

Sierra Leonean women and the peace process

by Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff

Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff is a barrister and solicitor of the High Court of Sierra Leone and of Gray's Inn, London, who has been in private practice in Sierra Leone since 1985. During this time she has also been a women's rights advocate. She is a member of several women's organizations and sits on the board of 'Femmes-Africa-Solidarité'.

Centralization of power, violence and patriarchal attitudes excluded women from politics and public decision making in post-independence Sierra Leone. Subsequently, politics and politicians were discredited by the failure of the APC one-party government to meet even the most basic needs. In response, women formed non-political voluntary groups that focused on the advancement of the status and welfare of women and worked at the community level to provide them with material benefits and democratic opportunities not otherwise available. Eschewing politics was seen as essential to protect oneself at the personal and organizational level under the APC regime and its successor, the NPRC junta.

The Women's Forum

In mid-1994, the Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW) proposed that women's groups meet regularly for networking, information sharing and collective action on issues of common concern. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Women's Association for National Development (WAND), SLAUW, the National Organization for Women (NOW), and long-time community activists such as Haja Isha Sasso formed the backbone of the new structure. Soon the women of ZONTA and Soroptimist International were networking with Omo Benjamin of the Women's Wing of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, with Alice Conteh of the newly formed National Displaced Women's Organization, and with members of different women traders groups. Muslim women's associations and mass membership Christian women's groups were also active participants in the Women's Forum, as the discussion group came to be known.

The first issues tackled were preparations for the Beijing Conference on Women. However, the rebel war was



having such a negative impact on women it could not be ignored and women were drawn into political discussions on how to end it. Amy Smythe, the then president of the YWCA, was one of those who argued consistently that women should not insulate themselves from the ongoing crisis and insisted that the YWCA offer its resources in support of activities that were considered by many of her members to be 'too political'. In 1995, Patricia Sharpe of the US Information Service at the US Embassy in Freetown organized a series of discussions with teleconference facilities, enabling Sierra Leonean women, many of them members of the Forum, to learn about initiatives taken by other Third World women in similar situations. At the end of 1994 a women's seminar organized with support from the US Embassy ended with a resolution to take action for peace.

Women's Movement for Peace

As a first step the Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace (SLWMP) was formed and joined the Forum. The SLWMP's initial objective was simply to restore peace in the country. It justified its strategy of direct intervention in politics on the grounds that the national crisis was too

serious to be left to the military government. They argued that women were natural peacemakers who could bring unique skills to resolving the conflict. SLWMP obtained the Forum's active support for a campaign of appeals to government and rebels, marches, prayer rallies and meetings with government and members of the international community to apply pressure for a negotiated settlement.

The military government, like its predecessor, was uneasy about public discussion and particularly sensitive about criticism of their handling of the war. The women's peace campaign put the issue in the public domain in a non-partisan and non-confrontational manner that made public debate of contentious issues possible without the fear of automatically offending the government.

The first peace march organized by the SLWMP in January 1995 was a joyous carnival affair led by a then little-known paediatrician, Fatmatta Boie-Kamara. It was a public demonstration of a kind not seen since the Mothers' Union marched on Parliament in the 1960s to protest against changes in family law. Female professionals, previously known for standing aloof from



Finda – aged 16

interviewed by Ambrose James in March 2000

I was captured in 1996 at Tombodu by a woman captain. She took me to be part of her squad and to be her close aide. I was trained to use an AK-58 gun and a pistol. We attacked Tongo, Koidu, Kongoteh, and a Guinea border town called Fokonia, where we burnt houses and looted foodstuffs and chopped off people's hands. When we were [forced to move out of] Koidu, we went near to the Liberian border and then started attacking right up to Freetown. I used to infiltrate into enemy territories to spy. We smoked marijuana, took capsules, had cocaine injections. My mother was killed in Kono and I have not been able to see my father, brother and sisters. Although I have never gone to school, I want to go to school and become a nursing sister. On the whole, I am still not sure that this accord will work. Unless there are adequate job opportunities for the youths in this country, there will be no future for them. The political arena is crowded with too many old people and no chance is given to the younger people. They ask for experience and how can youths get experience when they are not given the opportunity?

the concerns of ordinary people, danced through central Freetown, linking arms with female soldiers, petty traders and student nurses, singing choruses. The message of the demonstrators was simple and compelling: 'Try Peace to end this senseless war'. As the march moved along, the crowd of women of all ages and stations called to onlookers to join them. Many found the appeals irresistible.

Peace groups hitherto viewed with suspicion as 'fifth columnists' and rebel sympathisers acquired legitimacy through association with the women who had mobilized a mass movement and enjoyed the support of the international community. As a result of the women's intervention a negotiated peace settlement became a respectable option that offered both government and the rebels the opportunity to climb down from entrenched positions without loss of face.

However, by mid-1995, no significant response to the women's activities from the parties left their peace campaign in the doldrums. WOMEN (a small member of the Forum), whose main objectives were promotion of a democratic culture and active participation of women in politics and governance, at this point provided fresh impetus. They proposed the Forum take up the government's half-hearted offer of civilian rule, given under pressure from the international community. As

ever, many groups were wary of politics. In a passionate debate some members of the SLWMP, themselves recently displaced as a result of the war, pointed out that economic collusion between government soldiers and RUF forces meant a speedy battlefield victory by the government was unlikely. It was concluded that peace would best be pursued through a return to democratic civilian rule.

Building momentum

Women took the lead in the democratization process encouraged by other civil society groups, who felt the military would put up with more from the women than from them. The women's position paper prepared for the National Consultative Conference in August 1995 (called Bintumani I, after the hotel where it was held) was circulated to all delegates and convinced them of the conference's importance. Many of the women's recommendations were adopted without debate, the most significant of which was the provision that only a recall of the conference could authorise postponement of elections.

As the voting date neared and civilians were increasingly targeted in brutal attacks aimed at maiming potential voters and intimidating others, the Women's Forum called a widely reported press conference. There they

underlined the need for candidates to address women's issues such as illiteracy, health care, women entrepreneurship to reduce poverty, and reform of laws detrimental to women on divorce, property, marriage and inheritance. They also reaffirmed their commitment to peace and demanded that elections go ahead as planned as 'an essential and fundamental part of the peace process' and that women make up fifty per cent of any peace negotiation delegation.

In the midst of the pre-election violence and an orchestrated campaign calling for peace before elections, the national Consultative Conference was recalled by the NPRC government two weeks before the election in February 1996. Looking back, the democratisation process had an air of inevitability about it, but on that morning there was still all to play for in the contest for delegates' votes at Bintumani II. Many delegates were undecided, particularly after the force commander clearly signalled the army's opposition to elections. When someone noticed that the young teacher slated to speak on behalf of the Women of the Eastern Province was being prevailed upon by Kailahun District elders to break ranks, an immediate decision was taken by the other women in the conference hall to substitute another speaker. Marie Turay's loud and unequivocal declaration in favour of elections took courage and was considered by many to be the turning point in favour of the decision to proceed with elections.

Representation

The women's movement's claim to speak for women nationally was often challenged but it was justified. The women's demands in 1995–96 were a non-controversial minimum, reflecting the long-standing demands of women for improved welfare and status. Women displaced to Freetown and the main towns joined the Forum and other connected groups. Well-established Forum members, like the YWCA, already had nation-wide membership and communication structures. Other Freetown groups, such as WAND, had established contacts with up-country women leaders through their provincial projects. SLWMP undertook a successful sensitization campaign and opened branches in all accessible parts of the country. The Forum considered these provincial links important and used them to share information, to co-ordinate marches, and, when places were obtained for additional women delegates to Bintumani I, to identify and contact provincial participants. Decision-making through long and lively discussions on issues attended by up to eighty women at a time, all of whom had a right to speak and to which experts might be invited to provide information, was the hallmark of the Forum and was cultivated to emphasize the democratic credentials of the movement.

Initially the women brought nothing to the peace process but idealistic appeals that carried no weight with the belligerents. The RUF never responded to their appeals for direct talks and the NPRC and civilian governments ignored their demands to be included in the formal peace process. In any case, neither the NPRC nor the RUF were, at that time, interested in the kind of peace being suggested by the women. Women believed that their hard work in the democratization process would be rewarded by places at the negotiating table, but politicians recognized that the ideas and attitudes thrown up by the women's movement had the potential of destabilizing traditional politics, so they discouraged further participation by women in leadership. Thirty years of systematic marginalization of women in politics had left them lacking confidence. The majority of women steadfastly refused to convert into a political force that would have had leverage in the peace process. A civilian government that promised to take over responsibility for the peace process was a sufficient achievement for many of the women's groups who were not comfortable in the spotlight.

The 1996 elections produced a civilian government but neither a participatory peace process nor sustainable peace. After Abidjan, internal conflict disintegrated the SLWMP, while the Forum struggled to fulfil the limited role offered by a flawed agreement it had played no part in drawing up. The May 1997 coup ended women's attempts at independent intervention in the peace process. In future they would be firmly submerged within civil society.

Lost voices

Although the participation in the search for peace and democratization processes were very empowering experiences for individual women, the movement was perhaps not as influential as sometimes suggested – at least not in the short-term. Certainly they opened up opportunities for public debate on peace issues and peace advocates were no longer automatically perceived as fifth columnists. They also emphasized the importance of issues over personalities in politics. However, the lack of an ideological framework to guide their peacebuilding activities blunted the movement's effectiveness. Forum discussions were long and inclusive, but the analysis was shallow and the consensual style prevented a clear and consistent long-term vision being elaborated.

Nonetheless, the women of Sierra Leone did succeed in creating an independent voice that articulated a non-partisan, female perspective on a wide range of fundamental issues. The most useful contribution a women's movement could make to sustaining peace would be to regain that voice.