

WOMEN'S VOICES, WORK AND BODILY  
INTEGRITY IN PRE-CONFLICT, CONFLICT  
AND POST CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION  
PROCESSES IN SIERRA LEONE

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A study of the changes that have taken place in Sierra Leonean women's lives in the last 20 years in the three thematic research areas of voice and participation, work and access to resources, and bodily integrity entails a situation analysis of women's pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict reconstruction activities in these fields. This is because the primary defining feature of the period 1986-2006 is the civil war years of 1991-2002. Armed conflicts, whether inter or intra state, leave behind not only human carnage, massive destruction of physical and socio-economic infrastructure (the Sierra Leone civil war was no exception to this reality)<sup>1</sup>, but also at the political level "a weak and collapsed state, with no effective local government structures and few remaining traditional authorities" (Eno, 2002:74). At the socio-cultural level, "War also destroys the patriarchal structures of society that confine and degrade women. In the very break down of morals, traditions, customs and community, war also opens up and creates new beginnings" (Turshen, 1998:20).

Thus, in studying the changes in Sierra Leonean women's lives in the period under review, we shall focus not only on the challenges brought on by the war, but also the opportunities created by it, to explore how women have or have not used these openings to transform their existence and status in society. The question for investigation then is how Sierra Leonean women have confronted the challenges and opportunities created by the war not only to increase their voices and participation in the public-political space, but also their access to resources and bodily integrity.

## **Voice and Participation**

The presence of Sierra Leonean women in public life goes as far back as 1604 when Fatima I ruled as paramount chief of Bullom. During the colonial period, Madam Yoko became a paramount chief of the Kpaa Mendes from 1898-1906 and posed a serious challenge for the colonial administrator. Other well known female paramount chiefs include Honoria Bailor Caulker, and Ella Koblo Gulama, who was not only the first female legislator, but also the first female cabinet minister in the Sierra Leone. These women were either born into ruling families and, in instances in

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<sup>1</sup> Of the pre-war population of 4.5 million-75, 000 were killed, 100,000 mutilated, 500,000 became refugees and 2 Million persons were internally displaced and 250,000 women and girls were abducted and raped.

which there were no male heirs, succeeded their fathers, or they were married to a member of a ruling family and succeeded their husbands.

Since the 1950s, a considerable number of women have participated actively in politics both at the local and national levels. In the 1950s, women such as Constance Cummings-John were active in the struggle for independence, contested for a seat in parliament and became mayor of Freetown in 1966. Other women who ran for or were appointed to political offices in that era include June Holst-Roness, Florence Dillsworth, and Nancy Steele, a woman known for her militancy. From 1986 to date, about 20 women have served as cabinet or deputy ministers and about 10 have been elected to parliament.

Despite these achievements, it can be argued that women's voices and their participation in the public-political arena in Sierra Leone have been extremely marginal. In addition to the usual factors of illiteracy, lack of training, entrenched patriarchal norms and values on the roles and responsibilities of men and women in society and other constraints that limit women's participation in the public domain, the introduction of the one-party totalitarian state in 1978 by the Siaka Stevens led All Peoples Congress (APC) party further marginalised women from the public-political space. During that period, women in the public domain either had to kow-tow to the state's political line or become apolitical, thereby limiting women's ability to organise and challenge existing discriminatory policies and practices in society. In effect, women's organising and activism were limited to welfarist activities such as micro-credit schemes, family planning and hygiene, and vocational training for girls and young women. When women became "political", they were mainly cheerleaders and foot soldiers of the APC party.

Although marginalised from the public decision-making process, during the war, Sierra Leonean women like their counterparts of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Somalia and Rwanda became the torchbearers of peace. Sierra Leonean women were galvanised into the peace process as part of their preparatory effort towards the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing Conference) in 1995. In 1994, the Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW) proposed the creation of a network for women to meet regularly and share information on issues of common concern. This initiative led to the creation of the Sierra Leone Women's

Forum (Forum) as the umbrella organisation of women groups. Although the Forum's objective was networking for the Beijing conference, however, due to the devastating effects of the civil war on the economy and society and especially on women, the Forum decided to organise in support of the peace process and participate in the transition from military governance to civilian rule.

The Sierra Leonean Women's Movement for Peace (SLWMP) and Women Organised for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN), two Forum members spearheaded women's political organising for peace and democratisation. They organised demonstrations, campaigns, peace matches and debates, prayer rallies, mobilised and built a cross-class alliance among women. In addition, they appealed to both the government and rebels to end the war as well as to the international community to apply pressure for a negotiated settlement.

Increasing international pressure on the government to democratise and its inability to defeat the rebels encouraged civil society groups led by the Forum to demand an end to the war and a return to civilian governance. The government succumbed to the pressure and organised a National Consultative Conference (later referred to as Bintumani 1 & 2 after the hotel where the meetings were hosted) to discuss the future direction of the country. The women's position paper demanding an end to the war and military rule was adopted at the Bintumani 1 conference in August 1995, and elections were set for August 26 1996. Violence broke out immediately after the conference with the RUF rebels increasing their attacks on civilians to thwart efforts towards the agreed civilianisation project. A palace coup took place amidst this furore in January 1996 and the new government tried to impede progress towards multiparty politics by sponsoring campaigns demanding peace before elections. It was women that took the lead to protest this new turn of event: "They countered that elections are an event, whereas peace is an ongoing process. Thus, elections could occur in parallel to peace negotiations" (Solomon, 2005:174).

As a result, a second Consultative Conference (Bintumani 2) was organised to solicit the views of Sierra Leoneans on the political crisis. To ensure that conference delegates and the general public maintain their stance on the democratisation project, the Women's Forum embarked on sensitisation campaigns organising public rallies, press conferences and meetings to reinforce public opinion in support of the transition programme. At the Bintumani 2 conference in February 1996, it was the vigilance

and determination of the women that ensured that the democratisation process was not truncated by the military government. According to Jusu-Sheriff,

*When someone noticed that the young teacher slated to speak on behalf of the women of the Eastern province was being prevailed upon by the 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 (2000).*

Women's intervention in the public-political space during the crisis changed the nature, course and discourse on the peace process and Sierra Leonean politics in general.

“Peace groups hitherto viewed as “fifth columnists” and rebel sympathisers acquired legitimacy through association with the women who had mobilised 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 the government and the rebels the opportunity to climb down from entrenched positions without the loss of face” (Ibid)

Unfortunately, the elections held later in 1996, which the Sierra Leone People's Party won, did not lead to the expected peace that women valiantly campaigned for nor were their demands for increased participation in the political process heeded. Although women had demanded that 50 per cent of delegates to peace negotiations be women, there was no female participant at the Abidjan Peace meeting. Only 5 women won seats in parliament out of 80 parliamentary seats, 2 women appointed ministers out of a cabinet of 25 and 2 female deputy ministers out of 20 deputy ministers. However, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs was established in 1996.

The Abidjan Peace Accord notwithstanding, the civil crisis continued and on May 25<sup>th</sup> 1997, the Armed Forces Ruling Council in alliance with the Revolutionary

United Forces, the rebel group, overthrew the elected government. Women, once again took an active part in the pro-democracy campaigns. However, they could not organise as a group due to the repression and brutality of the coupists. Consequently, they engaged in covert activities as undercover agents infiltrating the junta, exposing its activities in arms deals, diamond smuggling and naming its international partners (Solomon, *Opcit*: 177). Sierra Leonean women in exile in Conakry, Guinea, sent anti-junta messages on Radio Democracy to the government, organised demonstrations against the regime and mobilised the international community to intervene in the crisis.

On May 6<sup>th</sup> 2000, women intervened once again in the crisis management process by organising a march to Foday Sankoh's house, the leader of the rebel movement to protest the RUF's violation of the terms of the 1999 Lome Peace Accord. The women were physically and verbally abused at Sankoh's house and to show their disgust "They collectively hitched up their skirts, bent over, and bared themselves to Sankoh and his coterie. In Sierra Leone, such an action by women is the worst curse that can be brought upon anyone" (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004:4). The maltreatment of the women spurred civil society to mobilise a protest march on 8<sup>th</sup> May in support of the women's action. Sankoh's bodyguards opened fire on the demonstrators killing 21 persons and injuring several others.

Despite their pro-democracy and peace activism during the conflict phase, women were once again marginalised in the formal peace process and in the post-conflict public political space. When the Government of Sierra Leone and the RUF rebels in Lome, Togo signed the Lome Peace Accord in July 1999, there were only two female members of the delegation—one each from both sides of the conflict. Furthermore, the Accord had only one reference to women within the body of the text:

Given that women have been particularly victimized during the war, special attention shall be accorded to their needs and potentials in formulating and implementing national rehabilitation, reconstruction and development programmes, to enable them play a central role in the moral, social and physical reconstruction of Sierra Leone (Eno, *Opcit*: 74).

From the above, it can be argued that Sierra Leonean women's activism was not given due recognition either by the state or the international community as they were not recognized as actors and agents of change of peace. Rather, they were seen as victims who should be protected and taken care of. Nevertheless, the war created some space for women's voice and active participation in politics. For example, in post-war Sierra Leone, the proliferation of NGOs, many headed by women, has made it possible for many more women to advocate for issues that directly affect the lives of women. Currently, women account for 14.5 per cent of members in the current parliament, 19.3 per cent of both ministerial and deputy ministerial positions. It is hoped that with the forthcoming elections (2007), we will see more women representation in parliament and the cabinet and that such a move will translate into a greater voice and access to work and other resources for women in the country.

### **Work and Access to Resources**

Research has shown that access to resources—land, labor, capital, credit, information, etc, is often gendered and that women, irrespective of the pivotal role that they play as producers and household managers, are often denied or given limited access to such resources. This is also the case for women in Sierra Leone where postwar conditions has, in many situations, contributed to making such access even more difficult for some women. Even though their contributions have often been undervalued and taken for granted, Sierra Leonean women, who it is estimated make up over 51% of the country's population, have always been an integral part of the country's workforce and economic development. As expressed earlier, there have been an impressive number of women in influential positions ranging from paramount chiefs, political activists, high court judges, educators, entrepreneurs, business women, cabinet ministers to presidential candidates. Women are also fairly represented in the civil service, the legal profession, police force, military, teaching and nursing and some have held topnotch positions such as permanent secretaries, director-generals, chief medical officers and top ranking officers in the army.

However, the presence of women in the public sphere and positions of authority has not necessarily closed the gender gap. Thus, even though many Sierra Leonean women have transgressed and continue to transgress masculine/public spaces

in terms of work and access to resources, they are still the minority and, in some instances, are operating from a framework designed by male leaders/politicians who act as their patrons. The majority of Sierra Leonean women are uneducated, lack or have limited access to capital, education, land, etc and live under discriminatory customary laws that assign them second class citizenship. Ironically, a ten year civil war that has left the country in shatters has, on the one hand, made women's lives more difficult and, on the other hand, created spaces for women to agitate for change on their and on other women's behalves. As such, in postwar Sierra Leone the demand for women's access to education and other resources have intensified.

### **Education**

Once named the Athens of West Africa because of its vibrant intellectual and academic life, Sierra Leone is now a shadow of that image. It is the home of Fourah Bay College, the first university in West Africa and the *alma mata* of many prominent West Africans. Irrespective of this history, the literacy level in the country is very low and women continue to be at the bottom rung of the literacy ladder with the least access to education. It is estimated that the adult literacy rate for women is 23% while that of men is 38%. Furthermore, 43% of girls and 57% of boys enroll in primary schools respectively. Reasons for this disparity range from government's lack of commitment to girl education, early marriage, demands for female labor in the family, teenage pregnancy, parental attitude toward the education of their female children, to conditions of the structural adjustment program.

Taking cognizance of these disparities, women have played pivotal roles in enhancing female education in the country. As far back as 1898, Mrs. Lydia Reuben Johnson founded the coeducational Reuben Johnson Memorial School. Among many others are Mrs. Caseley-Hayford, who founded the Girl's Vocational School, Mrs. Hannah Benka-Coker, the Freetown Secondary School for Girls, Mrs. Constance Cummings-John, the Roosevelt Secondary School and Haja Salimatu Sesay, the Kankalay School. These institutions have provided a variety of educational opportunities for young women.

For many women in the country, formal education has not only been one of the legitimate ways to gainful employment but it has also been integral to professional



advancement and social mobility. As such, it is not uncommon to find women with formal education holding high administrative positions such as permanent secretary and minister in the ministry of education. However, as Filomina Steady has argued,

Despite these achievements, the record for the majority of women still leaves much to be desired. The illiteracy rate for the population as a whole, based on figures from the Human Development Report, can be as high as 80 % in the rural areas. As most schools are fee-paying, formal education is expensive. Although educational opportunities increased soon after independence, the government has not been able to provide adequate educational opportunities and facilities for many years. Among the reasons for this failure are the protracted recession and the ten-year rebel war from 1991-2001. (80)

These obstacles have surely impacted women's access to work and the types of work that they engage in.

### **Work**

Like most women, it can be argued that 99% of women in Sierra Leone work double shifts in the formal or "informal" economy and as home managers, taking care of the daily business of running a family. Unfortunately, their productive and reproductive labor in the domestic sphere never figures in the economic index. According to the Sierra Leone Human Development report (1998), 48.5 % of women work in the formal sector wherein 40.5% work at the clerical or junior level and only 8% at the administrative and managerial level. Women also constitute over 55% of the agricultural labor force. Women in the "informal" sector engage in activities such as gara making (tie-dyeing), soap making, basket making, oil extraction, hair dressing, childcare and petty trading. These activities often have very low turnovers. "Even in farming where women are engaged mainly in food production, (subsistence farming) cash returns are much lower than that from cash crops where men dominate."<sup>2</sup> In general, trade and teaching have been sources of employment for the majority of Sierra Leonean women.

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<sup>2</sup> Sierra Leone's National Policy on the Advancement of Women. Pg 14.

Women in Sierra Leone have a long history of engaging in trade whether at the local or sub-regional level probably because trade has always been the one activity that provides them with immediate employment/subsistence. Women traders have been involved in “mobilizing capital, securing markets, defending their interests, and withstanding economic pressures from middlemen and large foreign –dominated commercial enterprises.”<sup>3</sup> Some of these traders own shops in which they sell foodstuffs or imported clothing and others sell in the market places or from their homes to friends and relatives. Post-war unemployment and post-war reconstruction strategies such as the availability of micro credit have led to an upsurge in petty trading. Unfortunately, many of these women barely break even and whatever profit they make goes toward feeding and taking care of the immediate needs of their households which often do not include comprehensive healthcare and meeting most of the educational needs of their children. It can be argued that these economic hardships led to many anti-social behaviors such as enlistment in the rebel movement and engaging in sugar-daddyism.

The economic decline of Sierra Leone, a direct effect of IMF conditionalities such as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), created a pre-war society in which the youth were not only unemployed/underemployed but were also unemployable. As a result a sense of despair and hopelessness permeated Sierra Leonean society. Unfortunately things have not changed much in this post war era. For many young unemployed and underemployed women, sugar-daddyism has become the rule rather than the exception. Partly because parents can no longer serve as sole providers for their children, many young women end up depending on men (sugar-daddies) to meet their economic needs and to provide sustenance for their needy families.

During the war, rebel camps became an opportunity and alternative to a better life for many young women. As Binta Mansaray explains, “looting was also a reason why some women stayed in the movement: in a society that had so deprived them, they knew that they would never get the opportunity to legally earn a fraction of their gain from raiding and looting villages” (146). In effect, war zones become “a space in

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<sup>3</sup> Steady pg 61.

which social and economic opportunities unavailable in ‘safe’ areas (such as refugee camps) could be found” (Mats 421).

After the war, there was a drastic increase in sex work fuelled mainly by the presence of a large contingent of UN and ECOMOG peacekeepers and the large numbers of internally displaced people and orphans in the country. It is not uncommon to see young women parading the beach areas at night in search of “johns” and to see them being picked up by UN personnel and other vehicles. In the Sierra Leonean context, where more than half of the population live in abject poverty, (the majority are women), it will be difficult to sustain the arguments that material concerns may not be the only driving force for sex work. Many of these sex-workers head households and take care of extended family members with their earnings.

Even though many female ex-combatants are said to be engaged in sex work, the majority have been trained as hair dressers and seamstresses as part of the DDR program. The aim of the rehabilitation part of the program was to make them self-employed. However, even as these trainings help to create employment, they also hinder women’s advancement in the formal sector. With limited skills and no formal education, it will be impossible for these women to occupy upper and mid-management positions, have equal access or close the gender gap. Even in areas, such as farming, where women continue to outnumber men, they have limited or no access to land.

## **Land**

According to the country’s National Policy on the Advancement of women, “60-80% of women earn their living through agricultural activities and are engaged in 90% of food production,” but yet, “they have less access to technical and financial inputs than their male counterparts.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, only few have access to the lands that they cultivate and the power to determine how the lands that they cultivate should be used. One of the reasons for this is that, unlike the Western area (Freetown and its environs) where land is privately owned, the majority of Sierra Leonean women live in the provinces where land is communally owned and where customary laws prevail.

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<sup>4</sup> National Policy on the Advancement of Women, pg 7.

In such setups, traditional rights of women to land and other productive assets are seriously violated because decision making powers often reside with men. Moreover, when they do have access to land they are denied credit by financial institutions because of reasons that are often gendered.

### **Credit**

Because most of these women engage in petty trading and do not own big business ventures, they have always found it difficult to secure credit from financial institutions, whose demands they often cannot meet. The two main ways that they had traditionally been able to access capital is through cooperatives and Osusu (rotating credit) clubs. Micro-credit alternatives have been a recent innovation that has its own set of restrictions. The Osusu clubs have been and continue to be the most popular forum for mobilizing capital. According to steady, “the Osusu appeal is both economic and social and rooted in traditional forms of mobilization of capital. On the basis of economic rationality, Osus provide an opportunity for raising capital without too much red tape.” (67)

Now more than ever, many Sierra Leonean women are developing different survival strategies and reconstruction plans to help them deal with the harsh realities of a post-war society. The Osusu, a savings and credit scheme, has become an integral part of this reconstruction and the mushrooming of *osusu* groups and community clubs that disburse small scale loans are cases in point. There are different forms of Osusu in existence in the country and they are convenient and have served as effective savings schemes for those who have no access to the banking system or have no time to go to the bank.

In *osusu* groups, a number of women contribute money on a weekly or monthly basis and one of the women is given the whole sum to either start a small business or take care of immediate needs such as paying for medical care, school fees or even spending it on a wedding or initiation ceremony. Rotation is often done on a monthly or quarterly basis, and success of the scheme is highly dependent on trust. Community clubs, on the other hand, engage primarily in providing loans to women. Some of these loans are often expected to be paid back with interest and a few are interest-free. Based on repayment patterns, each woman has the opportunity to ask for

bigger loans to expand her business. Such grass-roots efforts serve a multiplicity of purposes: they help women make life changing decisions that ultimately affect their households; they help women form a community in which they deal with economic, social, and political issues and they serve as sites for the production of income-generating work and moral, emotional, and psychological support.

### **Healthcare**

Sierra Leonean women are mostly responsible for the healthcare needs of their entire families. They are the ones who usually have to take time off to take care of sick and infirmed family members. This task becomes even more difficult in a society that had its meager medical infrastructure and facilities destroyed in a civil war. The healthcare needs of these women themselves are hardly ever met because such services are expensive, inadequate, and inaccessible. The maternal mortality rate is high, about 700 for 100,000 live births and the infant mortality rate is 160 per 1,000. Ignorance is the leading cause of these deaths. For example, women are being forced to push when they are not fully dilated and objects used to cut umbilical cords are not sterilized. Moreover, Because of the level of poverty, many women suffer from anemia and malnutrition. However, these numbers were higher before many traditional midwives were trained to become traditional birth attendants. These trainings have helped TBAs to deliver much better services through blending traditional methods with modern medicine.

During the war, many young abductees were vulnerable to adverse reproductive health outcomes such as AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and as a result the problem of taking care of young people suffering from AIDS has become a part of the Sierra Leonean landscape. Many of those infected with the AIDS virus had either lost their parents during the war or have parents who can in no way take care of them, either because they fear communal ostracism or have no means of providing for a sick child. In such cases, young female relatives are left with such burdens. Currently, the government, through the HIV/AIDS secretariat, is working hard to curb the spread of the disease. They provide education on prevention and provide free testing and free ART treatment for those infected. In essence, issues of women's health and bodily integrity are beginning to be addressed.

## **Bodily Integrity**

In Sierra Leone, change has been very slow around issues of bodily integrity and one area of contention has been on the issue of excision. There are two main procedures performed in Sierra Leone, *sunna*, the removal of the hood of the clitoris, with the body of the clitoris remaining intact, and clitoridectomy or excision, which is the removal of the clitoris and all or part of the labia. One major difference is that, in Sierra Leone, excision is associated with a secret society known as the Bondo Society. In essence, undergoing excision automatically makes an initiate a member of the Bondo, a society that is exclusively female, operated by “powerful” women called ‘digba’ or ‘Soweh’ and a society in which initiates take an oath of secrecy. Some initiates strongly believe in the repercussions of breaking the oath of secrecy and therefore afraid to openly discuss the procedure. Because this procedure is embedded in the discourses around culture and tradition, on-going debates on its relevance seem to polarize rather than connect key players on both sides. However, because of issues of modernity and access to relevant information, many initiates have refused to initiate their own children and wards. Such actions, in effect, help to weaken the influence and structures of the society and the debates help to draw attention to other abusive experiences of women in the country.

In pre-war Sierra Leone, issues such as rape, sexual violence and domestic violence, which have a negative impact on women’s development, were hardly discussed or addressed. Though now curtailed, practices such as early and forced marriages whereby very young girls are given in marriage to men old enough to be their grandfathers still persist, remain acceptable and hardly challenged. As a result, immature girls face early sexual activity and are exposed to risks and complications arising out of early pregnancy and childbirth. The situation of women is further worsened by inadequate, unaffordable and inaccessible health care system in the country, making Sierra Leone a country with one of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates.

Discussing and reporting rape and other forms of sexual violence against Women and girls has always been an uphill task. In pre-war Sierra Leone, women and girls had much more difficulty reporting rape and other sexual violence they

experienced because, for one, they were made to believe that they were responsible for the acts perpetrated against them. Perpetrators were hardly prosecuted or made accountable for sexual crimes committed against women and the culture of silence and impunity pervaded the society. In many cases, the discovery of sexual violence committed against a girl or a woman was usually addressed not by the victim, but by family members who felt that the family honour had been violated. Moreover, the virginal status of the girl or woman greatly influenced the reaction of the family. Where the sexual abuse of a virgin girl or woman was discovered, the family or community had various means of dealing with the situation and the focus is often on reclaiming the dignity of the family. It is important to note that rape and sexual violence was addressed not in the context of the victim's integrity but in the context of the integrity of the family.

In the rural areas, most sexual violations were addressed without recourse to the courts. The leaders in the community—chiefs, community elders and religious leaders—usually addressed incidences of sexual violence. Among most ethnic groups the perpetrators are required to pay an amount as a fine and in cases where the woman is married such fines are known as woman damage. In a few ethnic groups, physical punishment may be inflicted on the perpetrator and in other ethnic groups the perpetrator may be forced to marry the victim leading to a further violation of the rights of the victim.

The phrase “domestic violence” was rarely used before the conflict and violence within the home or in a relationship was never considered to be domestic violence. Such behaviour was considered almost normative and among certain ethnic groups physical chastisement of wives was a right husbands had and were free to exercise. The culture of silence, in relation to domestic violence, was so prevalent that even educated women who were victims of domestic violence rarely reported such crimes.

Even though acts of domestic violence could be prosecuted within the legal framework under the crime of assault, wounding, manslaughter or murder, in both rural and urban areas, sexual violence cases, including rape, were hardly taken to court due to a number of reasons. First is the reality that the police were often reluctant to investigate such cases because they believe that they were personal,

belonged to the domestic realm and ought to be addressed at home or within the family structure. Second is the victim's fear of ostracism, stigma and shame from testifying in public. Third and most importantly are the existence of archaic laws and the gender insensitivity and unreasonable bureaucratic delays of the justice system. It was only where the violence experienced was extremely extensive, sometimes even leading to disfigurement or death, that legal action is taken. Moreover, because fines imposed on the perpetrators were often minimal fines, out of court settlements became the most practical means of addressing issues of sexual violence. It can therefore be argued that because of an ineffective judiciary and lack of political will, such impunities escalated and became manifest during the war.

Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) contend that the extreme violence that women suffer during conflicts does not arise solely out of the conditions of war but is directly linked to the violence that exists in women's lives during peacetime. This may be true in many situations of conflict but the unprecedented violations against the dignity and integrity of women experienced during the Sierra Leone civil war, makes such an argument very difficult to sustain. Reports abound about the crimes that were committed against women. For example the TRC report intimates that "domestic violence against women intensified during the civil war" and "women and girls were the deliberate targets of sexual violence and rape by all the armed groups during the conflict" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: 167, 169). The violations that women and girls experienced were characterized by the most extraordinary inexplicable acts of violence, leaving many of them permanently scarred (137). Women and girls were tortured as various objects such as firewood, sticks, and guns were inserted into their private parts. Some women were forced to have sex with other male members of their families such as their sons and wards. There were also few reports of disembowelment of pregnant women and torture and killing of babies in their mother's presence. Some women and girls had their arms and limbs amputated. Abducted women and girls experienced sexual slavery and forced marriage and it is estimated that 58% were repeatedly violated by multiple perpetrators. Furthermore, to instill fear and deter abductees from escaping, the different warring factions often tattooed or marked their victims with knives, blades and other sharp instruments on various parts of their bodies. It is therefore not surprising that one of major findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that women and girls were deliberately



subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment with the deliberate intention of inflicting serious mental and physical suffering or injury. The abuse of women was indeed a weapon of war and a strategy designed to destroy the norms and values of the society.

The violations committed against women and girls continue to have a negative impact on their lives in post-war Sierra Leone. Because of societal sanctions against abortions and lack of access to proper healthcare, a lot of women had to carry unwanted pregnancies and have become single mothers in a post-war society in which life can be unbearably difficult. Psychosocially, many women suffer in silence, carry the shame and stigma of their rape and abduction experience and are reluctant to discuss these experiences or seek help. As was discussed earlier in the paper, some women suffer permanent or irreparable injury as there has been an increase in sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. In effect, widowhood, ostracism and forced pregnancies have led to an increase in female-headed households where families live in very poor conditions. However, post-war reconstruction efforts, through the creation of gender-sensitive programs, have begun to address many of these problems.

For instance, although the terms of reference of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made no reference to women, in undertaking its task, the Commission invited and received submissions from NGO's, women's groups and other activists on the issue of violence against women during the war. It also invited and recorded testimonies from victims of sexual and other abuses. It particularly dealt with the status of women before the conflict in order to ascertain links with such abuses of women before during and after the conflict. The Commission was gender sensitive and in its processes ensured that gender issues were taken into account.

As has been iterated in this paper, reports of the violence women faced during the conflict led to the proliferation of agencies and non-governmental organizations operating in Sierra Leone. The efforts and successes of these organizations are debatable because there are a large number of victims who claim that they have not benefited from such programs. During the special hearings for women at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission most victims of sexual violence complained that they had not receive any medical assistance and that they continue to experience health problems related to the sexual abuse they encountered during the war.

Violence against women continues to prevail in the society as a result of the structural inequalities women face, absence of law reform to address such violations

and the continued application of discriminatory laws. One important change as a result of the war is the increased and sustained activism of women advocating for peace democracy and good governance. In their campaigns, women have also skilfully advocated for the respect and protection of women's right, the prosecution of offenders and law reform to restore the dignity of women. We now have a lot of women's groups advocating for women's rights at all levels and the momentum is building up.

The Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children's Affairs has been involved in a lot of initiatives towards the protection and promotion of the rights of women. Other manifestations of an increased political will to address women's rights issues are the setting up of the Family Support Unit by the Sierra Leone Police Force to address sexual violence and domestic violence. There has also been a marked increase in the reporting, investigation and prosecution of sexual and domestic violence. The media regularly reports incidences of sexual violence, particularly against minors, and domestic violence even though reports about prosecution or conviction of these offences are almost non-existent.

Even though the need to address sexual and domestic violence is part of the wider post-war discourse on women's empowerment, there are challenges towards the elimination of such violence. For one, the policies developed by the Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children's Affairs on the Advancement of Women and Gender Mainstreaming are hardly implemented. These policies recognise the historical discrimination against women and the need to ensure that the rights of women are secured and promoted in all spheres of society. The establishment of the Family Support Unit of the Police is recognition of the need for the enforcement of the laws against sexual and domestic violence but their work is hampered by lack of personnel, training and other support.

Through the collaborative efforts of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, UNDP and civil society groups, laws have been drafted to cover domestic violence, minimum age of marriage (18 years), customary marriage laws, divorce registration and inheritance laws, and marriage rights in general. These draft laws seek to implement the provisions of CEDAW that advocates for the removal of discriminatory laws and to ensure that the rights of women are secured and enforced. These draft laws have been the outcome of nationwide consultation. The Law Reform Commission has also drafted laws to reform the laws on sexual violence and other

issues around the protection of women's rights. So far, there has been no set schedule on when these draft laws will be put into bills, presented to Parliament and passed into law. It is therefore necessary at this stage to conduct effective lobbying of Parliamentarians and the executive to ensure that these laws are passed. This will be the beginning of the measures to address the structural inequality, discrimination and abuse women face on an everyday basis.

### **Conclusions**

It can be argued that the Sierra Leonean women's movement, as an organized force, was able to confront the challenges brought on by the civil war, by increasing their voices and participation in the political space, and their bargaining power in the household as well as changing the discourse on bodily integrity during the conflict phase. However it was not able to fully use the opportunities created by the war to advance a women's agenda for gender equality and empowerment in the immediate post-conflict reconstruction process. This is not surprising because although "women suffer the adverse effects of war, advocate peace and yet find themselves unjustifiably marginalised in the peace-building process. As such, the signing of a peace agreement signals the end of one struggle for women, but the beginning of another for the services and legal instruments addressing the specific post-war challenges" (Williams, 2006).

This, to a large extent has been the case because post-war Sierra Leone has seen an increase in the number of local and International NGOs headed by women and with a focus on empowering women. As they advocate for voice, participation, bodily integrity and help to provide access to work, education, land, legal system, healthcare, credit, etc, these women and their organizations have not only been instrumental in changing the lives of many women but also in creating the space for other Sierra Leonean women to advocate for change.

Moreover, the establishment and the effective functioning of the Human Rights Commission, it is hoped, will create more awareness on women's rights and help to protect and advance those rights and address issues of sexual and domestic violence. Even though nationwide sensitization and awareness raising campaigns

about the rights of women remains a great challenge, work towards the restoration of the dignity and integrity of women is in full force.

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