



Hon. Bernadette Lahai holds a Ph.D in Agricultural Extension and Rural Development. She worked for 13 years at the Agricultural Research Institute in Sierra Leone, specializing in gender issues agricultural and technology research and development. Hon. Lahai also worked as a FAO National Consultant for a Women's Project in Sierra Leone, and as a Gender and Social Sector Expert in the development of the Sierra Leone Vision 2025. She joined politics in 2002 and has been a Parliamentarian since then. Hon. Lahai is a gender and women's activist, and member of many women's and professional organizations.

Women remain underrepresented in parliaments worldwide. Why, in your experience, is it so important to have women in parliament? What can they bring to further assist development?

As a first point, it is women's constitutional right to vote and be voted for. Numerically, they make up 51% of the population and since politics is about numbers, we expect that the gender that forms the largest proportion of the population should have that same representation in parliament. In addition, it makes economic sense to fully utilise all of a country's human resources, both potential and actual. 'Womanitics', or the use of women in development efforts, is increasingly viewed as highly efficient and necessary. Women bring their unique personal and group experiences to bear on legislation; they are by nature more long-term thinking, which is the foundation for the leap most newly industrialised countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have made. Women naturally work through consensus rather than competition, which could have positive effects on all parliamentary procedures. Finally, as women have historically been marginalised, they will strive to ensure that the laws parliament enacts serve to protect marginalised groups, including women, youth, the elderly, orphans, ethnic minorities and so forth.

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As a Member of Parliament in a post-conflict state, how have you experienced the role of your parliament in post-conflict reconstruction in Sierra Leone? What aspects have been most challenging to the institution, and what lessons could be learned from this?

Parliament has been instrumental in post-conflict reconstruction in three key ways. Firstly, with respect to legislation, it has repealed and incorporated the decrees of the military junta into laws, and has amended or passed new laws that address some of the causes of the conflict, such as the Political Party Registration Act, the establishment of the National Electoral Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the Small Arms and Light Weapons Commission, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Secondly, the parliament has worked on increased oversight of the executive for equitable and effective use of finances and funding. Finally, more attention is being paid to the representation of constituents and their needs, with an emphasis on those issues and challenges that government should seek to address. Considerable problems persist, however. The biggest challenge has been to put the national interest above party interests, due to the considerable influence of political parties on the decisions MPs take in parliament, and due to the tremendous power given to the President. In addition, parliament has an attrition rate of over 80%, transparency and accountability remain weak due to patronage. Politicisation of every issue in the country makes these features difficult to reform.

One of the Millennium Development Goals is to provide all children with basic education. Basic education is a building block for democracy, as it teaches us about 'vivre ensemble', the exclusion of violence, and the importance of dialogue. What tools do parliaments have at their disposal to help foster basic education for all? How can oversight of government, legal mechanisms, and lawmaking ensure that all children can attend primary school?

Consultation with constituents on needs, problems and potential solutions to educational needs is crucial, as is oversight of the executive. A parliamentary network for the exchange of experiences, expert hearings, and cooperation with CSOs could do much to improve policy-making on this topic as well. What is important as well, and this goes beyond education as a policy field alone, is to ensure communication between all stakeholders so that gaps in implementation can be identified and adequate corrective measures can be taken. This is done through setting and reviewing performance targets; field visits; keeping citizens informed and soliciting their technical, financial and moral feedback; and through accurate supervision of the educational projects and through oversight of the executive.

In fragmented societies, such as post-conflict countries, the link between democratic institutions and citizens is particularly important. MPs should ensure that they represent their constituents adequately by communicating with them through a constant and ongoing dialogue. At the same time, exchanges with their peers in parliament should ensure that a consensus can be reached on policies. In this light, the role of parliament in rebuilding the social and political structures of the nation, and in achieving reconciliation, is crucial. How can parliaments best play this role?

The main way for parliaments to play this role is by ensuring through legislation that both restorative and retributive justice are undertaken to forestall reoccurrence. At the same

time, legislation should redress the factors that led to the conflict in the first place such as social inclusion, free and fair elections, accountability and transparency, political tolerance, etc. Throughout, accountability is indispensable, as is a constant dialogue with constituents. Lastly, parliament should be alert to early warning signs of imminent conflict, and be proactive and forward-looking in its approach – only then can tragedies be prevented and can reconstruction achieve lasting, sustainable results.

The Millennium Development Goals are the most well-known mechanism in the global fight against poverty. How important are pro-poor policies in your region, and what can parliaments do to design and implement them with a view to achieving the MDGs?

The importance of pro-poor policies has been reflected in Sierra Leone's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, the incorporation of gender budgeting in the budget process, prioritising rural and agricultural development as means of reversing rural-urban migration, and projects that will increase access of the poor to sustainable income, and a pro-poor focus in the development budget. What can and should still be done in the future is speedily ratify

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loans and grants focusing on pro-poor programmes, and monitor their progress so that potential setbacks and needs can be addressed. In addition, parliament should ensure that the domestic revenue base is strengthened and monitored so as to make adequate allocations to effectively implement pro-poor programmes. To support these initiatives, constituents should be educated concerning their roles and responsibilities, and leadership and skills training should be provided. Finally, as I have stressed before, effective oversight is absolutely essential – only that way can these programmes be truly efficient.