

Assessing the Role of the Sierra Leone Teacher's Union in Nation Building: A Case Study of Sierra Leone Teacher's Union, Freetown

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the pivotal role of the Sierra Leone Teacher's Union (SLTU) in the nation-building process of Sierra Leone. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study assesses the SLTU's contributions, challenges, and impact on the educational sector. Findings indicate that while the union is crucial for advocating teacher's welfare and influencing policy, its effectiveness is often hampered by political interference, poor working conditions, and internal challenges. The study concludes that a synergistic relationship between the government and the SLTU is essential for achieving quality education and sustainable national development.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Education is the process of facilitating learning, the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values,

and habits. It occurs through various methods—storytelling, discussion, teaching, training, and research—often under the guidance of educators, though self-education is also possible (Dewey, 1944). While its objectives are culturally

specific, a universal aim of education is to transform human behaviour—shaping how individuals think, feel, and act. The role of education in national development is paramount; it is essential for producing a modern, free nation by driving economic growth through a skilled workforce, fostering national unity, and underpinning political democracy with a literate, informed electorate (Hanson & Brenbeck, 1996, as cited in Gbamanja, 2002). Ultimately, education is a tool for empowerment, equipping individuals to meet future challenges and lead meaningful lives.

Within this educational landscape, teacher unions have become a formidable force, particularly in the public sector. For over a century, they have advocated for educators, though their efficacy and very legitimacy are constantly politically challenged. Often portrayed in media as militant and self-serving, unions have faced significant headwinds from federal policies like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, which have sought to curtail traditional collective bargaining power (Strunk & Grissom, 2010). In response, unions have adopted a spectrum of strategies, from defensive postures to proactive partnerships and independent reform initiatives.

1.1 The Positive Effects of Education

The value of education extends far beyond the classroom. Research consistently shows its profound impact on societal well-being (Cleveland, 2014):

- A. **Poverty Reduction:** Education is a primary driver for escaping poverty. It provides the skills needed to secure employment and achieve self-sufficiency, breaking cycles of intergenerational deprivation.
- B. **Health Promotion:** Educated individuals, particularly mothers, experience significantly better health outcomes. A child born to an educated mother is 50% more likely to survive past age five, and each additional year of a mother's schooling reduces child mortality by 2%. Education also acts as a "social vaccine," drastically reducing the risk of HIV/AIDS.
- C. **Gender Gap Closure:** Education is a powerful tool for gender equity. It delays child marriage, empowers women to make

informed life decisions, and leads to smaller, healthier families.

- D. **Malnutrition Minimisation:** Educated populations are better equipped to fight hunger. Educated farmers adopt more effective techniques, and educating girls is identified as one of the most potent strategies to increase food security.

Economic Growth: There is a direct correlation between a nation's educational attainment and its economic prosperity. An educated workforce attracts investment, boosts productivity, and increases gross domestic product (GDP).

1.2 The Role of the Teacher

The teacher is the central agent in delivering these educational benefits. Teaching is a multifaceted profession requiring long hours and significant skill. Moore (1998) categorises the teacher's role into three primary functions:

- A. **Instructional Expert:** Planning, guiding, and evaluating learning.
- B. **Manager:** Structuring and maintaining an orderly learning environment.
- C. **Counsellor:** Acting as a sensitive observer of student behaviour and a collaborator with parents, administrators, and colleagues.

A trained teacher is more than a subject-matter expert; they are an "educationist" versed in pedagogical principles, contemporary methodology, and an understanding of the learner (Gbamanja, 2004). In many jurisdictions, such as Sierra Leone, these roles are codified in official documents that emphasise efficient service delivery, commitment to the profession and community, and ethical use of resources (Kuyateh et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2009).

The role of the teacher is foundational to societal progress, acting as a catalyst for socialisation, change, and development across all facets of life (Saharan & Sethi, 2009). Teachers are the bridge and springboard for economic growth, stability, and national development. In Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union (SLTU) stands as the primary professional and trade union organisation tasked with safeguarding the welfare of teachers and, by extension, the quality of

education. This article assesses the SLTU's role in nation-building, using its headquarters in Kissy as a case study, to analyse its historical evolution, contributions, and the persistent challenges within the educational landscape.

1.3 Historical Context of the SLTU

The genesis of the SLTU dates back to the early 20th century, rooted in the dissent of Anglican Church School teachers dissatisfied with their conditions of service. This led to the formation of the Church School Teachers' Union (CSTU) in 1901. However, its scope was limited, excluding teachers in non-government-assisted schools and the protectorate (now the provinces). To amplify their voice, the Sierra Leone Protectorate Teachers Union was formed in 1964.

A significant milestone was the merger of these two entities in 1940, forming the Amalgamated Teachers' Organisation. Internal leadership struggles plagued the organisation until a historic special delegate conference in Bo in 1963 resolved these differences, leading to the birth of the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union (SLTU). Under the leadership of President Mr W.L. Sherman and Secretary General Mr Tamba E. Yambasu (appointed in 1966), the newly unified SLTU successfully pressured the government to pass the pivotal 1964 Education Act. Article 63 of this act mandated the creation of the Joint Committee for Teachers, a formal negotiating body for teachers' salaries and conditions of service.

The union's history is marked by periods of internal revolution, notably in 1980 and 1990, where mass protests over stagnant development and delayed salaries led to the overthrow of executive committees. These upheavals underscore the union's dynamic and often contentious role in advocating for its members (SLTU Annual Records, 2016–2020).

1.4 The Problem Statement

The Sierra Leonean educational system faces multifaceted challenges that impede the nation-building process. Teachers struggle with large class sizes and disruptive students, limiting their ability to provide individual attention and complete syllabi effectively, which negatively impacts overall student performance (Field Research, 2021).

A critical issue is the lack of parental involvement. Many parents, either due to demanding livelihoods or their own limited education, are unable to support their children's academic progress. This is compounded by societal issues, such as the need for a stronger focus on girls' education and changing deep-seated mindsets, as highlighted by the Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs.

Furthermore, the SLTU itself grapples with a restrictive environment. The 1996 Collective Agreement remains the primary document protecting teachers' rights, yet the broader Education Act is perceived to limit the union's bargaining power. Instances of delayed salary approvals, leading to teachers working as volunteers, and tragic cases of non-payment of salaries—such as the documented female teacher who died in 2006/2007 while owed five months' pay—highlight the dire consequences of systemic neglect (SLTU Documentation).

1.5 Aim and Objectives

This study aims to assess the role of Sierra Leone Teacher's Union in nation-building. The objectives are as follows:

1. To assess the role of teachers as a pillar for national development.
2. To assess the role and responsibility of Teacher's Union in implementing national policy.
3. To outline prospective recommendations to the Government for supporting projects and activities of the Teacher's Union as partners in developing the nation.

1.6. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study draws on the work of scholars who posit that teacher unions occupy a dual role: a trade union function focused on member welfare and a professional function aimed at educational improvement (Barber, 1996; Bascia, 1998). Barber (1996) argues that these two functions are intrinsically linked; the success of one depends on the other.

The conceptual framework defines core concepts:

- A. Education is defined as "the training of people with a view to imparting intellectual or manual skills and the development of physical and moral qualities" (Page, 2001, as cited in Review of Educational Sector Analysis in Burkina Faso).
- B. Quality Education, according to Fredriksson (2004, p. 4), is "the education that best fits the present and future needs of particular learners... and the community in question, given the particular circumstances and prospects."
- C. Nation-Building is the process of constructing a national identity and unifying people within a state to ensure long-term political stability and viability.

This framework positions the SLTU as a crucial stakeholder responsible.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: TEACHER UNIONS AND THE REFORM LANDSCAPE

2.1 How Teacher Unions Influence Education Policies

Teacher unions exert influence through two primary channels: collective bargaining and political advocacy. Scholar Terry Moe (2011, p. 275) argues that their political power may be "even more consequential" than their bargaining power. This power stems from their substantial resources—dues from a large membership—which are deployed to influence elections, lobby for favourable policies, and oppose reforms they perceive as harmful (Winkler, Scull, & Zeehandelaar, 2012). This influence extends to all levels of government, from local school boards to state legislatures and federal campaigns, allowing unions to shape the educational policy environment significantly (Hess & Leal, 2005; Lott & Kenny, 2013).

2.2 Educational Reform Without Teacher Unions

The past thirty years have seen a trend towards centralised, top-down educational reform initiated by state and national governments (Urban, 2004). This shift has emphasised standardised curricula, accountability measures, and mandates, often at the expense of local decision-making and capacity building (Bascia & Rottmann, 2011). Within this constrictive environment, teacher unions often find themselves marginalised. When their priorities

align with policy, they are seen as compliant; when they oppose it, they are viewed as obstructions; and when they propose their own reforms, they are accused of overstepping (Bascia, 2003).

A central flashpoint in this conflict is collective bargaining. Critics argue that union contracts restrict administrative flexibility and inhibit reform (Strunk & Grissom, 2010). Policies like No Child Left Behind directly challenged bargaining agreements, for instance, by allowing for the removal of staff in persistently low-performing schools regardless of individual performance, clashing with standard "just cause" dismissal provisions in contracts (Krisbergh, 2005).

This has fuelled public antipathy, often amplified by media portrayals of unions as villains blocking progress (Goldstein, 2011). Documentaries like *Waiting for "Superman"* and studies linking unions to higher costs and lower performance have cemented this negative image in the public consciousness, fuelling support for reforms like vouchers and charter schools (Cooper & Sureau, 2008; Eberts, Hollenbeck, & Stone, 2004). Paradoxically, as these attacks have intensified, teacher unions have become increasingly the primary defenders of the public education system itself (Cooper & Sureau, 2008).

2.3 Teacher Unions' Reforms: Partnership and Independence

Contrary to their critics, a body of research depicts unions as active, committed participants in educational improvement (Bascia, 1994; Murray, 2004). Many have embraced "new unionism," a collaborative approach to bargaining that expands their role into professional and reform agendas (Urban, 2004).

- A. Unions as Reform Partners: Many unions have formed partnerships with districts and states to drive change. Initiatives often focus on Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) programs, which mentor new teachers and intervene to support struggling experienced teachers, as seen in pioneering programs in Toledo and Seattle (Murray, 2004). Other collaborations have developed new evaluation systems (e.g., Pittsburgh's RISE program) and innovative professional development opportunities (Hamill, 2011).
- B. Unions Reforming on Their Own:

Independently, unions often step in to fill systemic gaps. They provide professional development that states and districts do not, launch media campaigns to bolster support for public education (Bascia, 2008b), and even conduct their own research to inform policy (Bascia, 2003). They act as "test beds" for teacher-generated initiatives, from new curricula to student support programs, fostering bottom-up innovation (Bascia, 2000, 2009).

However, these partnerships are fragile. Their success often depends on the personalities of individual leaders rather than institutionalised practices, making them vulnerable to leadership changes (Johnson et al., 2007). Furthermore, collaborations can become unbalanced, forcing unions into accommodation rather than true partnership, especially on contentious issues like performance pay (Mead, 2006).

2.4 The "Good Union": Characteristics for Success

Successful, reform-minded unions share key organisational characteristics (Bascia, 2008a). They:

- A. **Articulate a Coherent Message:** They develop a clear vision for a supported education system and consistently communicate it, rather than merely reacting to others' agendas.
- B. **Understand Costs and Benefits:** They strategically assess the long- and short-term implications of partnerships and negotiated positions.
- C. **Address Member Diversity:** They offer a wide range of participation and leadership opportunities to meet the varied needs of their membership.
- D. **Avoid Internal Fragmentation:** They foster communication and coherence between internal departments (e.g., bargaining, professional development) that often operate in silos, sometimes at cross-purposes.
- E. **Exercise Leadership in Messaging:** They avoid reactive, defensive language and

instead work to shape a positive public discourse about teaching and teachers.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, utilising both qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis (Gay, 1992).

- A. **Sample and Sampling:** A simple random sampling technique was used to select 60 members from the SLTU headquarters in Kissy. Due to constraints, 50 members responded, representing a cross-section of the union's management and staff.
- B. **Data Collection:** Primary data were gathered through structured questionnaires and personal interviews. Secondary data was sourced from published materials, including SLTU management reports, newsletters, annual records, academic journals, and online resources.

Data Analysis: The collected data was analysed using Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Total Socio-Economic Value (TSEV) concepts. Results were presented through descriptive statistics, tables, and charts for clarity and impact.

IV. ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

This chapter focuses primarily on data analysis and discussion of the findings that the researcher has collected in the field of study. However, the analysis was conducted on both qualitative and quantitative methods, in which primary and secondary data were collected for discussions under review. Education is more than just curriculum and classrooms; it's the bedrock of a nation's future. At the centre of this vital system are two powerful forces: the individual teacher and the collective voice of their unions. This article explores their intertwined roles in shaping not only students but society itself. However, data analysis in this chapter is subdivided into the following headings based on the primary objectives of the study:

4.1 The Teacher's role: Architect for the future.

The profound role of a teacher as a nation builder cannot be overstated. They are far more than conduits of information; they are the

architects of character and the guardians of culture.

To fulfil this immense responsibility, educators must be lifelong learners themselves—constantly seeking knowledge, demonstrating strong character, and bringing creativity and innovation into their teaching. Through their perseverance, love, and sacrifice, teachers light the path that produces a nation's future leaders.

Their role is beautifully complex, blending the academic, the pedagogical, and the social. They are instructors, counsellors, and mentors (academic). They are motivators, evaluators, and facilitators of learning (pedagogical). Perhaps most importantly, they play crucial social roles: they are role models, confidants, surrogate parents, and guides who prepare students to participate fully in society.

A teacher's influence runs deep. Students are profoundly shaped by their teacher's compassion, integrity, and moral commitment. A respected teacher becomes a living example, their attitudes and ethics subtly woven into the fabric of their students' lives, especially during formative years when future plans are being made.

Ultimately, a civilisation is not built on abstract ideas alone; it is lived through the practical behaviour of its people. Teachers provide the vital link between concept and action. They create a learning environment pulsating with life, instilling in students a confidence in their culture, a respect for national values, and a strong moral compass. They help students stand firm on the foundations of tradition while reaching for new standards of academic excellence.

4.2 A Complicated Partnership: Teacher Unions and Educational Reform

The relationship between teacher unions and educational progress is nuanced. On one hand, organisations like the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU) play a direct role in systems that affect teacher quality and career progression.

However, a common critique, both historically and today, is that unions can become overly focused on the "bread and butter" issues—wages, benefits, and working conditions—sometimes at the expense of broader educational interests. Scholars like Bascia (1998) have noted this tendency, observing that such a focus can unfortunately

alienate the very learners the system is meant to serve.

This isn't to say professional development is ignored. Unions do engage in efforts to broaden teachers' roles and capabilities. Yet, the tangible benefits of these initiatives for students can sometimes be slow to materialise.

Despite this tension, their role is indispensable. As Vaillant (2005) emphasises, the support of teacher unions is critical for successful educational reform. They are highly organised, well-resourced bodies that represent the people who implement policy daily: the teachers. No meaningful educational policy can succeed without their consultation and buy-in. They are, therefore, essential partners at the policy table, capable of championing real, positive change in the educational landscape.

4.3 What the Research Tells Us: Teachers Weigh In

Our research sought to understand teachers' own perceptions of their unions' roles. The results, drawn from high agreement scores, paint a clear picture:

- A. A strong majority (73%) believes unions work to improve educational quality.
- B. An overwhelming 83% agree that unions have professional responsibilities.
- C. Most see unions as partners in policy-making (65%) and policy implementation (75%).
- D. 71% believe unions are instrumental in ensuring schools function effectively.
- E. Yet, a significant 76% agree that a union's highest priority is protecting teacher rights.

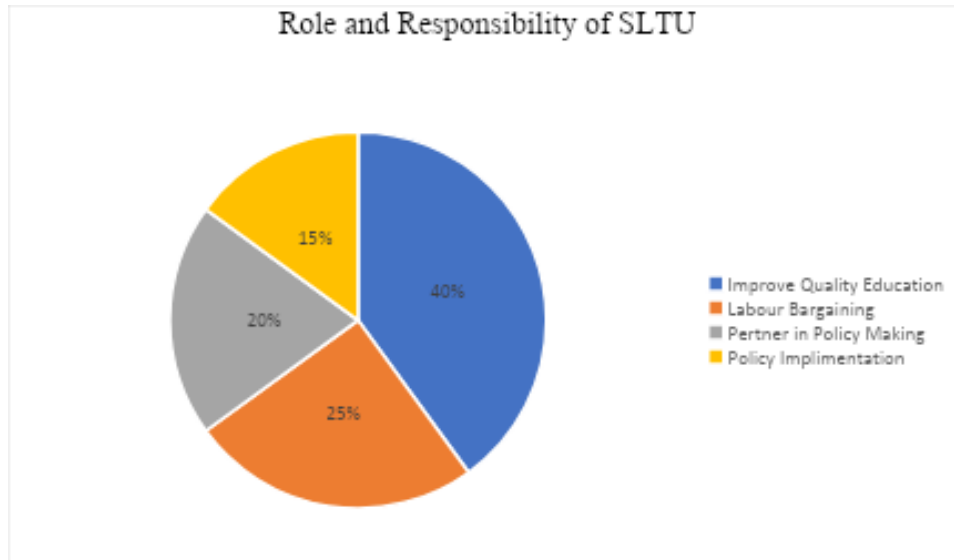
This data aligns with the literature, confirming that unions are seen as contributors to quality education and professional matters. However, it also supports the idea that their activist energy is most visible—and perhaps most effective—when championing member rights, such as during salary disputes.

This creates a fascinating duality. While unions are recognised as facilitators of teaching and learning, their actions can sometimes contrast with this, such as when they resist the

implementation of specific policies like outcome-based education.

In essence, teachers primarily see their union membership as a form of protection—a vital shield

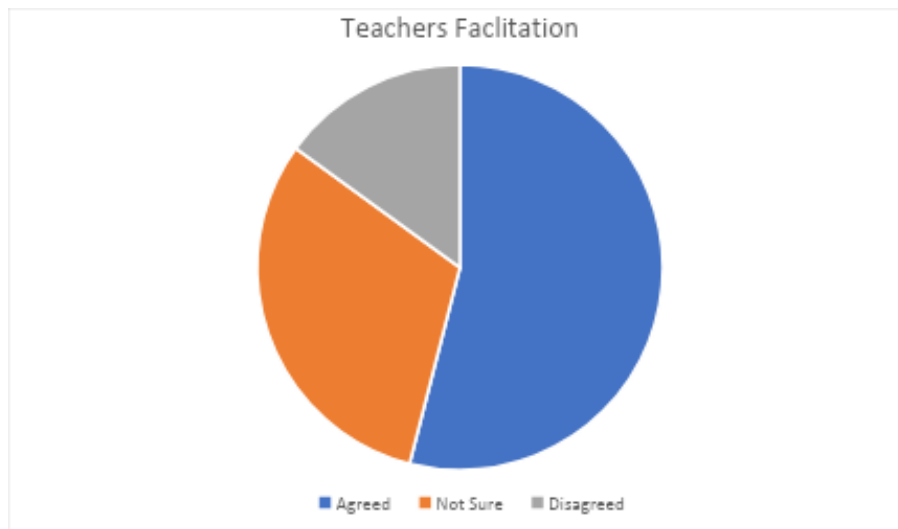
in labour disputes. This practical need often defines the relationship more than any shared professional mission, highlighting the complex and sometimes conflicting realities of modern education system.



Source: Field Research, February, 2025

Figure 4.1: Shows the Role and Responsibilities of the Teacher’s Union

The above table shows that 40% of the respondents agreed on the improvement of the quality of education, 25% of the respondents agreed on labour bargaining, while 20% of the respondents focus on the partner in policy making, and the balance 15% focus on the policy implementation.



Source: Field Research, February 2025

Figure 4.2: Shows the Teacher Facilitation

Teacher unions facilitate easy administration (Graph: E) of schools with 53% agreement, 36%

disagreement, and 10% not being sure. The affirmation of the statement that teacher unions

facilitate the administration of schools is in line with the preceding paragraph, which states their wish to work in harmony with the SLTU in matters that affect teaching and learning.

In the interviews, SLTU indicated that their preoccupation was to bargain with the Ministry of Education in the interest of education in general and of their members in particular. They also indicated that they are engaged in collaborative efforts for the training of teachers in workshops with regard to curricula and policy matters. They indicated that they engage with the Department to allocate them money so that they could

4.4 Demographic Situation

The following are demographic variables that were considered during the research. They include gender distribution, age distribution, education, marital status, religion, and the establishment of a business.

4.5 Gender Distribution

The table below presents the sex distribution of respondents in the sample.

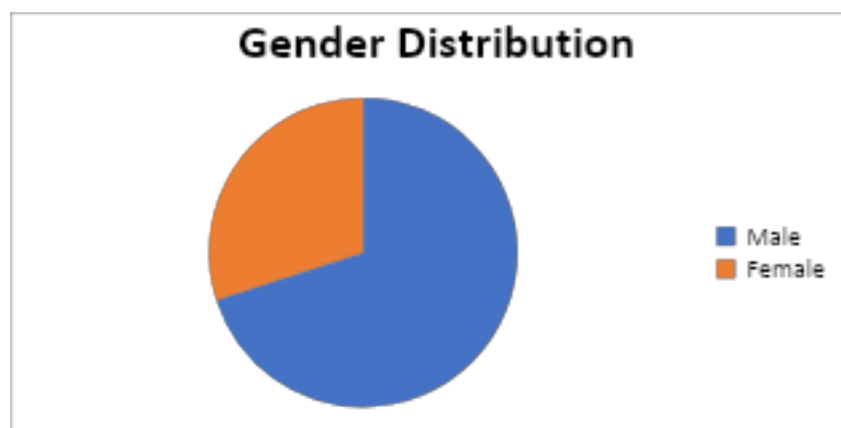
Table 4.1: Shows the gender percentage distribution of respondents in the study area.

Sex	No. of Respondents	Percentages
Male	35	70%
Female	15	30%
Total	50	100%

Source: Field Research, February 2025

From the above table, it is true that male respondents dominated the male respondents as interviewed in the study area. Few women were seen and interviewed at the administrative level of the SLTU in the sample size. It can also be noticed that more men were interviewed in the offices of the SLTU. Only 30% were women, and all 70% were men.

The information above is shown below in the form of a pie chart.



Source: Field Research, February 2025

Figure 4.3: Shows the gender distribution of respondents in the study area.

KEY

Male - 70%

Female - 30%

4.6 Age distribution of residents

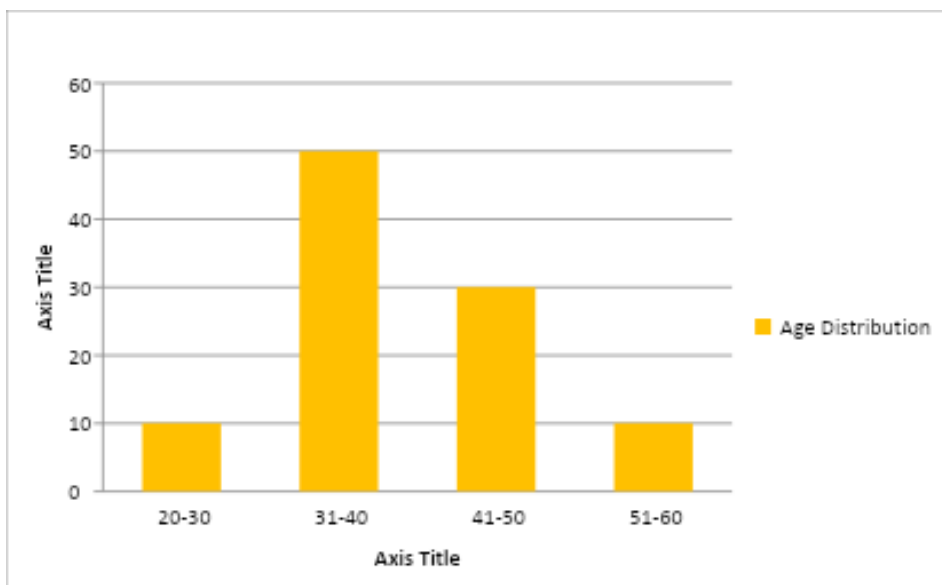
The table below shows the age distribution of the respondents in the form of age brackets, from 20 years to 60 years.

Age Bracket	No. Of Respondents	Percentage (%)
20 ----- 30	5	10%
31----- 40	15	30%
41----- 50	25	50%
51----- 60	5	10%
Total	50	100%

Table 4.2: Shows the Age Distribution of Respondents in the study area. Source: Field Research, February 2025

The table above shows that 50% of the respondents fall within the age range of 41 to 50 years, while 30% respondents are in the age range of 31 to 40 years. 10% of the respondents fall within the age range of 20 to 30 years, also 10% of the respondents were found within the age range from 51 to 60 years.

The information is shown below in the form of a bar chart



Source: Field Research, February 2025

Figure 4.4: Shows the age distribution of the respondents in the study area

KEY

- 20 – 30 -10%
- 31–40 - 30%
- 41–50 - 50%
- 51–60 - 10%

4.7 The educational background

The table below shows the educational background of the respondents interviewed, as seen from primary to tertiary level of their background, and it was clearly shown in the form of percentages.

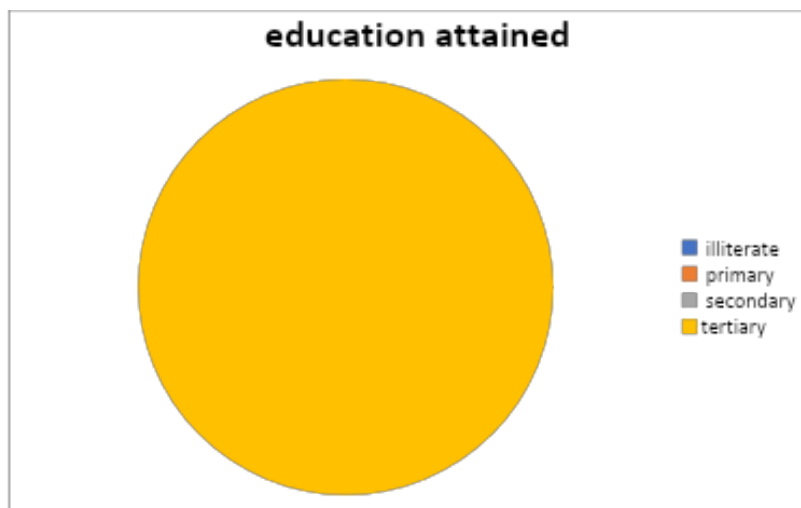
Table 4.3: Shows the Distribution of the Respondents According to the Education Attained

Educational Level	No. Of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	-	0%
Primary Level	-	0%
Secondary Level	-	0%
Tertiary Level	50	100%
Total	50	100%

Source: Field Research, February 2025

From the table above, one can see that 100% of the respondents attained tertiary education, some attained degrees, while others attained teachers’ certificates. It is seen that all of the respondents completed their tertiary education. A zero to illiterate and zero to primary education, and also to secondary education.

The following information is shown below in the form of a pie chart



Source: Field Research, February 2025.

Figure 4.5: Shows the percentage distribution of respondents’ education attained

KEY

Illiterate	-0%
Primary Level	-0%
Secondary Level	-0%
Tertiary Level	-100%

4.8 The marital status

From the table below, one can know that because of the empowerment given to women to make their choices and decisions, the majority of them choose not to marry, and those who got married call for divorce as they feel.

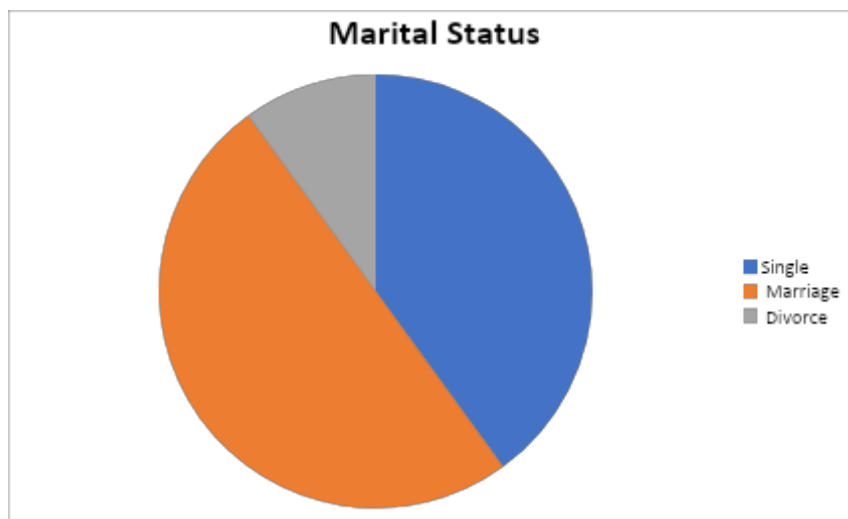
Table 4.4: Shows the percentage distribution of respondents according to marital status

Marital Status	No. Of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Single	25	50 %
Marriage	20	40 %
Divorce	5	10 %
Total	50	100 %

Source: Field Research, February 2025

The table above shows that 50 % of the respondents were single, while 40 % of the respondents were married, and 10 % of the respondents got married and divorced. Empowerment gives women the right to make their own decisions.

The above information is shown in a pie chart below.



Source: Field Research, February 2025.

Figure 4.6: Shows the percentage of respondents' marital status

KEY

Single = 40 %

Marriage = 50 %

Divorce = 10 %

4.9 Religious distribution

The table below shows the distribution of religion in the study area of the sample size, which the respondents complied with, the only two religions that are known within the country –Islam and Christianity.

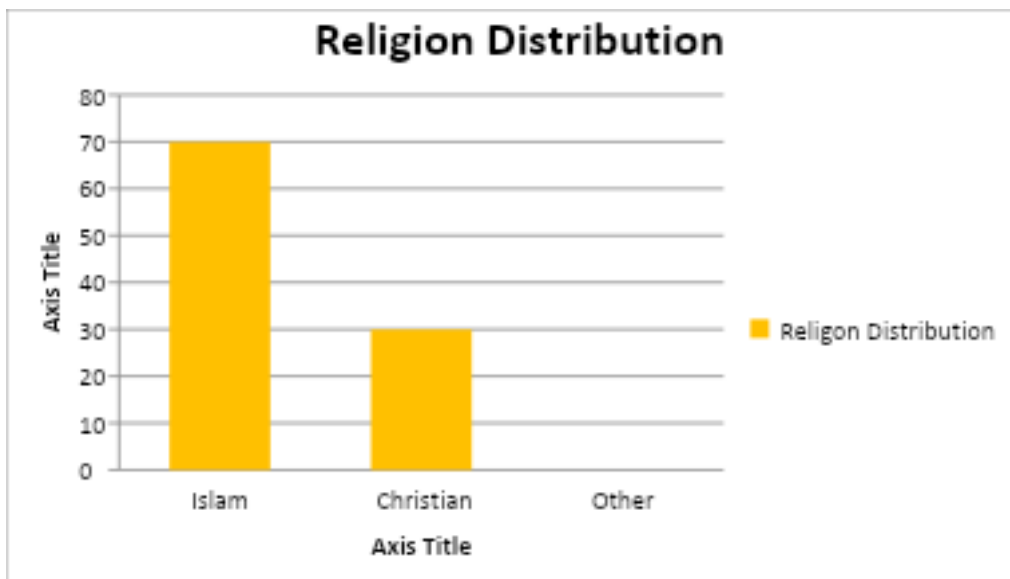
Table 4.5: Shows the percentage distribution of respondents' religion.

Religion	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
Islam	35	70%
Christianity	15	30%
Other	0	0%
Total	50	100%

Source: Field Research, February 2025.

From the table above, the reader can see that the majority of the respondents were Muslims. 70% of the respondents were Muslims, and the remaining 30 % were Christians. One can able to know that respondents don't recognise other religions, except Muslim and Christian.

The following information is shown in a bar chart below



Source: Field Research, February 2025.

Figure 4.7: Shows the percentage distribution of respondent's religion

KEY

Islam	-70%
Christianity	-30%
Other	-0%

4.10 Teacher's union role in the implementation of the national policy on education

The National Policy on Education (2004) reiterates that education cannot rise above the quality of its teachers. This statement no doubt emphasises the place of teachers in the realisation of educational objectives of every country, with particular reference to the developing countries like Sierra Leone, where functional education is mostly needed.

In view of the above, Nwite (2010) stated that the importance of teachers' unions as indispensable human resources and the single most important element in the school system should be recognised and given a prominent position in society. Also, Lassar, cited in Ofunsola and Deda (2007), referred to the teachers as the initiator of the learning process, the facilitator of the learning skills, the assessor of the learning sequence, the assessor of the learning efficiency, and indeed the pivotal element in the entire educational development.

Contributing to the roles of teachers' unions in the implementation of the National Policy on Education, Anikweze in Nwadam (2004) pointed out that it is the teacher who translates the educational policies into actions and principles and theories into real practices. He also argues that the decisions of the policy makers, no matter how coherent they may sound, the fashionable curriculum and the provision of adequate instructional materials notwithstanding, are all efforts in futility without adequate, qualified curriculum implementers that will facilitate the needed change in behaviour of the learners,

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The SLTU is an indispensable actor in the Sierra Leonean educational ecosystem and the nation-building project. While its historical struggle for teachers' rights is commendable, its potential is curtailed by systemic challenges, including

inadequate funding, political interference, and poor working conditions. The effectiveness of any national education policy is contingent upon the will of political leaders and the capacity of motivated, well-supported teachers to implement it.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- A. Political Will and Funding: The government must demonstrate strong political commitment by increasing education funding and developing sustainable financial arrangements for the sector.
- B. Capacity Building: The SLTU and NGOs should organise regular workshops and seminars to sensitise teachers on their roles and update their skills.
- C. Merit-Based Recruitment: Recruitment into the teaching profession must be based on merit and qualification, moving away from catchment quotas and federal character systems.
- D. Improved Dialogue: The Ministry of Education and the SLTU must foster a cordial, constructive relationship based on continuous dialogue and involvement in decision-making, not mere consultation.
- E. Joint Training Programs: The Ministry and SLTU should collaborate on tailor-made training and mentoring programmes to build a dedicated and professional teaching corps.
- F. Responsible Unionism: The SLTU must ensure that its advocacy strategies, including strikes, do not chronically disrupt teaching and learning, thereby safeguarding the quality of education.

In essence, nation-building is a collaborative endeavour. For Sierra Leone to thrive, its

government and teachers' union must work as partners, not adversaries, in the critical mission of educating its future leaders.

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