

Gender and conflict in Sierra Leone

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Even prior to the six-year civil war in Sierra Leone, opportunities for women and girls were limited at best, at worst non-existent, particularly in rural areas. Sierra Leone's female literacy rate, for example, was a disturbing 16.7% in 1994 compared to 43.7% for males, according to the Human Development Report, 1997. The Report, which measures a country's achievement in quality of life, rates the country's Gender-related Development Index at 146, the lowest for reporting countries. The country's overall Human Development Index is also the lowest at 175 on a scale of 1 to 175. The index is a composite of life expectancy, education (adult literacy and combined primary, secondary and tertiary enrolments) and real GDP per capital, and it shows the distance a country has to travel to reach the maximum possible value of 1. Sierra Leone's Human Development Index is 0.176. Gender-related Development Index measures inequalities between men and women in a country's achievements in the same dimensions and variables as the Human Development Index.

Female life expectancy at birth in Sierra Leone is a low 35.2 years, slightly higher than males' at 32.1 years, and the general population's at 33.6 years. However, 52% of the total population is not expected to live to age 40. The infant mortality rate stands at 200 per 1,000 live births and the under-five rate is 284. The rate for maternal mortality is 1,800 per 100,000 live births. High infant mortality is generally accompanied by high fertility rates. Total fertility rate has remained almost constant, fluctuating only slightly between 6.0 to 6.5 since the 1970s. It stood at 6.5% in 1994. A very high proportion of the total fertility rate can be attributed to teenage childbearing. More than 50% of Sierra Leone's population is under 18.

The persistent economic and social decline of Sierra Leone since independence no doubt has effected every Sierra Leonean regardless of gender. But from the above statistics, it is evident that women and girls as mothers, wives and caretakers have borne disproportionately the burden of the country's economic descent.

The impact of the war

Sierra Leone's on-going civil war has pushed the country further down the economic ladder and exacerbated the plight of women (particularly rural women). Six years of widespread violence and general insecurity have

devastated rural Sierra Leone, particularly in the south-eastern part of the country, where the conflict has been the most severe. The near total-collapse of rural social structures and the fear of violent RUF rebels attacks drove a large segment of the rural population to abandon their homes and flee to urban areas, including the capital, Freetown, which until the present crisis was virtually untouched by the destruction visited on the rural areas. Many of the rural displaced were women and children who stayed either with relatives or at refugees camps scattered around urban areas. Many were still living in these camps in appalling conditions at the time of the May 25th coup, which brought the country to a standstill and further exacerbated the economic situation.

Women and girls in conflict

In time of conflict, men are usually either fighting or searching for work in conflict-free areas. Even when men are available to the household, gender ideologies put a disproportionate burden of reproductive work on women. Women are left behind with the burden of providing for their immediate and extended families. This burden is compounded by the destruction of traditional support systems and livelihoods that occur in conflict zones. Lack of basic services such as health, education and infrastructure further undermine the ability of women to provide for their dependents in these situations. Apart from their domestic responsibility, in conflict times as in peacetime, women must personally cope with menstruation, pregnancy, child birth and child care, often times while on the move. Moreover, with the targeting of women and girls as a tactic of war, many become victims of rape, non-sexual assault, and atrocities such as the evisceration of pregnant females, which has been practised by the RUF rebels. It has also been reported that unaccompanied girls are often captured by combatants and civilian men alike and used either as forced labourers by families in need of domestic workers or as 'wives'. Women and girls must also cope with little or no support system with unwanted pregnancies and raise children from acts of rape. Severely ostracised, these women and girls are forced to leave their homes for the relative safety of refugee camps. In Sierra Leone, as in the rest of the world, women and children make up the majority of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Life in the refugee camps is only slightly better than the hardship and terror these women left behind. Services are as basic as possible and focus on nutrition and the supply of antibiotics. Boredom is a common ailment of refugee women, as well as men. There are usually no educational or training facilities for these women and their children. Access to health services for their children and themselves is limited to essential medicine for malaria, cholera and diarrhoea. Contraceptive availability is rare, while women and girls are further victimised by sexual and physical violence in refugee camps. Some go from a life of decision-making and relative economic independence to a life of total dependency. The implication for women refugees is that whatever self-

esteem they may have had is quickly eroded as a displaced person or refugee. More often than not there are no counselling services to help women to cope with such issues.

RUF women

Women and children were particularly targeted by RUF rebels. Child combatants were a particular favourite of the RUF (but also used by other armed factions) who regard them not only as the 'best fighters' but boosted their courage by giving them hard drugs to toughen them. Some RUF recruits were as young as eight years old (see Interagency Special Report Number 1). Despite increasing attention directed at child combatants, there is little provision for girls.

The impact of Sierra Leone's stagnating economy on women and girls has been largely invisible to policy-makers and researchers alike because women and girls traditionally lack voice and power. For example, Paul Richards' book, *Fighting for the Rain Forest* --an analysis of the conflict in Sierra Leone from a youth and resource perspective--focused exclusively on boys ('rarray' boys). But the deleterious effects of Sierra Leone's deteriorating services and resources were not unique to boys. On the contrary, girls are more vulnerable to hard economic times. For example, girls are a source of wealth for hard-pressed parents who may force them into an early marriage for bridewealth. In addition, an increase in school fees often results in a reduction in female enrolment ratios, due to the cultural preference of educating males.

Women and girls were certainly not invisible to the RUF, who either recruited them as willing volunteers or abducted them. Although there is no official figure on the total number of women associated with the RUF, it is believed that there may be as many as 10,000. Of this figure, it is estimated that 9,500 of these women may have been abducted. Others were even 'donated' by relatives, one woman, for example, was given to the RUF by her uncle. This differentiation in how female and male youths came to adhere to the RUF, however, does not matter to the society, whose general attitude is condemnation of these girls--some of whom are as young as 10 years old. (A recent informal survey of ex-RUF girls in Liberia revealed that the majority of these girls do not understand what the fighting was all about, nor RUF ideology.)

From what is known of the RUF's structure in their camps, gender relations followed traditional lines. Women are second class citizens. With the exception of a few women leaders, leadership roles were preserved for men. There were two categories of people: fighters and 'civilians'. The fighters were the men and women trained in combat and were actually engaged in fighting. The female fighters were mostly the spouses or partners of the male fighters. They were used strategically by the RUF. For example, after an area is captured, the

female fighters would loot and occupy the area, freeing the men to move on and attack more areas. The 'civilians' were the men and women who were not trained in combat and provided the labour force for farming and domestic work. The majority of the 'civilians' were girls captured as 'wives.' Their primary role was to provide domestic and sexual services. The lives of 'wives' in the camps were hellish. Opportunities to leave were not common. Moreover, those caught while attempting to escape were killed as a deterrent to the others. As a survival strategy, many 'wives' cooperated with the male fighters, who, in turn, protected them.

Apart from 'wives' associated with one man who could protect them, the rest were communal property and all men had sexual rights over them. According to some of the girls, gang sex was a daily occurrence in the camps. As a result, sexually transmitted diseases (especially gonorrhoea) were rampant, as were unplanned pregnancies and child bearing. Access to medical facilities was limited. In some occupied areas, the RUF would set up their own clinics. However, these were mostly to provide services such as amputations, to sick or wounded fighters. With limited medical facilities to provide pre- and post-natal care, maternal and infant mortality were believed to be very high. In one RUF camp near Kenema, two girls age 10 and 12 were found. Between them they had had three children--all deceased. Camp conditions were also horrible for children who were either abducted or found unaccompanied. They were used as food scavengers and farming labour in addition to being helpers to the female combatants.

As of the May 25 coup, little or nothing had been done to address the special needs of these female combatants and many are still living in refugee camps. Presently in Liberia, the majority of ex-RUF combatants are females. Almost all are mothers, some barely in their teens, with several children from male fighters. Having no homes to return to, nor any means of subsistence for themselves and their children, many turn to prostitution as a survival strategy. Some simply barter their bodies for food, shelter and other basic necessities. The majority are suffering from one form or another of STD. The implication for the communities in which they live is a proliferation of STDs, especially gonorrhoea.

Having had no psychological counselling, and having witnessed and taken part in atrocities during their RUF years, these women and their children have difficulty re-adjusting to normal society. They manifest behavioural problems and are a source of tension and conflict in both their communities and in refugee camps where some have sought shelter. Some are said to be very proud and boastful of their RUF association. But others are very ashamed to talk about their experiences. Maladjusted in their new environments and with little to look forward to, many are going back to their former combat lives, with the reconstituted RUF, the People's Army.

Conclusion

Although women rarely have a say in the decisions leading to conflicts, their roles as mothers, wives and caretakers leave the burden of preserving the social order in the midst of conflicts on them. Accordingly, women make a vital contribution to peace and conflict resolution. Women as survivors of war have gender-specific needs and perspectives that require focused analysis. However, the analytical and operational frameworks of post-conflict situations tend to treat the impacts of conflict as if the same across the population and gender spectra. In so doing, women's special needs are often overlooked. It is important, therefore, that women's voices and approaches be incorporated in the frameworks of post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building. In 'Development in conflict: the gender dimension' Judy El Bushra and Eugenia Piza Lopez have argued that 'armed conflict can be pictured as a fault-line running across the evolution of a society, expressing injustice and grievances and often indicating where transformation is most surely needed'. Gender relations in Sierra Leone definitely need to be transformed.

Transformation implies a starting point of thorough and critical knowledge of existing conditions and the societal dynamics affecting women and girls in Sierra Leone. In the current context, two key areas are the situation of rural women, who were already extremely marginalised prior to the civil war, and ex-RUF women, as those who in a post-war setting are most likely to represent the most marginalised of the marginalised.

Research on rural women, including their experiences as IDPs and refugees, could be vital to enhancing the welfare of women in conflict situations world-wide. In the context of Sierra Leone, an in-depth study of the situation of rural women would lead to a better understanding of the changes that have occurred in their lives as a result of the country's economic decline and the political instability since 1991. Some of the issues might include

- changes in kinship, family formation, gender relations, the gender division of labour and possible windows of opportunity for improving women's well-being;
- the impact on agricultural production, other means of subsistence, and social support structures;
- what changes have occurred in fertility rates, infant and maternal mortality rates; and what changes have occurred in female access to education, health and to STDs rates.

Regarding ex-RUF women, critical exploration of their living conditions, motivation and societal perspectives would be valuable in understanding the plight of women engaged in war, as well as serve as a basis for focused and relevant social and economic programming.

Analysis of their experiences could answer key questions such as:

- what was their understanding of RUF, government and civilian motivations and legitimacy. In other words, what was their understanding of the root causes of the violence;
- why did they join or remain with the RUF;
- what were gender relations in the RUF camps;
- what were some of their coping strategies;
- were there any positive aspects to their association with the RUF;
- what are their needs and what in their experiences do they think could contribute positively to the peacebuilding and reconstruction processes in Sierra Leone;
- and what future do they foresee for Sierra Leone, themselves and for their children?

Findings from such studies would provide empirical data for policy planning and programming for humanitarian operations. In addition, they could be used to promote and encourage women in all sections of Sierra Leonean society to be involved in the peacebuilding process, post-conflict reconstruction and in actively determining their own futures.