many women-owned businesses.

[21] SLE also refers to New Leones

5.2 The non-bank financial sector

These are financial institutions regulated by the Central Bank.

According to the BSL's *Financial Stability Report 2023*, in December 2023, other financial institutions remained stable with a constant number of DTMFIs, community banks (CBs), FSAs, mobile money companies (MMOs) and discount houses. However, the number of COMFIs increased to 69 and credit unions (CUs) decreased to 25. DTMFIs expanded in terms of assets, equity, deposits and loans, but their growth was lower than the inflation rate, resulting in a significant decline in real terms. The largest DTMFI accounted for 36.64% of the sector's assets.

The assets of CBs increased in 2023, primarily due to increased investments and gross loans. The three largest CBs accounted for 39.3% of total assets, with investments increasing by 66.7% and gross loans by 15.3%. The profitability of the CB sector increased by SLE8.8 million to SLE14.2 million, and net financial income increased by 12.9% to SLE35.3 million. Six out of 17 CBs recorded profits, while the consolidated operational self-sufficiency was 134.3%, above the MIX standard[22] of 112%. The remainder did not meet the standard due to high non-performing loans (NPL) ratios. Return on assets decreased but was still higher than the MIX standard of 2.1 percent.

The MMOs saw significant growth in activities, including the number of agents, accounts and transaction value. In December 2023, the discount houses sector reported a pre-tax profit of SLE0.6 million, slightly better than the previous year.

In December 2023, the number of CUs decreased from 27 to 25. Despite this, total membership increased by 12.2% to 16,494. The consolidated total assets of the CUs sector increased by SLE5.7 million to SLE30.0 million, while total savings increased to SLE19.6 million. Share capital and gross loans also increased by 43.6% and 14.7%, respectively.

Overall, the non-bank sector seems to have done well, as is shown in increased assets, equity, deposits and loans of DTMFIs and CBs, for example.

Microfinance institutions (MFIs)

MFIs in Sierra Leone are facing substantial funding gaps to meet the demands of their clients. A recent study23 on blended finance MFIs reported a funding shortfall of at least 20% of their current portfolio. An extrapolation of this across the entire MFI sector indicates an annual deficit of at least US$5 million.

All MFIs primarily lend to the informal sector. DTMFIs utilise both group and individual lending methodologies, with a preference for the latter. In contrast, COMFIs predominantly offer group-based loans. MFIs generally offer a variety of products tailored to different customer segments, such as agricultural loans and consumer loans, reflecting a diversified product offering rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

[22] Microfinance Information Exchange (MiX) founded in 2002 that provided market data and intelligence on financial service providers catering to low-income populations around the world.
[23] United Nations Capital Development Fund (2024) *Mapping of Blended Finance to Support Financial Intermediaries and Fintechs in Sierra Leone.*

The majority of MFI customers in Sierra Leone (and for that matter, in Africa and other developing economies) are women. Four examples from Sierra Leone are BRAC, MUNAFA Social Microfinance, ACTB Savings and Loans, and LAPO[24].

BRAC: This is the largest COMFI in Sierra Leone. It operates 42 branches across 14 of the country's 16 districts, serving over 70,000 clients, of whom 96% are women. As of November 2023, its loan portfolio stood at US$48 million.

BRAC offers group lending, agricultural finance and chattel-secured loans, with loan sizes ranging from US$400 to US$3,500.

Entrepreneur du Monde's MUNAFA25 Social Microfinance: This MFI has been operating in Sierra Leone since 2019 as a social microfinance institution supported and financed by the French NGO Entrepreneurs du Monde. It focuses on providing income-generating loans that help its clients (referred to as partners) develop their businesses. MUNAFA plans to expand by opening new branches. Currently, it is focused on extending its services into rural areas.

In-house training is a core activity aimed at building relationships with communities and promoting the organisation.

MUNAFA clients are almost all exclusively women: MUNAFA operates five branches, each covering specific areas of Freetown, and promotes lending to groups of 15–30 members. Individual loans range from US$60–500 at an interest rate of 2% per month. It provides training on gender issues, health, environmental awareness, education and other social aspects. It also conducts phased household assessments during the loan period.

Munafa's clients exclusively come from the informal sector, including slum areas. The institution's success is largely attributed to its close monitoring and capacity-building efforts with its clients and borrowers.

ACTB Savings and Loans (actb): Of actb's 20,000+ clients, over 75% are women depositors and borrowers. In terms of business sizes, almost 100% are categorised as small enterprises and less than 1% as SMEs.

actb has a dedicated agricultural loan product. Its in-kind lending product provides smallholders with an integrated range of inputs as well as access to machinery and skills training. It is delivered upfront to customers before their farming seasons begin.

actb also acts as a market maker, connecting smallholders with active buyers, ensuring that post-harvest produce is transacted fairly between parties and proceeds are delivered securely to smallholder-owned actb bank accounts. A pilot programme was successfully conducted in 2020 with 100 rice and maize farmers in the Mile 91 district. This delivered demonstrable productivity and post-harvest loss improvements.

A full product roll-out across actb's rural branch network was scheduled in 2021.

[24] BRAC is 'Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee' ACTB is 'a call to business' and LAPO is 'Life Above Poverty Alleviation

[25] This should not be mistaken for SMEDA's MUNAFA fund.

LAPO Microfinance: This serves over 37,000 clients, predominantly women, with products tailored to their needs. These include loans and savings plans aimed at those less familiar with savings practices, group loans for small traders, as well as dedicated loan plans and educational financing for women.

LAPO offers both individual and group loans, covering small business loans, SME loans and consumer loans.

It recently raised a local currency corporate bond of SLE60 million (approximately US$3 million), marking a two-thirds increase to its existing SLE100 million portfolio.

This milestone is a first in the country and is intended for lending to clients. The funds are expected to have a significant impact on MSME lending and could help close LAPO's funding gap of about 20% of its current portfolio.

Commentary on MFIs: What we note from these MFIs are that:

- Their clients tend to be more of the micro- and small-enterprise type
- They provide non-financial services, such as financial literacy, as part of the loan package
- They have adopted digital finance to more easily reach and connect with their clients
- Perhaps as a result of the three foregoing points, the majority of their clients are women.

Critically, and perhaps most importantly, is that they have developed more customer centric products, i.e. products more appropriate for their level of customers (e.g. for women, agriculture). MFI finance products are not the one-size-fits-all variety that commercial banks tend to favour. MFI products tend to take the following into account in their product design.

- That their customer segments are very unlikely to be able to offer immovable assets as collateral
- That repayments are best done on a flexible (e.g. weekly or balloon payments for agriculture-based lending) basis than on a fixed monthly rate
- That a lot of their customers, being self-employed women, also have domestic responsibilities. Their time needs to be efficiently managed. Digital finance allows for this. That keeping money in commercial banks is also costly, whether it is only for safe keeping or savings. A current account attracts monthly charges and a savings account has restrictions on how many times withdrawals are allowed.

A constraint for MFIs is that they lack sufficient capital to increase their lending and other financial services.

Regarding the cost of finance however, MFIs loans are at least as expensive as those of commercial banks. It would seem that the cost of finance is, arguably, not as important to MFI clients as are availability and access.

The Apex Bank and the Rural Finance Network

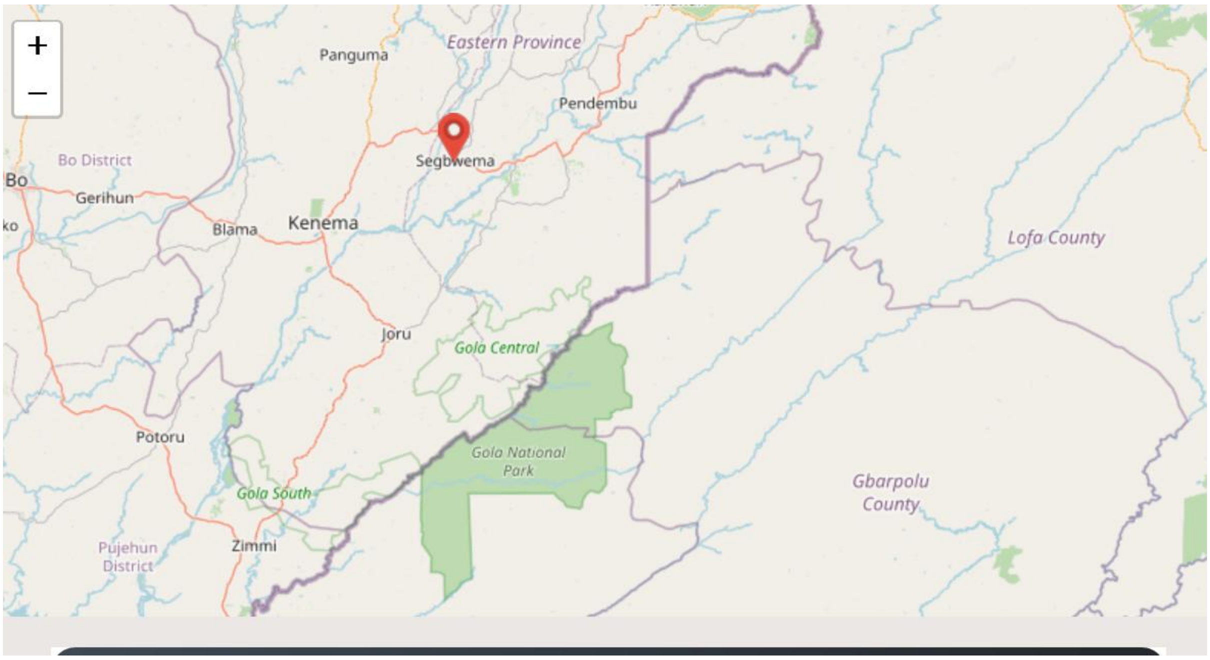
The Apex Bank and its RFIs operate as a hybrid entity under its own Act and Regulations. Established in 2014, the bank is financially and technically supported by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). It supervises 17 CBs and 59 FSAs on behalf of BSL. The Apex Bank is majority-owned (51%) by CBs and FSAs, with the remaining 49% reserved for future investors. While the Apex Bank engages in a limited amount of retail lending, its primary clients are the CBs and FSAs.

Community banks

Apart from financing obtained from the Apex Bank, CBs also secure funding from customer deposits and equity provided by shareholders and investors.

CBs accept deposits primarily from local residents, as they were established to provide banking services in close proximity to their communities. According to IFAD, all CBs are operationally self-sufficient, meaning they can cover all their operating costs.

Below is a snapshot of Segbwema Community Bank[26].



Segbwema on the map of Sierra Leone[27]

[26] See footnote 12: The Ecorys study on movable asset-based financing.
[27] https://ms.maptons.com/3541269

Table 4. Snapshot of Segbwema Community bank

Key sectors financed	
Agriculture and agribusiness Commerce Transport (vehicles and motorcycles)	
Main finance products	
Farm maintenance loans Produce buying and export loans Food processing and marketing (rice milling, gari, sorghum) Salary loans Small business loans Motorcycle purchase loans	
Loan sizes	
Minimum	SLE500;
Maximum	SLE200,000
Average	SLE80,000
Net portfolio (2021)	SLE600,000,000
	Average value
Fixed asset (property document)	SLE600,000*
Movable items	SLE150,000
Savings balances held at the bank	SLE65,000
Interest rates and charges	
30% p.a. for 12 months for commercial loans 18% p.a. for agriculture to encourage farmers 30% for transport investment loans Admin charges fees 2% on amount borrowed across the board Penalty for default 2.5% per month on amount defaulted	
Portfolio composition	
Salary loans	50%
Agriculture and agribusiness	30%
Small business loans	15%
Motorcycle loans	5%
Conclusions	
Cost of funds is higher than at commercial banks and non-business (salary) loans make up half of the portfolio. Salary loans are safer because the borrower's salary is paid directly into the account at the bank. Lending to businesses, especially agribusinesses, is not the main lending line. A major constraint of all the CBs is undercapitalisation.	

* Note: This is three times the value of the highest loan amount (SLE200,000)

Financial Services Associations

FSAs are established and owned by their shareholders, who are largely rural-based small-scale farmers, teachers, traders and other community residents. The majority of these shareholders are operators in the micro and small-enterprise and informal sectors. Members of FSAs save regularly and can borrow from the FSA at a rate of three times the amount saved. FSAs also acquire funds by borrowing from CBs and from loans provided by their shareholders. FSA clients are primarily enterprises within the informal sector, with loan sizes ranging from the New Leone equivalent of US$20 to US$5,000. The loans mainly support small-scale agriculture along the value chain, from input suppliers to on-farm activities and processing.

Apex Bank is at the top of this financing structure, primarily funded through IFAD. These funds enable the bank to provide financing to CBs, which in turn support FSAs. The most recent contribution is a grant of US$5 million, designated for on-lending to CBs and FSAs.

Apex Bank lends to CBs at a quarterly rate of 2.5%, equivalent to approximately 10% per annum. In turn, CBs offer loans at an annual rate of 18% for agricultural purposes and 22% for non-agricultural businesses. These rates are significantly lower than those of commercial banks.

The study findings revealed that the Apex Bank's current arrangement may not be financially sustainable. Despite being in operation for over 10 years, the bank continues to struggle with profitability and remains heavily dependent on IFAD funds for capitalisation and lending.

Commentary on Apex Bank and RFIs: These were established to serve rural communities most of whom are involved in agriculture. Agricultural finance can be problematic unless carefully designed. Apex Bank and RFIs were established to address the following challenges in agricultural financing.

1) Product suitability: Financial services offered in rural districts are often not suitable for the diverse profiles of smallholder borrowers. Loans are structured on microfinance terms that are not flexible according to crop cycles and require loan repayments to commence pre-harvest.

2) Risk: Financial institutions are reluctant to extend credit provision to smallholders because the perceived risks are too significant, with minimal availability of insurance products.

3) Customer access: The majority of financial institutions in Sierra Leone operate through urban branch networks. Rural market access is limited by weak transport links and inefficient service delivery channels.

4) Commercial opportunity: The agricultural sector is constrained by weak access to inputs, technology and market linkages. A lack of sustained investment into the sector has resulted in low productivity yields.

CBs, such as Mattru, Segbwema and Yoni, play a crucial role in providing financial services to rural communities, often serving as a lifeline for local businesses and individuals.

A 2018 publication[28] indicates that a substantial portion of CB clients, shareholders, and savers are women. Data suggest that CBs have a significant proportion of women clients making up their 70,000 clients, with over US$3.5 million (approximately. NLe87.5 million) in disbursement loans made. This suggests an average loans size of approximately $50.

The IFAD 2018 mission reported[29] the following.

[28] 2018 - New Rural Finance Institutions in Sierra Leone (2018) E. S. Gbakie, Brima Kamara and Patrick A.F. Dumbuya

[29] Rural Finance and Community Improvement Programme - Phase II Supervision Report IFAD 2019 Mission Report

- That 85% of all shareholders were either women (44.4%) or youth
- In another study, 43.6% of savers were women
- The CBs loan portfolios contain a significant percentage of women.

5.3 Commentary on the non-bank financial sector

The non-bank sector is widespread, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Structure of other non-bank Financial Institutions (2023)

Institution type	Number	Number of branches/outlets
DTMFIs	5	67
COMFIs	69	128
CBs	17	23
FSAs	59	59
Mobile Money	3	72,454 (agents)
Discount Houses	2	2

Source: BSL Financial Stability Report 2023

There are well over 72,000 outlets for various types of financial services scattered around the country. It is fair to say that a good number of them are based in rural areas. It would, however, be wrong to think that those communities are well served for financial services.

A major issue with the rural-based financial institutions, is that almost all the non-bank institutions (CBs, FSAs and COMFIs, especially) are undercapitalised and so find it difficult to provide the level of finance needed. They therefore serve mostly those enterprises at the "bottom of the pyramid" (or close to it).

Other providers of finance

These are programmes, projects and NGOs, and are not regulated by the Central Bank. Almost without exception, they cater to the underserved segments of society, such as women, youth and disabled people.

We shall provide an overview of four) types:

- The MUNAFA Fund
- CUs
- The UNDP Growth Accelerator Programme
- The Sierra Leone Agribusiness Development Fund (SLADF).

The MUNAFA Fund aims to address the financial challenges faced by MSMEs by providing loans at lower interest rates than commercial banks. The Fund is disbursed through, and managed by, SMEDA.

In 2021, the Government of Sierra Leone launched the Microcredit Scheme (MUNAFA Fund) as support to promote and develop SMEs in the country. Since 2021, the Fund has allocated

US$5 million to support a loan scheme implemented through FSPs. As of 2023, these providers have disbursed approximately US$1.5 million.

The funds are lent to FSPs at 3%. FSPs on-lend to the informal sector at a maximum interest rate of 9%, with a grace period of 3 months given to the borrower before starting repayment. The maximum loan term ranges from 6 to 12 months, depending on the amount borrowed.

SMEDA disbursed US$1.5 million as the first tranche to the FSPs, with a second tranche of US$2.5 million later disbursed. The participating FSPs reported that repayment of the first tranche was satisfactory, exceeding 85%. However, repayment of the second tranche has been poor, with repayment rates falling below 50%.

It is feared that it will be victim of the "moral hazard" of poor repayment caused by the loans being treated as government funds and therefore not needed to be repaid.

The average loan size is SLE1,200 which is considered low to meet the financial needs of even a microenterprise. This may have contributed to low repayment rates, as the loans are not sufficient to effectively improve the borrowers' businesses.

- **Mechanism:** The fund provides wholesale loans to FSPs at 3% interest per year. FSPs then on-lend to MSMEs at 9% interest per year
- **Eligibility:** To be eligible for the MUNAFA Fund, a person must be Sierra Leonean, above 18 years but not more than 65 years, have been in business for at least 6 months and possess a valid national identification document
- **Impact:** The MUNAFA Fund has already supported thousands of SMEs, with NLe 22.5 million disbursed to 4,324 MSMEs as of May 2021
- **Second Phase:** Thirteen microfinance providers received Le15 billion to fund the second phase of the MUNAFA Fund Loan Scheme
- **SMEDA's Role:** SMEDA plays a crucial role in managing the MUNAFA Fund, including providing reports to the government on the disbursement of funds.

The effectiveness of this fund is uncertain, especially as no published evaluation is available.

Credit Unions

CUs are savings and credit cooperatives where members hold shares and can save and borrow. In Sierra Leone, most CU members with enterprises are informal sector traders and small-scale manufacturers, including individuals.

Currently, there are 25 CUs comprising 610 groups with a total membership of 16,200 individuals. These CUs are spread across 12 of the country's 16 districts and are supervised by the National Cooperative Credit Union Association (NaCCUA).

Sources of finance for CUs exclusively come from members' savings and shareholding. CUs are typically composed of members in the same or similar vocations or trades, such as the Teachers Credit Union.

Table 6. Other key credit union data

Minimum savings	Approximately US$3.00 per month
Maximum loan amount	Approximately US$5,000
Main types of members	Farmers, traders, teachers, government employees
Interest rate on loans	1.5–3% per month
Maximum loan term	18 months
Loan portfolio (Sept 2023)	Approximately US$950,000 (i.e. an average of US$60 per member)
Savings to loan ratio	1:3, i.e. a member can lend only up to three times their savings
Interest paid on savings	Up to 15% per annum

NaCCUA faces challenges in meeting its members' financial needs and receives minimal support from the Department of Cooperatives, the umbrella body for cooperatives. As a member of the World Council of Credit Unions, it receives technical assistance but not financial support. On rare occasions, NaCCUA has borrowed from MFIs but has found this to be costly.

UNDP's Growth Accelerator in Sierra Leone supports women-led cooperatives and MSMEs, focussing on the growth of innovative and viable informal operators and MSMEs led by women. The current (second) cohort, launched in November 2023, comprises 18 enterprises and cooperatives. The programme's components include skills development, access to finance and impact measurement to ensure the sustainability of the supported enterprises. Key performance indicators include the number of jobs created and the payment of local and central government taxes.

The programme provides grants of up to US$40,000 per grantee for business development and monitors post-grant performance. The ultimate objective is to make these enterprises investment ready, particularly in terms of access to formal financial institutions and impact investors.

SLADF provides grants of up to US$500,000 to SME agribusinesses, promoting the development of the rice, oil palm, cocoa and poultry value chains. Recipients of the grant are required to match the amount received with a combination of cash and kind, sourced with an element of commercial financing from a bank. This exemplifies blended finance, where the grant stimulates the provision of commercial loans to SMEs. Due to the size of the matching grant required, the facility primarily targets medium to large agribusinesses.

A condition of the grant mandates that grantees partner with a large number of small-scale outgrower farmers (at least 1,000 for rice, cocoa and oil palm). These outgrowers supply produce to the grantees, who use a significant portion of the grant funds to finance the outgrowers to enable them to grow, harvest and supply produce to the grantees.

World Bank: Agribusiness Services Matching Grant is a smaller fund than SLADF and targets small-sized agribusinesses. Its upper grant limit (and therefore matching element) is a maximum of US$50,000.

Of the 89 small businesses which obtained grants of around US$2,670,000, it is reported that 49 were women-owned agricultural enterprises.

FinTechs

Supported by UNCDF, BSL designed a regulatory sandbox as a dedicated environment to facilitate new business models that show clear potential to benefit Sierra Leone consumers and advance its financial inclusion strategy. In 2017, four businesses entered the sandbox, and by 2018, two – MiKashBoks (MKB) and InvestEd – were granted licences to operate. By 2022, an additional five businesses had been granted licences.

The most prevalent FinTechs in Sierra Leone are MMOs. There are three main MMOs operating in the country, Orange Money, Q-Cell and AfriMoney. The MMOs do not engage in traditional financial intermediation such as savings and lending. Instead, they enable financial services, including lending and savings. MMOs act as conduits for receiving and transferring funds, including loans, between various parties. For instance, Orange has an arrangement with Empire Solutions MFI, whereby Orange facilitates transactions between Empire Solutions and its borrowers. These services help micro and small enterprises build a financial services track record and contribute to improved financial literacy. The savings facility is particularly important.

However, apart from MMOs, fewer than a third of the emerging FinTechs that have entered the sandbox since its inception in 2017 have been licensed and thrived.

One of the BSL Sandbox graduates was MKB.

MKB is a social finance platform that graduated from the BSL sandbox in 2018 with a licence to operate. It serves as a savings vehicle for small savers and facilitates lending. MKB has digitised savings groups, such as VSLAs, enabling them to manage their savings efficiently. Additionally, MKB is integrated with digital payment systems like Orange Money and AfriMoney.

Group savings and lending have existed for many years but have traditionally been informal, which can lead to errors, abuse and distrust. MKB aims to formalise savings and lending within groups, making the processes safer and easier to manage. While MKB does not directly lend to participants, members can borrow a multiple of their savings from their respective groups through MKB, ensuring a safe and secure process.

Participants supported by MKB build up a financial profile through their savings, which can eventually help them obtain loans from formal financial institutions. MKB is actively working to establish linkages with banks and other financial institutions in Sierra Leone.

5. The Demand Side – MSMEs in Sierra Leone.

As with Section 3 above, it is useful to first look at the MSME sector generally before delving into the gender aspects of it.

In its MSME Development Strategy 2013, the Ministry of Trade and Industry of Sierra Leone stated that:

Sierra Leone's private sector is characterised by a large informal sector, an estimated 70% of the economy. The formal sector is dominated, in terms of number of businesses, by SMEs, with a few large-scale businesses directed to mining and commercial agriculture. At the most fundamental level, small businesses in Sierra Leone are constrained by weak and highly fragmented markets. Though improved, the business environment remains a costly one, particularly for small business owners, many of whom struggle to compete with lower-cost imports. Even with profitable projects in hand, small businesses can rarely access loans and other key financial services.

It is in this "pool" that women-owned businesses operate.

Unlike small businesses, it is relatively easy to identify which businesses can be termed "large" in the context of Sierra Leone. They are mainly multinationals, such as Bollore, the seaport specialists who have the concession to manage the container terminal in Sierra Leone; Orange, the mobile telephone company; and CSE[30] Ltd, the Senegal-based roads construction company. There are also large-scale businesses in mining and commercial agriculture, such as Sierra Rutile and PEE CEE & Sons, respectively.

The difficulty comes with identifying micro, small or medium enterprises, which constitute the vast majority of businesses in the economy. Currently, the term SME is used loosely and generically because there are no clear parameters set in Sierra Leone. We believe that this discussion – i.e. the parameters for identifying a micro, small and medium-sized businesses – must be the starting point of an analysis of SME (and therefore women's) access to finance.

4.1 SME segmentation and definition

One of the key early findings of this study was that having clear criteria or parameters by which to define micro SMEs is critically important when discussing access to finance. Essentially, the generalisation of SMEs can be highly misleading as it assumes that they are a homogenous group and suffer the same constraints. Medium-sized businesses, for example, have a reasonable chance of being able to offer traditional collateral, i.e. land and buildings, to obtain loans, compared to most small and, almost certainly, all micro-enterprises. Categorising MSMEs correctly in the Sierra Leone context should be a formal exercise. It is key to the development of specific financial products for each business size. The collateral (as well as, perhaps, the repayment terms) requirements, for example, will be different for a medium-sized business than for a MSME.

[30] CSE stands for Sahelian Company of Enterprise. It is a Senegalese-based engineering firm.

There are internationally accepted definitions of SMEs, which are largely based on a mix of number of employees, annual turnover, and assets and capital invested. These include the International Finance Corporation (IFC) definition in Table 7, with its corresponding definition in Sierra Leone in Table 8.

Table 7. IFC MSME definition

IFC MSME Definition				**MSME Loan Size Proxy**
INDICATOR	**EMPLOYEES**	**TOTAL ASSETS (US$)**	**ANNUAL SALES (US$)**	**LOAN SIZE AT ORIGINATION**
Micro enterprise	<10	<$100,000	<$100,000	<$10,000
Small enterprise	10–49	$100,000–<$3 million	$100,000–<$3 million	<$100,000
Medium enterprise	50–300	$3 million–$15 million	$3 million–$15 million	<$1 or $2 million[31]

The Sierra Leone SMEDA Act 2016, defines SMEs in terms of annual turnover only, as depicted in Table 8, below.

Table 8. SMEDA definition of SMEs in Sierra Leone

Business size	**Annual turnover (sales) (NLe.)[32]**	**IFC equivalent (NLe.)**
Small	<100,000	1,100,000
Medium	100,000-500,000	33,000,000-165,000,000
Large	> 500,000	> 165,000,000

A major reason for the need to segment the different levels of enterprise size is that, as we shall see in the next section, the different financial institutions cater for various businesses sizes. For example, micro and even small enterprises, are not suitable customers for commercial banks and are better catered for by MFIs. This is not only for credit access but also even for savings facilities.

[31] Due to the depreciation of the Leone since 2016, the annual turnover thresholds used in table 8 are 40% higher than used in the SMEDA Act.
[32] NLe. refers to New Leones i.e. which exchange rate is approximately NLe:25:US1.00

6. The Demand Side – Women's Access to Finance in Sierra Leone

This section starts by looking at the demand-side in general before going on to focus of women.

It would seem from the foregoing sections, that there is a raft of financial services available for everyone. From CUs to commercial banks (and all those many more in between). One would be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss is about regarding access to finance generally and for women specifically.

From the 2022 Ecorys movable assets study,[33] the key factor that constrains in access to finance (for both genders) is inadequate collateral for the following reasons:

- Movable asset not accepted as collateral by commercial banks
- Fixed asset value less than value of loan requested
- Fixed asset collateral not perfected
- Fixed asset collateral offered is located in rural areas
- No fixed assets.

The other main factors are:

- High interest rates
- Repayment terms: These include repayment periods that are too short and not aligned with business cashflow.

Women, who dominate the informal sector, are reported to be disproportionately affected by the low financial services penetration. The World Bank *Enterprise Survey 2017*[34] reports that only 15.4% of women enterprise owner-operators have ever borrowed from formal financial institutions.

There have, however, been improvements in the financial sector over the past 3 years or so in a number of areas in terms of access to finance, including for women, but there is still a long way to go to get anywhere near gender parity in access to finance. Access to finance initiatives have included:

- The establishment of the collateral registry where movable assets should be more acceptable as collateral
- Significant development and usage of digital financial services including loan management via digital means, e.g. mobile money transactions via telecoms companies such as Orange
- The growth in the number of agents for mobile money operators and commercial banks
- The advent of a number of impact and social investments targeting SMEs, for equity investments, e.g. the Acumen Fund
- New sources of finance being made available for MSMEs such as the Government's MUNAFA Fund being executed by SMEDA and other projects funded by development partners, such as UNDP's Growth Accelerator

[33] See footnote 12.
[34] World Bank (2017) *Enterprise Survey 2017: Sierra Leone,* https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2975

- Allowing MFIs to begin taking deposits via the Other Financial Institutions Act 2001 and Guidelines for Other Deposit-Taking institutions 2011.

But still, the disparity persists.

6.1 Identified gaps

Lack of gender-specific products in most institutions: Most commercial banks, CBs, COMFIs and DTMFIs lack targeted financial products for women. Based on the desk review, only SLCB and Ecobank appear to have targeted products for women.

Geographical disparity: CBs, critical in rural areas, mostly lack products designed for women. Only 1 out of 17 CBs have a targeted product, leaving a significant gap in rural financial services for women.

Limited microfinance coverage: Despite the fact that the majority of MFI clients are women, this does not appear to be a deliberate strategy. It seems that MFIs have not sufficiently deliberately targeted women. Further, their geographical coverage is limited. This limits the reach and effectiveness of microfinance in supporting women-led businesses.

Undercapitalisation: Most MFIs and other non-bank financial institutions such as CBs, are undercapitalised and so cannot serve as many clients.

Inadequate availability of non-banking financial products: Financial products, such as leasing and insurance, are not readily available in the financial sector generally and the situation is worse for women-owned businesses. This is a critical gap in financial services generally and for women specifically.

Further evidence of the challenges that lead to gaps in financial parity were discussed at a *Women in Tourism Workshop* held in October 2024. The main workshop themes were:

- **Financial literacy:** Highlighting the importance of understanding financial products, services, and processes for informed decision-making
- **Networking and collaboration:** Fostering connections among women entrepreneurs, financial institutions, and industry professionals to strengthen support networks
- **Equitable information:** Information on financing options should be shared in both urban and rural areas without barriers to access
- **Access to finance:** Addressing the need for simplified and more supportive financing processes for women-owned businesses within the tourism sector
- **Alternative funding sources:** Exploring innovative financing options beyond traditional loans.

The one-day workshop was structured into three sessions. Recommendations from Session 1 included:

- That businesses utilise various entrepreneurship or BDS hubs across the country for essential knowledge and advisory support
- Women to file complaints with their banks' customer services care departments if issues arise and escalate to the BSL if unresolved
- Commercial banks to implement regular customer service training and workshops
- Costs associated with registration and licensing for women-led businesses to be reduced

- Special loans for women with simplified criteria for access to be developed.

Session 2 provided the following recommendations:

- **Transparency in loan interest:** Banks to clearly explain interest rates and other charges associated with loans as well as account holding
- **Information dissemination:** Banking information to be shared with the Sierra Leone Chamber of Commerce (and other business associations), so they can share among their members
- **Accessibility for the physically challenged:** Improved access to financial advisory services for physically challenged individuals, ensuring they can obtain the necessary financial support and advice.

The main theme of Session 3 was market and investment readiness. It was aimed at equipping participants with strategies, tools and a step-by-step roadmap for becoming investment and market ready, as well as scaling up their businesses.

The main recommendation from this session was that women needed easier access to relevant information on alternative funding options to traditional bank loans.

The participants were also introduced to new types of financing such as venture capital funds, angel investors, private equity funds, development financing institutions, accelerators and incubators.

Commentary on the workshop: The key recommendations which came from the workshop were:

- Need for financial literacy training
- Need for increased information dissemination/sharing
- Need for increased networking and collaboration
- Need for more transparency in banks' charges
- Less stringent collateral requirements
- Lowering the cost of finance
- The need for other sources and forms of financing. In short, better financial product development.

It is important to note that non-financial constraints on women's access to finance were also discussed. These included the complexities and costs of starting/running businesses (National Revenue Authority, National Social Security and Insurance Trust, local council tax, tourism tax, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Electricity Distribution and Supply Agency, water rates, etc.)

These are all very pertinent points as an unregistered and non-compliant business will find it difficult to access finance from formal financial institutions.

These challenges are not unique to women-owned businesses but, for women, this is compounded by other female-specific biases, such as cultural biases, sexism and lack of financial and non-financial resources.

The discussion of these problems highlights that several other non-financial sector factors hinder women's access to finance.

Conclusion: This report has looked at the access to finance ecosystem, i.e. regulation, FSP, the nature and make-up of businesses generally. This latter point is critical as it underscores the need to ensure that financial products are not of the one-size-fits-all variety, especially when they involve women-owned businesses. Here, various other factors can come into play regardless of the size of the business. For example, most women have added responsibility in their homes, some may come from cultures where women do not own land, etc. We also, in Section 3, looked at those acts (such as the Domestic Violence Act), which are meant to empower women generally. While they are not financial inclusion based, their enactment and, more critically, effective implementation will have a knock-on effect on women's ability to access finance.

The issues these acts are meant to address are just a few of the barriers affecting women's access to finance.

In Section, 7, we shall give an overview of what the literature from the desk review lists as barriers to women's financial inclusion.

This will be followed in the same section, by the enablers to counteract the barriers and help close the gender disparity.

7. Barriers to and enablers of women's financial inclusion in Sierra Leone – literature review

Our review found a range of literature on women's access to finance in Sierra Leone, indicating a growing interest, finally, in this area. However, despite this recent awareness, there still appears to be significant gaps in understanding the nuances of women's financial access across different regions, sectors and business sizes and in doing something tangible about it.

The GEWE Act and Regulations are the closest Sierra Leone has come. These gaps underscore the need for more comprehensive research, as a more profound understanding could shape more effective policies for women's financial inclusion and economic empowerment.

7.1 Barriers to Women's Financial Inclusion

Below is a summary of the barriers to women's financial inclusion in Sierra Leone identified in the literature:

National Study on Women's Access to Financing in Sierra Leone (2014)

Barriers: This comprehensive report finds that limited financial literacy, lack of collateral and restricted access to credit are prevalent challenges for women entrepreneurs, especially those running micro and small enterprises. It points to the need for tailored financial solutions to support women-owned businesses better.

UN Women Study on Gender and Economic Empowerment in Sierra Leone (2019)

Barriers: This study identifies social norms and legal constraints as primary barriers to women's access to credit and savings. It emphasises how deeply rooted gender biases in society and restrictive legal frameworks hinder women's financial autonomy and limit their economic agency.

World Bank Report on Financial Inclusion in Sierra Leone (2020)

Barriers: The report highlights low financial literacy, limited access to formal banking services, and cultural barriers as significant obstacles to women's economic participation. These factors restrict women's ability to engage with financial products and services, limiting their economic potential.

Women Entrepreneurs in Sierra Leone (2022)

Barriers: This study highlights the perceived risk of obtaining credit among women entrepreneurs due to high interest rates and a lack of trust in financial providers. Many women view the cost of borrowing as prohibitive, which prevents them from seeking financial support for business expansion.

Barriers and Enablers of Women's Participation in Revenue Generation in Sierra Leone (2023)

Barriers: The report from UNDP underscores limited access to finance as a significant barrier affecting women's ability to participate in revenue-generating activities. It points to systemic financial constraints that prevent women from scaling their businesses and increasing their economic contributions.

Reducing Financial Gender Disparity in Sierra Leone (2024)

Barriers: This article discusses the gender gap in bank account ownership in sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra Leone. The significant disparity between the percentage of women and men with bank accounts reflects broader financial exclusion issues, which restrict women's access to savings, credit and investment opportunities.

Overall, further research underscores that the barriers to women's financial inclusion are numerous and multifaceted and can perhaps be collated into the following:

- **Lack of collateral and credit history.** Women often lack the formal collateral and credit history required by traditional financial institutions, limiting their ability to access loans and credit facilities essential for business startup or expansion.[35] This barrier is exacerbated in rural areas where property and asset ownership by women is uncommon due to prevailing cultural norms
- **Financial literacy and awareness.** According to the 2018 Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey, in many parts of Sierra Leone, women experience lower literacy levels than men. In addition, limited financial literacy among women inhibits their understanding of financial products and services. This gap is exacerbated in rural and marginalised communities with minimal access to financial education.[36] Without proper financial literacy, women are less likely to engage with formal financial systems and are more vulnerable to exploitative informal lending practices
- **Gender bias in financial institutions.** Gender biases within financial institutions impact women's loan approval rates and terms, resulting in higher interest rates and stricter repayment conditions than men.[37] These biases are often rooted in societal norms and perceptions of women's roles and capabilities, influencing the attitudes and decisions of FSPs.

7.2 Enablers to Women's Financial Inclusion in Sierra Leone

Similarly, our desk review highlighted the enablers to women's financial inclusion identified in the literature. They are in fact the "flip side" of the barriers.

World Bank Report on Financial Inclusion in Sierra Leone (2020)

Enablers: The report advocates for policy reforms to enhance financial education and expand access to microfinance initiatives tailored for women. These recommendations are aimed at building financial literacy and making financing options more accessible and appealing to women, which could increase their economic participation.

UN Women Study on Gender and Economic Empowerment in Sierra Leone (2019)

Enablers: This study calls for gender-responsive policies addressing women's specific barriers. It emphasises that policies promoting women's economic agency through targeted interventions can

[35] ADB (2019) *Women's Economic Empowerment in Asia and the Pacific.*
[36] CGAP (2020) *Financial Inclusion Insights: Women's Access to Finance in Low-Income Countries.*
[37] IFC (2018) *Banking on Women: Unlocking Finance for Women Entrepreneurs.*

be powerful enablers, as they help dismantle structural barriers and encourage women's active participation in the financial sector.

National Study on Women's Access to Financing in Sierra Leone (2014)

Enablers: The study suggests that creating tailored financial solutions for women entrepreneurs, particularly those in micro and small enterprises, could significantly enhance their financial access. By addressing the unique needs of women-led businesses, financial products can become more accessible and supportive of their growth.

Women Entrepreneurs in Sierra Leone (2022)

Enablers: This study highlights the need for affordable financing options and trust-building measures between financial institutions and women entrepreneurs. It suggests that reducing interest rates and fostering a trustworthy relationship with women-owned businesses can encourage women to seek credit and expand their enterprises.

Barriers and Enablers of Women's Participation in Revenue Generation in Sierra Leone (2023)

Enablers: This UNDP report emphasises the potential of improved access to credit as a significant enabler for women's economic activities. It suggests that addressing the financial access gaps for women can enhance their capacity to contribute to national revenue generation and engage more actively in the economy.

Reducing Financial Gender Disparity in Sierra Leone (2024)

Enablers: This article highlights the role of advocating for gender-sensitive government policies as a critical enabler for women's financial inclusion. It emphasises that policy efforts to reduce the gender gap in bank account ownership can improve financial access for women, thereby empowering them economically and narrowing the disparity between men and women in financial inclusion.

While reviewing other literature, we identified several other critical enablers of women's access to finance, including:

- **Microfinance and community-based initiatives.** MFIs and community-based savings groups have been pivotal in expanding financial access for women. Case studies from organisations like BRAC in Bangladesh and Grameen Bank in India demonstrate the effectiveness of microcredit in empowering women entrepreneurs.[38] These initiatives provide financial resources, social support networks and training that enhance women's financial management skills
- **Digital financial services.** Technological advancements have transformed financial inclusion landscapes through mobile banking and digital financial services. Innovations such as mobile money platforms (e.g. M-Pesa in Kenya) have enabled women, even in remote areas, to conduct financial transactions securely and conveniently.[39] Digital financial services reduce the need for physical bank branches, lowering costs and increasing accessibility for women
- **Policy and regulatory reforms.** Progressive policy reforms aimed at gender equality and financial inclusion have shown promise. Regulatory frameworks that promote women-friendly financial products and mandate gender-disaggregated data collection are critical

[38] BRAC (2021). *Microfinance for Women: Empowering Entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.*
[39] GSMA (2020) *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020.*

steps towards addressing systemic barriers.[40] Effective implementation and enforcement of these policies ensure that financial institutions are held accountable for their practices and are encouraged to innovate in ways that benefit women.

[40] World Bank (2021) *Promoting Women's Financial Inclusion: Policy and Regulatory Perspectives.*

8. Access to finance for women-owned business – African comparisons

Limited access to finance for women is not unique to Sierra Leone.

To better measure the extent of the problem in Sierra Leone, it is useful to put it into the perspective of how much (if at all) of a problem it is in other African countries. That is not to say that the problem is not acute if it is the same in other countries. The main objective of looking at the experiences of other countries is to examine what they have done/are doing, to alleviate the problem.

This section looks at the following countries for comparison:

- Nigeria
- Ghana
- Rwanda.

8.1 Nigeria

An October 2024 study in Nigeria[41] provided the following findings and recommendations.

Key domain areas analysed in the study included: business structure, access conditions, current demand profile, supply conditions, barrier analysis, influence of unlicensed financing institutions, securitisation frameworks and roles of enabling institutions.

Findings

The table below compares findings from the study similar to those found by our study in Sierra Leone. These are a mix of supply- and demand-side factors.

Table 9. Sierra Leone women's access to finance comparison with Nigeria

Nigeria findings	Sierra leone findings
Only 25.9% of respondents reported accessing finance from commercial financing institutions.	Very low percentage of women have access to commercial financing institutions.
Women-owned enterprises (WoEs) prefer non-loan financing options (family, esusu and cooperatives). However, when seeking loans, microfinance banks are the preferred source because of the flexibility in collateral requirement and the relative speed of disbursement.	This is the same in Sierra Leone, where MFI clients are overwhelmingly female.
Microfinance banks currently do not have the needed capital to meet the demand for finance from WoEs.	Similarly, MFIs (and other non-bank financial institutions) have limited capital for lending.

[41] Investment Climate Reform Facility (ICR) (October 2024) *Enhancing Access to Finance for Women Owned Enterprises.*

WoE are perceived to be prudent in relation to their demand for finance and to have better loan repayment behaviour making them a niche market segment.	This is the same experience from financial institutions in Sierra Leone.
Due to relatively high interest rates and poor collateral capacity, the supply of financing for assets like manufacturing equipment and other processing equipment is very low.	High interest rates and stringent collateral requirements are major barriers to access.

The Nigeria study also found that the following factors influence the low access to finance for WoEs. The literature review for our study found most of these not dissimilar to Sierra Leone.

The key demand-side factors include:[42]

- Low annual turnover
- Low level of education and financial literacy
- Low asset ownership
- Low level of business formalisation
- Poor participation in women cooperatives
- Poor access to BDS
- Cultural and family factors
- Generally high level of fear of negative perception and harassment associated with loan defaults
- Low awareness and poor uptake of insurance (and other financial) products.

The **findings** of the study are markedly similar to the Sierra Leone findings.

Most of the **recommendations** would also not be out of place for Sierra Leone. They include the following.

Policy

- Capitalise an MSME development fund of which 35% should be allocated for WoEs
- Institutionalise gender reporting, safeguarding and whistleblowing frameworks in banking institutions
- CBN to develop a tiered set of corporate account opening requirements that recognises limitations of the informal sector. *Note: Tiered KYC is already in place in Sierra Leone.*

Financial institutions

- Expand access to BDS and integrate same in the delivery of access to finance products
- Simplify loan application processes and communicate clear service timelines
- Implement more comprehensive value-chain-specific financing solutions that cover the entire ecosystem from access to input to market access, especially for agriculture
- Integrate and promote insurance packages as mitigants to credit risks, including climate change risks, critical for agriculture

[42] It should be noted (as mentioned earlier) that not all levels (sizes) of women-owned businesses have these constraints. These mainly tend to affect the micro and small women-owned businesses.

- Increase adoption of alternative forms of collateral, such as movable assets, business inventories, cash flow lending and group guarantee. Sierra Leone already has a collateral registry.

Development partners and public sector actors

- Develop and promote gender support networks for financial education
- Increase promotion of women cooperatives and other joint action interventions as access to finance enablers
- Enhance and prioritise partnerships with commercial banks, microfinance banks and BDS providers in the delivery of MSME-dedicated financing and financial literacy interventions
- Leverage BDS and joint action interventions as enablers in all access to finance interventions
- Stipulate a minimum level of securitisation to ensure sustainability for all access to finance (loan) interventions.

This set of recommendations from Nigeria emphasises an integrated financing package.

SME Development Agency of Nigeria[43] – specific recommendations

- Collaborate with relevant stakeholders to establish a digital platform for the dissemination of access to finance information for WoEs via text message and social media technologies.

Concluding remarks on Nigeria

Generally, it is clear that Nigeria and Sierra Leone have a lot in common regarding women's access to finance and the recommendations from their study are similar to those recommended here and in previous studies. Each can learn from the other's experiences.

8.2 Ghana

In Ghana, women's access to finance is affected by a complex interplay of factors, including discriminatory laws, low financial literacy, social norms and limited access to property rights, infrastructure and technology, hindering their ability to access and utilise financial services.

The factors include:[44]

1. Discriminatory laws and regulations:

- **Limited property rights:** Women's limited access to and control over property can restrict their ability to provide collateral for loans, hindering their access to credit
- **Gender bias in inheritance and property ownership:** Laws and customs that discriminate against women in inheritance and property ownership further limit their economic opportunities and access to finance
- **Bureaucracy and complex procedures:** Complex and time-consuming procedures for opening accounts and accessing credit can disproportionately affect women, who may have less time and resources to navigate these systems.

[43] This is the equivalent of Sierra Leone' s SMEDA.
[44] 2022 Alliance for Financial Inclusion (AFI) - The Role Regulators Play in Closing Financial Inclusion Gender Gap: A Case Study of Ghana

2. Socio-cultural barriers:

- **Low financial literacy:** Lower levels of financial literacy among women can lead to a lack of understanding of financial products and services, and a reluctance to engage with formal financial institutions
- **Social norms and gender roles:** Traditional gender roles and social norms can restrict women's economic activities and their ability to make independent financial decisions
- **Lack of trust in financial institutions:** Negative experiences with formal financial institutions, such as high interest rates or perceived discrimination, can lead to a preference for informal sources of finance, which may not be sustainable or reliable.

3. Infrastructure and access:

- **Limited access to technology:** Lack of access to mobile phones and the internet, which are increasingly important for accessing financial services, can further marginalise women
- **Geographic barriers:** Women in rural areas may face significant challenges in accessing financial institutions and services due to limited infrastructure and transportation options
- **Lack of financial infrastructure in rural areas:** The lack of financial infrastructure in rural areas, such as banks and ATMs, makes it difficult for women in these areas to access financial services.

4. Demand-side factors:

- **Risk aversion:** Women may be more risk averse than men, leading them to avoid taking on debt or investing in risky ventures, even if they have access to financial services
- **Fear of failure:** Women entrepreneurs may be hesitant to seek funding for their businesses due to a fear of failure and the potential consequences of debt.

Government of Ghana's response

The Government of Ghana's National Financial Inclusion and Development Strategy (2017–2022) set out to increase access to finance for women as part of a comprehensive strategy to increase financial inclusion to underpin inclusive macroeconomic growth and development.

In Ghana, the gap in access between men and women as of 2021, had widened to 11%, compared with 9% that had persisted since 2017, although the percentage of women accessing finance had increased from 27% in 2011 to 63% in 2021.

Concluding remarks on Ghana

As with Nigeria, women in Ghana and Sierra Leone share very similar access to finance constraints. Some of the responses from the government and Bank of Ghana were also similar. It is heartening to note, however, that the percentage of women accessing finance increased by 36% in 10 years.

8.3 Rwanda

Financial inclusion: Rwanda has made substantial gains in financial inclusion, increasing the number of females with access to financial services from 92% in 2020 to 96% in 2024. The gender gap has been maintained at just one percentage point (96% men versus 97% women in 2024).

Despite this progress, significant gender disparities persist in the uptake and use of formal financial services. For instance, only 17% of women hold bank accounts, compared to 27% of men, highlighting deeper structural issues such as, low financial literacy, low formal employment opportunities, lack of decision-making power, cultural norms and other matters constraining women's economic agency.

The uptake of mobile money has been transformative, with 73% of women using these services, up from 55% in 2020. Although digital finance has narrowed the gender gap in some areas, persistent gaps exist in the use of more complex formal financial products, such as credit (9%), insurance (7%) and investment (12%) vehicles.

In addition, there is still a gap between rural and urban women in terms of using formal financial services with 95% of urban women using formal financial products or services, compared to 87% of rural women.

The issues in Rwanda:[45]

Gender-sensitive financial products and services: There is a fundamental mismatch between FSPs offerings and the needs of women and women-owned and -led businesses.

Thirty-eight per cent of women-owned MSMEs are credit constrained, compared with 26% of men-owned MSMEs, and there remains a lack of choice of financial products and services specifically tailored to meet women's needs. It is also important to note that women are less likely than men to approach banks to ask for further information on products

Quality of sex-disaggregated data collected: The National Bank of Rwanda has experienced some challenges regarding the quality of some data it receives from its supervised FSPs, as it depends on the data maintenance and management information systems of the FSPs.

Need for greater collaboration and coordination between stakeholders: There is a strong need for collaboration and coordination between market players when advancing women's financial inclusion. There is inadequate information sharing, duplication of efforts, unequal distribution of interventions in districts and regions, as well as insufficient systematic monitoring, evaluation and reporting of interventions about women's financial inclusion.

These are among the supply-side barriers.

Below are the demand-side barriers.

Lack of financial knowledge: For these non-borrowers, the top three reasons were because they do not need to (38%), because they were worried paying back the loan (34%) although their rate of non-performing loans (NPL) is lower than that of men and because they did not have the required collateral (15%).

Lack of access to networking opportunities: While such constraints are faced by both genders, they affect each group in different ways, with a more negative impact on women. This is due to additional social responsibilities (unpaid care and domestic work), which limit the time and flexibility needed to scale up their businesses.

[45] Alliance for Financial Inclusion (2023) *Increasing Women's Financial Inclusion and Closing the Women's SME Credit Gap in Rwanda through Enabling Financial Policy and Regulation.*

Measures to increase access to finance for women include:

- Driving greater gender diversity within the National Bank of Rwanda (the Central Bank) and to conduct a Gender Diversity in the Workplace study
- Starting to automatically pull supply-side, sex-disaggregated, financial and non-financial data on financial inclusion from banks, MFIs and non-bank financial institutions through its Electronic Data Warehouse by June 2018
- Increasing the number and membership of savings groups by 20% and linking 64% of them to formal channels through digital finance and FinTech
- Launching a gender-responsive National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS). Rwanda is now on Phase III (2021–2025) of that strategy.

Concluding remarks on Rwanda

Most of the issues in Rwanda are similar to Sierra Leone. Rwanda does, however, appear to have made much greater progress in women's financial inclusion than Sierra Leone. Also, like Sierra Leone, it has launched an NFIS.

Rwanda's financial inclusion for women is much higher than Sierra Leone's which suggests that their interventions have been working. The key intervention has been the *'transformative uptake of mobile money'*.

Comments on comparator countries

There is little doubt that women in Sierra Leone share similar constraints with women in the African countries briefly reviewed here. These include:

- Stringent collateral requirements
- Low financial literacy
- High cost of finance from financial institutions
- Inadequate product diversification
- Cultural biases
- And many, many more.

The responses by government, Central Banks and the whole ecosystem have seen a few similarities but also some different initiatives. Rwanda, for example, now mandates that banks and all regulated financial institutions submit gender-disaggregated financial and non-financial data on financial inclusion.

Sierra Leone needs to take as much as possible from these initiatives through increased collaboration and information sharing between countries.

9. Key findings

The analysis reveals a landscape with promising but underutilised potential for women's financial inclusion. The findings are many but we highlight key ones below.

Limited access to financial products and services. Although there is growing interest from banks and microfinance institutions in women-specific products, most commercial banks and RFIs lack gender-targeted products, limiting women's ability to access finance, particularly for agricultural and business investments.

Geographic and structural barriers. Rural women, primarily engaged in agriculture, face significant barriers to accessing formal financial services. CBs, vital to rural areas, offer few products tailored to women and mobile money solutions have limited penetration beyond urban areas. Structural factors, such as lack of formal collateral and limited financial literacy, exacerbate these challenges.

Positive developments in digital financial services. Sierra Leone's FinTech sector, which includes mobile money providers like EziPay and Afro Mobile Money, holds promise for reaching unbanked populations, particularly women in rural areas. However, gaps remain in rural outreach and financial literacy, which prevent women from fully utilising digital financial services.

Strong demand but insufficient support in agriculture. Women-led agricultural enterprises have an apparent demand for financial services tailored to their needs. Current offerings in agricultural finance are limited and often do not consider the cyclical nature of agriculture, which affects women's ability to meet standard repayment schedules.

Opportunities for Policy and Partnership. GEWE 2022, GEWE Regulations 2024 and NSFI offer frameworks supporting women's financial access. Strategic partnerships between the government, financial institutions, development partners and NGOs have the potential to promote targeted financial products and improve financial literacy among women.

Stringent collateral requirement and high cost of borrowing. Collateral requirements, especially from commercial banks are major hindrances to women accessing finance. The, so far, disappointing performance of the collateral registry, which is meant to ease collateral issues, is frustrating.

Undercapitalisation of financial institutions: Most non-bank financial institutions are undercapitalised and especially those such as MFIs and CBs. These types are most suitable for providing financial services to MSMEs yet are unable to reach as many as they could have if adequately capitalised.

Similar challenges in other African countries: The problems of access to finance for women in Africa, are not unique to Sierra Leone. Most African countries face the same issues. However, access to finance for women in Sierra Leone appear to be much lower than in several other African countries.[46]

[46] This just an extrapolation of the four countries whose financial access was reviewed.

10. Key recommendations

As a desk top exercise, this review of women's access to finance in Sierra Leone has been comprehensive. However, a desk top review can only achieve so much. A truly comprehensive study with the potential to influence meaningful change is desirable. Perhaps the last comprehensive study on women's access to finance was over 10 years ago.[47]

The first recommendation is therefore for a more comprehensive study on the subject of women's access to finance.

The recommendations from this desktop review are important for guiding the MGCA and relevant stakeholders in improving financial inclusion for women. If these recommendations are accepted and implemented, they will assist in addressing identified barriers, making use of existing opportunities and promoting gender-sensitive financial products.

These recommendations will need to be further refined by the MGCA, as well as through discussions with FSPs, the BSL and selected business associations of women-owned businesses.

It is essential, however, that for these recommendations to be effective, the ministry must have the requisite capacity to oversee their implementation.

1. Undertake a more comprehensive study on the subject of women's access to finance

Objective: To establish a more definitive understanding of the issues affecting women's access to financial services and how best to address them for meaningful results.

Suggested actions:

- Disaggregate women (and all) businesses by size i.e. micro, small and medium. MGCA should work with SMEDA on this initiative
- Disaggregate women by location, i.e. rural and urban
- As part of the study, establish the financing gap for women in business, disaggregating the findings for the different business types, i.e. by size and by location
- Meet with a selection of women-owned businesses and associations to obtain first-hand information on their access to finance challenges
- Meet with financial institutions to assess the appropriateness of their financial products and services for women in business (especially by size, location)
- Assess (a mix of desk reviews and interviews) the achievements of various financial inclusion initiatives and especially those that seek to improve women's access to financial services.

2. Funding and other support from the MoF, BSL and development partners

Objective: To create funding mechanisms led by the MoF and BSL that enhance financial access for women.

Suggested actions:

- Establish a Credit Guarantee Fund to incentivise FSPs to offer women-specific loans. Development partners should be included in this initiative

[47] AFFORD, Cherie Blair Institute (2014) *National Study on Women's Access to Financing in Sierra Leone.*

- Investigate the processes involved in and the possibility of creating a local currency gender bond. Again, development partners could be included in this initiative
- Seek financial support for the capitalisation of non-bank FSPs (e.g. MFIs, FSAs, VSLAs, etc.) especially those which serve rural areas to enable them to expand their services and lending abilities.

3. BSL policies on financial products targeting women

Objective: To develop policies through the BSL that encourage financial institutions to develop and offer tailored financial products for women, supporting increased access to finance for women-owned businesses.

Suggested actions:

- Mandate financial institutions to offer products specifically catering to women-owned businesses. This must consider the different levels of business size
- Encourage FSPs especially commercial banks, to make use of the collateral registry especially for female borrowers
- Set differential collateral and credit requirements suited to each business category to improve accessibility
- Provide incentives to institutions offering gender-sensitive products
- Reduce the capital requirements to establish a women's bank or encourage it to start as a deposit-taking MFI[48]
- Assist FSPs catering to women's financial services' needs, to source capital/funding with a combination of grants, equity and debt
- Mandatory periodic submission by BSL-regulated FSPs of gender-disaggregated, financial, and non-financial data on financial inclusion from banks and all BSL-regulated financial institutions
- Encourage development of insurance products that address specific risks faced by women, especially in agriculture. Such as the very recent initiative between Ecobank and Activa insurance company
- Monitor compliance and impact through periodic reporting by financial institutions.

4. Tailor financial products for distinct categories of women-owned businesses

Objective: To develop a categorisation system for women-owned businesses that enables financial institutions to tailor financial products and services to meet the distinct needs of each category, thereby supporting more effective and inclusive financial access for women entrepreneurs.

Suggested actions:

- Disaggregate women-owned businesses by enterprise size, economic sector and location
- Develop tailored financial products specific to each category of women-owned businesses, including larger, small-scale, subsistence, and cooperative groups. These will include collateral, repayment terms
- Develop sensitisation and capacity-building programmes for FSPs on gender-specific financial needs

[48] The Women's Green Bank is in the process of being set by Ms. Naasu Fofanah.

- Develop a monitoring framework to assess the impact of these tailored financial products on each category of women-owned businesses.

5. Leverage technology

Objective: To expand mobile banking and digital financial services specifically for rural women by leveraging partnerships with FinTech companies, the BSL and telecommunications providers to create accessible, gender-responsive financial solutions.

Suggested actions:

- Collaborate with FinTech companies through BSL's Sandbox to develop digital solutions tailored to women financial needs and in various economic sectors
- Develop targeted financial literacy programmes to equip rural women with the skills to use digital financial services effectively
- Encourage telecommunications providers like Africell and Orange to integrate mobile banking solutions with options for short-term, low-interest loans for women entrepreneurs
- Scale up FinTech solutions modelled after successful platforms, such as HerVest, to offer savings, impact investments and credit to women in agriculture
- Counter infrastructural challenges with technology and agency banking to ensure more appropriate and expanded delivery of financial services to remote locations
- Monitor and evaluate the adoption and impact of these digital financial services on rural women's access to finance.

6. Enhance financial literacy programmes through partnerships and collaborations

Objective: Empower women with the knowledge and skills to use financial products and services effectively through collaboration with BSL, between financial institutions, government bodies, NGOs and development agencies.

Suggested actions:

- Working with the BSL's NSFI programme, implement comprehensive financial literacy programmes covering essential financial management to advanced financial planning training
- Tailor financial education materials and training sessions to address the specific challenges faced by women
- Explore joint initiatives to address barriers to financial inclusion and promote best practices in women-centric financial services
- Promote awareness and outreach programmes to inform women about available financial products
- Collaborate with NGOs, community organisations and FSPs to deliver these programmes at the grassroots level
- Increase outreach and support for women-led agricultural and business activities in rural areas.

7. Advocate for policy reforms and supportive frameworks

Objective: Engage policymakers to create supportive gender-specific legislation and regulatory frameworks.

Suggested actions:

- Advocate for policy reforms that empower women generally, giving them the confidence and self-assurance to seek financial services
- Push for the codification of cultural laws and norms which disenfranchise women.

8. Monitoring and evaluation

Objective: Continuously assess the impact of financial products on women's financial inclusion and economic empowerment.

Suggested actions:

- Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the effectiveness of financial products and programmes
- Collect and analyse data to refine and improve offerings based on women's feedback and evolving needs
- Regularly review and adjust strategies to ensure that financial products and services meet women's needs effectively
- Share findings widely to all stakeholders and at least regionally and even in the African continent.