

Rural women and girls in the war in Sierra Leone

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More than six years of war and general insecurity have devastated rural Sierra Leone, particularly the southeastern part of the country, where the conflict has been the most severe. The near total-collapse of rural social structures and the fear of extreme violence drove a large segment of the rural population to abandon their homes and flee to urban areas, including the capital, Freetown. The majority of the rural displaced were women and children who fled to camps scattered around urban areas and in neighbouring countries. Many were still living in these camps in appalling conditions at the time of the May 25th coup, which introduced a new level of instability in Sierra Leone.

Because the war has been largely restricted to rural areas, it is rural people, particularly women and girls, who have been most effected. Rural females were particularly targeted as a tactic of war. Young girls were raped or abducted and made into either combatants, "wives" or camp slaves -- sexually and physically.

Among the forces at war, it is the women and girls of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who have received the least attention from the media and researchers. Of Sierra Leone's already severely disempowered female population, the women and girls associated with the RUF either willingly or by force (abduction and coercion) are probably the most marginalised of the marginalised.

Socio-economic opportunities for rural women and girls were at best limited, at worst non-existent. Prior to the war the persistent economic and social decline in Sierra Leone since independence had effected every Sierra Leonean regardless of gender. However, the statistics indicate that Sierra Leonean women and girls, particularly in rural areas, disproportionately bore the burden of the country's economic descent. Although, according to the UNDP 1997 Human Development Report, Sierra Leone has one of the lowest adult literacy rates in the world, at 29.6%, the female literacy rate is a low 16.7%. The female literacy rate in rural areas can be assumed to be worse, although the actual rate is not available. For example, Siaka Kroma, in his 1993 study of factors influencing school enrolment and attendance in rural communities in Sierra Leone, reported that the national enrolment ratio (ER) is 39.7% for all persons aged five and over, but only 24.6% for rural

areas. For girls, the national ER is 36.5%, but only 20.6% for girls in rural areas.

In the same 1997 Human Development Report, female life expectancy at birth in Sierra Leone is reported at a low 35.2 years, slightly higher than that of males at 32.1 years (a worldwide phenomenon), and also that of the general population 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.

The deleterious effects of Sierra Leone's deteriorating services and increasing scarcity of resources augmented rural women and girls vulnerability to the structural processes that traditionally marginalised them. For example, girls are more vulnerable to hard economic times because of their perceived commodity value in the form of bridewealth. Hard-pressed parents may see their daughters as a source of wealth and force them into an early marriage. In addition, an increase in school fees often results in a reduction in female enrolment ratios, due to the cultural preference for educating males.

The impact of the war

In time of conflict, the burden of women to provide for their immediate and extended families 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 rural women and young girls to provide for their dependents in these situations. Apart from their domestic responsibility, in conflict times as in peacetime, women and girls must personally cope with menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, child care and the care of the elderly, often while on the move. With the targeting of rural women and girls as a tactic of war, many become victims of rape, non-sexual assault, and atrocities such as maiming and the evisceration of pregnant females practiced by the RUF rebels. Consequently, many rural women and girls must cope with unwanted pregnancies and raise children from acts of rape with little or no support. Further victimised by social attitudes and severely ostracised, many are forced to leave their homes for the relative safety of refugee camps.

The road to the refugee camps pose further challenges. It has been

reported that unaccompanied girls are often captured by military and civilian men alike and used either as forced labourers by families in need of domestic workers, or as "wives". Those lucky enough to reach the relative safety of refugee camps are confronted with further hardship and terror. There are usually no educational or training facilities for female youth and their children, as well as for other refugees. Services tend to focus on nutrition and the supply of medicines for malaria, cholera and diarrhoea. Family planning services are rare, while women and girls are further victimised by sexual and physical violence. More often than not the traditional mechanisms to cope with such traumas are limited or non-existent.

RUF women and girls

The impact of Sierra Leone's conflict on females directly associated with the war (the majority of whom are rural women and girls) has been largely invisible to policy-makers because woman and girls (particularly in the rural areas) traditionally lack voice and power. For example, despite increasing attention directed at children associated with war -- whether as combatants or non-combatants -- there has been little provision for young females and their specific needs. But young women and girls were certainly not invisible to the RUF, who either recruited them as willing volunteers or abducted them. A few joined the movement out of loyalty to their male relatives and partners.

Although there is no authoritative figure on the total number of females 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 females may have been abducted mostly from the rural areas. Some others appear to have been '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 RUF victims and opponents, nor to Sierra Leone society as a whole, whose general attitude is condemnation of these girls -- some of whom are as young as 10 years old.

In the RUF's camps, there were two categories of members: fighters and "civilians". The fighters were the males and females trained in combat and who actually engaged in fighting. The "civilians" were the males and females who provided the labour force for the movement. The majority of the "civilians" were captured female youths. In the RUF camps, these captured females are known as "wives." Their primary role was to provide domestic and sexual services. The lives of "wives" in the camps were hellish. For example, the incidence of rape and gang sex was reported to be so prevalent in RUF camps that, as a survival

strategy, many "civilian" females co-operated with male fighters, who, in turn, protected them. In so doing, they go from passive victims to active agents in determining their welfare.

Opportunities to escape were rare. Those caught while attempting to escape were killed as a deterrent to others. At this juncture, it should be pointed out that despite the general hellish conditions of RUF camps there were variations in the degree of hardship and violence. There is some evidence that some of the violence against females in RUF camps may be linked to external pressure on the RUF "enclaves". For example, RUF rape victims in Makeni interviewed by Professor Paul Richards, Wageningen University, revealed that rape was used as a punishment for military failure.

Apart from those associated with males who could protect them, the remaining females 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 (STD), 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. Camps 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.

At the signing of the Abidjan Peace Accord, which temporarily brought the war in Sierra Leone to an end in November 1996, some of these RUF female youths became ex-members. However, at the time of the May 25th coup, little or nothing had been done to address their special needs. Many were (and still are) living in refugee camps. Presently in Liberia, the majority of ex-RUF members 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 including AIDS.

Having had no form of counselling (traditional or otherwise), and having witnessed and/or taken part in atrocities during their RUF years,

many of these youths and their children have difficulty readjusting 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 association with the RUF. But others are ashamed to talk about their experiences. Maladjusted in their new environments and with little to look forward to, some are going back to their former lives with the RUF (since the coup known as the People's Army).

There are many different categories of rural women and girls who have experienced the war in unique ways. There are, for example, 'bush-camp children' who spent periods of up to two years or longer hiding in the bush with their parents. Among these different categories of youths, the most marginalised are ex-RUF female members, fighters or non-combatants. However, the analytical and operational frameworks of post-conflict reconstruction tend to treat the impacts of conflict as if the same across the population and gender spectrum. In so doing, the special needs of women and girls are often overlooked. It is important, therefore, that the voices and experiences of Sierra Leone's rural women and girls be incorporated in post-conflict reconstruction and peace building. Conflict can (and does) open up windows of opportunities for social transformation. In *Development and Conflict*, Judy El Bushra and Eugenia Piza Lopez (1993) argue that armed conflict is like a fault-line running across the evolution of a society, expressing injustice and grievances and often indicating where transformation is most needed.

Transformation implies a starting point of thorough and critical knowledge of existing conditions and the societal dynamics affecting men and women. Hence, an in-depth analysis of the plight of rural women and girls should 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 violent upheaval since 1991; as well as the mechanisms for social transformation. Some of the changes which have occurred could have serious implications for the economic and social development of Sierra Leone after the crisis. Of crucial importance would be an analysis of changes in female access to education and health facilities, in STD rates, fertility rates and infant and maternal mortality rates. Also of importance are changes in family formation, gender relations, coping mechanisms, and possible windows of opportunities for constructive change.

Regarding RUF female members, critical exploration of their camp lives, motivation and social perspectives would be valuable in understanding

the plight of women and girls directly associated with war. Such information could be used as a basis for focused social and economic programming. Analysis of their experiences could answer questions such as i) what was their understanding of the root causes of the violence; ii) what were their coping strategies; iii) were there any positive aspects to their association with the RUF; iv) what are their needs and what in their experiences do they think could contribute positively to the peace building and reconstruction processes in Sierra Leone; and v) what future do they foresee for themselves, for their children and for Sierra Leone?

Answering some or all of these questions could provide a solid basis for the detailed understanding of motives and experiences of females caught up in war, and how to go about rebuilding the shattered lives of all Sierra Leonean, particularly rural women and girls.

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