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Women and Post-Conflict Society in Sierra Leone¹

By Hazel M. McFerson²

Abstract

Gender inequality in Sierra Leone, after colonialism among the worst in Sub-Saharan Africa, has been heightened further by the civil war of 1992-2002--which was related in part to the struggle for control of “blood diamonds” but also to long-standing social and regional disparities, and to collapse of formal institutions and widespread corruption. Sierra Leonean women are today among the most marginalized in the world, socially, economically and politically. However, there are differences among three groups: the better educated, comparatively richer “Krios” (descendants of the original freed slaves); relatively enlightened tribes; and the more traditional patriarchal tribes. The main route to improving the status of Sierra Leonean women is political empowerment. Some progress has been made since the civil war, post-conflict reconstruction programs and donor pressure are also opening up new opportunities for women progress, and there are hopes of significant electoral gains for women in the 2012 elections, inspired by the promising developments in neighboring post-conflict Liberia (which in 2005 elected Africa’s first female president). However, sustainable advancement depends on alliances whereby the better-educated urban women exert pressure for solving concrete problems of poorer women in exchange for their political support. Although such alliances are difficult, new grassroots women organizations have achieved positive initial results, which can be consolidated and expanded by appropriate partnership with international women NGOs.

Keywords: Gender and development, Post-conflict reconstruction, African women.

“We’ll kill you if you cry”

(From rebel soldiers to a gang-rape victim. Quoted in Human Rights Watch, 2003)

Sierra Leone: Political, economic and social background

The West African nation of Sierra Leone consists of 28,000 square miles, with over 6 million people, of whom an increasing number are in urban areas, and was created by the British as a haven for liberated African slaves (Creoles or “Krios”) from the

¹ This article stems in part from field research in Sierra Leone. I am grateful to all of my facilitators and interlocutors, including several government officials and women activists who did not wish to be named, but particularly to Martha Chigozie, Executive Director, Through Empowerment and Development for Women and Girls in Sierra Leone (TEDEWOSIL), Beatrice Fofanah, Women’s Coordinator, United Methodist Church Sierra Leone Conference, and Dr. Margaret Kilo and Eva Taylor of the African Development Bank.

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Bahamas, the United States, Nova Scotia and Great Britain, under similar conditions and motivations as the Americo-Liberians settled in neighboring Liberia under American auspices. In 1787, British philanthropists founded the "Province of Freedom" which later became Freetown, a British crown colony and the principal base for the suppression of the slave trade. By 1792, freed slaves from Nova Scotia joined the original settlers, the Maroons, and were joined by another group of slaves from Jamaica in 1800. The colonial status of Sierra Leone was that of a "multiple dependency," (Hailey, 1957), consisting of both a Colony and a Protectorate.³ Among the architects of the Colony were men such as William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharpe, and Lord Mansfield who formed an administration in 1806, which was instrumental in the British Empire's abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807. In 1808 Sierra Leone officially became a crown colony with the land possessions of Sierra Leone Company (formerly known as St George's Bay Company) transferred to the crown.

While Creoles were dominant in Freetown, the territory's indigenous African inhabitants were in the hinterland--thus establishing the Freetown/upcountry divide, which remains to this day. Almost from the beginning the colony was characterized by stratified gendered cultural and educational divisions consisting of the dominant Creoles in Freetown, the inhabitants of the Protectorate consisting of indigenous Africans, and groups arriving from the Upper Niger region. These differences have endured, and will be discussed further. The article thus, examines the position of different groups of women within the social structure of Sierra Leone and the main reasons for their subordinate status which is only now beginning to change.

The country gained independence in 1961, and is today a constitutional republic with a directly elected president under a unicameral legislature. The president is elected for a five-year term by popular vote; there are 124 seats in Parliament, of whom 112 are elected concurrently with the presidential elections and 12 are filled by Paramount Chiefs from each of the country's administrative districts. There are currently 16 women in parliament (13.2%), ranking Sierra Leone at 86 out of 142 countries in parliamentary representation of women.⁴

Since the passage of the Local Governments Acts of 2004, the country is divided into districts, which are administered by Local Councils in four regions: the Western Area, consisting of the capital Freetown and its environs; and the Northern, Southern, and Eastern regions. The political history of the country, which is now heralded as a genuine evolving democracy" (e.g., by von der Schulenburg, 2011) has experienced military regimes, political crises, endemic corruption, a failed state, and a protracted civil war, where politics are not issue-driven, but are about dividing among

³ This division has been among the most important factor in Sierra Leonean political developments. (Hailey, 1957.) The colony was set apart from the rest of the territory by its settlement pattern, originally populated by immigrants from Nova Scotia in 1787. They were followed by runaway slaves from the West Indies (Maroons), and then by "recaptives"—liberated slaves from slaving ships, whose mission was to bring "civilization" to the interior groups. (Jordan, 1969.) The politics and inhabitants of the Colony set the dominant cultural patterns, and served in the colonial administration. Sierra Leone formed a single constitutional unit, in that since 1924, the Legislative Council legislated for both the Colony and the Protectorate, and Creoles were active in the body. According to the 1924 constitution, three elected members were drawn from the colony, and three nominated Paramount Chiefs were drawn from the Protectorate, marking the first time the latter was represented on the Legislative Council.

⁴ IPU PARLINE database: SIERRA LEONE (parliament). <http://www.ipu.org/praline/reports/2281.htm>. accessed August 3, 2011.

elites contesting the spoils from the considerable mineral resources. Ethnic cleavages do exist, but are secondary and nowhere as pronounced as in most African countries, although there are significant religious differences intersecting with regional differences--with Christians (mostly in the Western area) accounting for about 20 percent of population, Muslims (mostly in the North) for 60 percent, and traditional African religions for the remaining 20 percent.

Despite vast extractive resources including diamonds, chromite, and reserves of rutile that are among the world's largest, along with bauxite, columbite and gold, the country has consistently ranked among the least developed in the UNDP Human Development Index and is one of the poorest, with a per capita income of about US\$700 (at official exchange rates) and one of the world's most unequal income distributions, with a Gini Index of 66. As a result, over 70 percent of the population subsists below the poverty line of one dollar a day. (GOSL, 2010)

Sierra Leone was in a brutal civil war from 1992 to 2002, at first limited to some rural areas but later expanding to much of the country and to major attacks on Freetown by the rebel "Revolutionary United Front" (RUF). The Lomé Agreement of July 7, 1999 formally ended the civil war, but sporadic hostilities continued well into 2002. The conflict is frequently assumed to have been caused exclusively by the desire to control the country's diamonds (popularized in the film *Blood Diamond*). Indeed, this was the principal fuel of the war and its major motivation, but not the only one. Years of bad governance, endemic corruption and denial of basic human rights created the deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable (TRC, 2004).⁵

The inability of the state to exercise a monopoly of force in the country resulted from the earlier 'personalization' of government by a small group (NAG, 2006). The existence of a shadow state that used the apparatus of government for personal use was a major factor in the collapse of the state. Corruption in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches also contributed to the climate of generalized rule violation, and still remains a widespread problem.

Older resentments and tribal hostilities, as well as the Freetown-upcountry divide, were also at work. Historically, the Krio elite in Freetown have held senior government positions, but were politically disinherited after 1900, with the final establishment of the British Protectorate over the hinterland (Crowder, 1968). During the colonial period, the British did not encourage Creole political dominance nor were they dominant in post-independence politics after 1961—in marked contrast with the dominant role of Americo-Liberians in neighboring Liberia. Power alternated between indigenous civilian and military actors, including a spate of Mende-dominated regimes, while Krios supported Limba politicians such as Siaka Stevens, causing resentment from the Mende and other groups, particularly the Temne. During the civil war the main rebel groups included Temne such as RUF leader Foday Sankoh and Mende such as the Kamajors, a former civil defense force whose leaders have been indicted by the UN war crimes tribunal. However, although important, tribal identity was only one of several considerations. The conflict was indeed mainly over valuable minerals--diamonds in particular--with rebel groups splitting, recombining and cooperating as convenient to maximize their profit. Thus, the abundance of valuable minerals has proven to be a curse in Sierra Leone (as

⁵ The Sierra Leone Truth & Reconciliation Commission was established as a condition of the Lomé Peace Accord with the assistance of the international community in the wake of the civil war.

elsewhere), first by creating a shadow economy (Reno, 1995) and then by partly causing and subsequently fueling the violence. None of the accounts of this history/background is gendered. However, for many women in mineral-rich areas, including in Sierra Leone, artisanal mining represents a poverty-alleviating opportunity. (Hinton et al, 2003). Approximately 30% of the world's artisanal miners are women who occupy a number of roles ranging from labour-intensive mining methods to the processing aspect of artisanal mining, including amalgamation with mercury in the case of gold extraction. Women in Sierra Leone are involved in artisanal mining in the Tongo Fields mining town, and in Kono, although after the war many returned to the Tongo fields to find that the mines were being exploited by different factions, and few women were receiving profits. This contributed to conflict flare-ups in the area.

Ethnicity and society

The main population groups

Sierra Leone is ethnically diverse, including at least 17 distinct groups. The four most important are the Krios in the Western area (10 percent), the Temne and Limba in the North (35 percent), and the Mende in the South (30 percent).⁶ There are also small but economically powerful Lebanese and Afro-Lebanese groups, some of whom participated in the diamond smuggling during the war.⁷

Ethnic relations among the groups have historically been good, and initially, there was intermarriage, but as Krios became exposed to British education and acculturation, they become detached from the indigenous people. (Jackson, 2005)⁸ Krios do not form a homogenous group, however, but are stratified by social class. (Fyfe, 1987). The absence of sharp cleavages along ethnic lines adds hope to the potential for women collective action for political empowerment, discussed later.

Lineage and the social structure

In pre-colonial times, women in the area of today's Sierra Leone often occupied positions of power; but first the colonial experience and then post-independence patrimonial politics followed by the civil war severely diminished their political influence and participation. The social structure in the country is in general both patriarchal and patrilineal.⁹ The extended rural families are organized in lineage groups, incorporating notions of a founding father and with membership, land access and property passing in the male line. (Richards, Bah and Vincent, 2004). Upon marriage women reside in their husband's locale; children "belong" to him; and the status and treatment of the wife depends on the marriage contract. Lack of lineage connections is a major cause of

⁶ Other significant indigenous groups include the Kono, Koranko, Bullom, Susu, Foulah, Loko, Mandingo, Kissi, and Yalunka.

⁷ Special legislation was passed just before the 1962 election to prevent Lebanese from standing for Parliament, from fears that they would use their wealth to buy their way in.

⁸ Paul Jackson (2005) writes: "During the war, the Krio community refused to believe that a war was actually going on in the countryside. It was only when the RUF entered Freetown that the war was brought home to them. The institutional bifurcation has led to a continued juxtaposition of state police and chiefdom police, magistrate's courts and customary courts, national tax and chiefdom tax, as well as a colonial legacy of the district officer administration."

⁹ This section is based on Richards, Bah and Vincent, 2004, unless otherwise noted.

insecurity, vulnerability and poverty among women, and “war widows” and rural women from weak families are especially affected. Marriage is a matter of strategic alliances. There is a loose hierarchy of ruling and dependent lineages, perpetuated by the control the elders exercise over the marriage networks, which can be modified by occasional alliances with influential “externals”. Poor women without connections fare very badly, but women from high-status lineages have some protection from uncles and brothers against violence and marital abuse.

The role of the chiefs

Although often manipulated by the national government in recent years, the role of Paramount Chief is central to the maintenance of the social system and to wealth generation, rank and power through building networks (Howard and Skinner, 1984). The chief, an elected official, is chosen for a life term in accordance with customary principles. Sierra Leone’s local governance is based on the chiefdom structure, which has its roots both in traditional authority and the system imposed by the British. The chiefdoms were originally designed to harness “native authorities” to British colonial rule (Fanthorpe, 1998). They were inherited by the Sierra Leone Republic, and remain key institutions of local government. The institution was perpetuated by the British through treaties, but the chiefs were only “traditional” in so far as the British labeled them as such (Jackson, 2005). The British instituted 146 local chiefdoms; today there are 149. Lansana Fofana writes “...the rot started with a name-change. The title ‘king’ became ‘chief’ ostensibly because the colonial administration would not countenance the existence of other regents while there was a perfectly good monarch in Britain (Fofana, 2009).

There are several different levels of ‘chief’, but the level that has power is designated as ‘paramount chief’. Chiefs are the guardians of the land, arbitrate disputes, and play an influential role in mining activities, which requires their agreement (Jackson, 2007). Chiefs receive a share of formal diamond exports for local development projects, and some along with the chiefdom councils have been implicated in corruption and bias in local law and the administration of local taxes. There are differences in the power and decision-making of male paramount chiefs, in comparison with the handful of women who have occupied the post--in which cases important matters have typically been resolved in male secret societies. The inhabitants of a chiefdom reciprocate for the chief’s role by performing services (communal labor on “his” land, which is held “in trust” for the group and which they are expected to maintain) and providing gifts (e.g., in dispute resolution) and providing gifts on behalf of the group (Zack-Williams, 1995).

Currently, chiefs are elected through a system of Electoral College councilors. Candidates must come from specific ruling lineages, many of which are allied with particular political parties. Through the years the central government has regularly sought to erode the powers of chiefs, who are now directly under the supervision and the scrutiny of the Ministry of Local Government. With the reintroduction of local government in 2004, the power and influence of chiefs has been significantly curtailed and in many instances has passed to municipal councils, which tax and provide local services. It is also not uncommon for the ministry to threaten chiefs with corruption probes if their political loyalties are in doubt, and some chiefs have been reduced to acting as the government’s mouthpiece in rural areas. (Jackson, 2005)

Paradoxically, despite their historically repressive role vis-à-vis women, the increasingly tenuous position of the “traditional” chiefs might provide an opening for an alliance with women groups to bolster women political representation, as suggested later. At this point it is important to highlight the importance of historical background in Sierra Leone, to which much attention has been given up to now, and is important to understand the current situation, and the position of women.

Women in Sierra Leone: The worst poverty and gender inequality in the world

The overall picture

Poverty is widespread throughout Sierra Leone. About 26 percent of the population cannot afford a basic diet and 70 percent subsist below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day. There is a wide disparity in geographic distribution, with poverty especially prevalent in rural areas, reaching 80 percent or more in the poorest districts, partly from destruction of tree crops during the war. (GOSL PRSP, 2005-2007). The extreme poverty is reflected in some of the world’s worst social and human indicators. Paradoxically, poverty is among the highest in Kono district in the east, where most of the diamond mining takes place, contributing \$142 million a year to the government. The town has no paved roads, no electricity, no clean water, and one ill-equipped hospital and two ambulances to serve 300,000 people. Most women give birth at home, unable to reach a doctor, and malaria is on the increase. (*Breaking the Curse*, Global Witness 2009.)

As poor as Sierra Leoneans are in general, women are poorer still. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper-II, (SL-PRSP- 2009) notes that while there has been a decrease in poverty in the urban areas since 2003, poverty is predominantly rural, and in terms of gender, female-headed households appear to be somewhat worse off in terms of assets, markedly in land ownership, which only 5 percent are likely to own. Their income averages only 45 percent of men’s income, and three out of four rural women live on less than 50 cents a day (*Foreign Policy*, 2008). Table 1 on selected women development indicators show that a Sierra Leonean woman lives on average a full ten years less than the average African woman (and half the life span of women in developed countries). Women life expectancy in the country is fifth shortest in the continent--next only to the four southern cone countries of Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where women’s health has been devastated by HIV/AIDS.

Still, the evidence shows that Sierra Leonean women do not live a shorter life than Sierra Leonean men. They do live a much harder life, however. Among other things, between agricultural labor and household chores, work absorbs virtually the entirety of their waking hours and this, among other factors, precludes their active participation in civic or collective activities. The maternal mortality rate is by far higher than in any other African country, 2.7 times as high as the average for the continent, and at 2,100 per 100,000 live births, the highest in the world with the possible exception of Somalia and parts of Afghanistan. (Maternal mortality is even higher according to Amnesty International, 2009, which reports that one in eight Sierra Leonean women die in childbirth.)

Women’s literacy, at 29 percent, is less than 60 percent that of men (and less than half the average for African women) and female numeracy, too, is barely 20 percent—again about half that for men. (The situation is even worse in the districts of Kambia and Koinadagu, where women literacy and numeracy rates approach zero.) Nor does the

future appear encouraging: girls enrollment in primary school stands at 42%, and girls are seldom educated beyond primary school, even among the Krio elite. Among the other consequences, high illiteracy has major political implications, as the lack of women's "voice" relegates their issues to the back burner (TRC 2004).

Regional differences

Table 2 shows the literacy rates by main region. The sharp Freetown/upcountry divide is especially evident in the more-than-double literacy rate in the Western Area than the rest of the country. Moreover, and particularly relevant to the later discussion of potential alliances, the comparative educational disadvantage of women is very slight in the Freetown area, compared to the very large gap in every other region and especially in the North.

The household survey for 2003/04 shows that districts outside the Western Area, where the capital of Freetown is located, generally suffer higher levels of poverty and reduced levels of public services. Although the 2007 and 2008 Service Delivery Perception Surveys show moderate gains in the quality of educational and health services in many districts, there is much room for improvement. The 2008 Poverty Diagnostic found that educational services remain pro-rich (when adjusted for the quality of teachers) while cost remains an obstacle to health care for many of the poor.

To reduce overall poverty in Sierra Leone the focus must therefore be on improving basic public services in the rural areas. Doing so is likely to reduce *absolute* poverty among both men and women, as at least some of the improvement will benefit poor women and girls through increasing their access to services. However, the impact on the *relative* poverty of Sierra Leonean women is not obvious. If, as is the case, poor women are in a weaker position in much of the country, the improvement in basic services can be mainly captured by men and thus increase gender inequality at the same time as it reduces overall poverty.

Table 1. Selected Gender Development Indicators, Sierra Leone and Africa, 2005 *

COUNTRY	Life expectancy		Literacy rate a/		Maternal Mortality	% Women in Parliament
	Overall	Women	Overall	Women		
Angola	41.7	43.3	82.9	54.2	1,400	15.0
Benin	55.4	56.5	47.9	23.3	840	8.4
Botswana	48.1	48.4	80.4	81.8	380	11.1
Burkina Faso	51.4	52.9	31.4	16.6	700	11.7
Burundi	48.5	49.8	67.3	52.2	1,100	31.7
Cameroon	49.8	50.2	77.0	59.8	1,000	8.9
Cape Verde	71.0	73.8	87.8	75.5	210	15.3
Central African Rep	43.7	45.0	64.8	33.5	980	3.5
Chad	50.4	51.8	40.8	12.8	1,500	10.5
Comoros	64.1	66.3	63.9	63.4	400	6.5
Congo (B)	54.2	55.2	90.5	79.0	740	10.1
Congo DRC	45.8	47.1	80.9	54.1	1,100	7.7
Cote D'Ivoire	47.4	48.3	60.8	38.6	810	8.5
Djibouti	53.9	55.2	79.9	79.9	650	10.8
Equator. Guinea	51.8	51.6	93.4	80.5	680	18.0
Eritrea	56.6	59.0	71.5	75.1	450	22.0
Ethiopia	50.5	53.1	50.5	22.8	720	21.4
Gabon	56.2	56.9	88.5	79.7	520	13.7
Gambia	58.8	59.9	49.9	49.9	690	9.4
Ghana	59.1	59.5	66.4	49.8	560	10.9
Guinea	54.8	56.4	42.6	18.1	910	19.3
Guinea-Bissau	45.8	47.5	60.0	60.0	1,100	14.0
Kenya	52.1	53.1	77.7	70.2	560	7.3
Lesotho	42.6	42.9	73.7	90.3	960	25.0
Madagascar	58.4	60.1	76.5	65.3	510	8.4
Malawi	46.3	46.7	74.9	54.0	1,100	13.6
Mali	53.1	55.3	32.7	15.9	970	10.2
Mauritania	63.2	65.0	59.5	43.4	820	17.6
Mauritius	72.4	75.8	88.2	80.5	15	17.1
Mozambique	42.8	43.6	54.8	25.0	520	34.8
Namibia	51.6	52.2	86.8	83.5	210	26.9
Niger	55.8	54.9	42.9	15.1	1,800	12.4
Nigeria	46.5	47.1	78.2	60.1	1,100	...
Rwanda	45.2	46.7	71.4	59.8	1,300	45.3
S.Tome/Principe	64.0	66.7	92.2	77.9	...	7.3
Senegal	62.3	64.4	51.1	29.2	980	19.2
Seychelles	72.7	73.6	91.8	92.3	12	23.5
Sierra Leone	41.8	43.4	46.7	24.2	2,100	14.5
South Africa	50.8	52.0	84.1	80.9	400	32.8
Sudan	57.4	58.9	71.1	51.8	450	16.4
Swaziland	40.4	41.4	80.9	78.3	390	16.8
Tanzania	51.0	52.0	77.5	62.2	950	30.4
Togo	57.8	59.6	68.7	38.5	510	8.6
Uganda	49.7	50.2	76.8	57.7	550	29.8
Zambia	40.5	40.6	76.3	59.8	830	14.6
Zimbabwe	40.9	40.2	92.7	86.2	880	22.2
Average	52.6	53.3	70.0	55.7	786	17

(*) Source: UNDP, *Human Development Reports*, 1997 and 2007/08, and UNICEF (www.unicef.org/infobycountry). Reliable data are not available for Liberia and Somalia. Maternal mortality in deaths per 100,000 live births; life expectancy in years; literacy in percent of relevant population. a/: 1995-2005 average

Table 2: **Sierra Leone: Literacy Rates by Regions, 2004**
(in percent)

Region	Males	Females	Total	Females/Males
East	40	22	31	55
North	43	20	31	47
South	45	25	34	55
Western Area	62	57	60	92
National	49	29	39	59

Source: 2004 Population and Housing Census. (Figures may not be fully consistent with Table 1 owing to the different year and slight differences in data collection methodology.)

Diminished quality of life and the role of female genital mutilation

Aside from the prevalence of absolute poverty and low literacy, Sierra Leonean women from all groups experience special diminution in quality of life stemming from a variety of factors. First, support for pregnancy and childbirth is grossly inadequate, especially in light of the extremely high birth rate of 6.5 children per woman of childbearing age (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Thousands of Sierra Leonean women die every year as a result of complications of pregnancy and childbirth that would be easily and cheaply treated elsewhere. Fewer than half (42 percent) of deliveries are helped by a skilled attendant; fewer than 20 percent occur in health facilities, and six of the country's 13 districts have no emergency obstetric care at all to address complications (Amnesty International, 2009). Hundreds of birthing women every year die in taxis or on motorbikes or walking to a distant clinic. Traditional beliefs and practices aggravate the health situation further. For example, obstructed labor is believed to be the result of infidelity, and time and effort go into trying to obtain a confession of infidelity instead of ensuring that the woman, who is in agony as the baby fails to emerge, has access to the critical emergency care. (Amnesty International, 2009.)

The health and quality of women's life is further damaged by vector-borne diseases such as schistosomiasis (bilharzia) which disproportionately affect women because they, more than men, stand in water to transplant rice, wash clothes or collect drinking water, and are especially vulnerable during menses (MacCormack and Jambia, 1996).

A particular factor of severely diminished quality of life among women is the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), which, as in the wide swath of tropical Africa, is the norm in Sierra Leone. It is estimated that between 80 and 94 percent of the female population have been subjected to the practice (Fanthorpe, 2007). The form most widely practiced in Sierra Leone is Type II female genital mutilation (also called radical circumcision or "pharaonic" circumcision from the evidence of ancient mummies).¹⁰ Type II FGM consists of excision of the entire clitoris and all or part of the labia minora, and is typically accompanied by infibulation.

¹⁰ United States Department of State, *Sierra Leone: Report on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC)*, 1 June 2001, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/46d5787cc.html>

Wrongly believed to be part of Islamic precepts, radical female genital mutilation is entirely a cultural practice. In Sierra Leone it is usually carried out within a ritual context, known as *Bondo*, as part of the passage from childhood to womanhood. *Bondo*, it is generally practiced by all classes, including the educated elite (except among Christian Krios). Some Sierra Leoneans who live abroad even bring their daughters back to Sierra Leone to be “circumcised” and participate in *Bondo* initiation rites.

Aside from the pain and trauma of the procedure and its lasting adverse impact on female sexuality, the long-term health implications are very severe and include urinary infections, pelvic infections, hemorrhage, painful intercourse, prolonged and obstructed childbirth, and occasionally death (Fanthorpe, 2007). Nevertheless, most traditional chiefs and authority figures are outspoken in support of *Bondo*. In 2008, the Paramount Chief of Nongowa Chiefdom in Kenema District stated that he could not marry a woman who did not “go through the process”, and saw *Bondo* as part of the cultural practices which as traditional chief he is responsible to uphold, regardless of the negative health impact on girls and women. Not coincidentally, *Bondo* also puts cash into the hands of village chiefs, who charge a fee for every “circumcision” ceremony that takes place within their jurisdiction.¹¹

The government has done little or nothing to abolish or at least mitigate the mutilation, nor have powerful women themselves objected to the practice. On the contrary, Patricia Kabbah, the late wife of former President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, sponsored the “circumcision” of 1,500 young girls before the 2007 presidential election.¹² Cabinet member Shirley Yeama Gbujama threatened in 1999 to “sew up the mouths of those who preach against *Bondo*”, and when trying to defend that remark ten years later she made the bizarre claim that “there are women who were never circumcised as young girls, and now that they're getting older, they are getting so many problems with their genitals that they go to doctors and appeal to doctors to cut them off.”¹³

The main causes of women's poverty and subordination

Poverty is rooted in structural conditions which are exacerbated by corruption, which as in all other countries is particularly harmful to the poor, especially women. Galtung (1969) defines poverty as an outgrowth of structural violence resulting from a particular social system and social institutions that systematically limit individuals' ability to fulfill their potential. Structural violence is built into the system, is stable, and flows from inequality in the distribution of power. Also strongly applicable to the predicament of Sierra Leonean women is Amartya Sen's “capabilities approach”, by which poverty is fundamentally the result of “capabilities deprivation”, i.e. the absence of agency, options and opportunities, limiting the ability of individuals to make choices (Sen, 1979). And Ho

¹¹ Mohamed Massaquoi, “Sierra Leone: Paramount Chief Supports FGM,” 06/05/2008, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804212034.html>, accessed November 15, 2009. See also IRIN Web Special. Documentary-March 2005. *Razor's edge. The Controversy of Female Genital Mutilation*. <http://www.irinnews.org/pdf/in-depth/FGM-IRIN-In-Depth.pdf>, accessed December 3, 2009.

¹² “Female genital mutilation a vote winner in Sierra Leone,” Misanet/Irin 17 March Afrolnews, <http://www.afrol.com/articles/15927>, Accessed November 1, 2009.

¹³ Gbujama has also held the positions of Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister of Social Welfare, Minister of Tourism and Culture, and Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs. She was one of the most respected and longest-serving cabinet ministers in President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's government. (Gbujama belongs to the Mende ethnic group.)

(2007) has compared poverty to a violation of human rights. In any event, any policy to reduce overall poverty in Sierra Leone even more than in the rest of Africa must address the female face of poverty.

Patriarchal structures, customary law, marriage and the family

As noted earlier, lineage and resulting networks play an important role in Sierra Leone, and are a fundamental reason for the subordinate status of women. The same Shirley Gbujama who defends female genital mutilation attributed the low status of women to deep cultural tradition and noted that: “In traditional...society, the wife and children are at the mercy of the family. Women have little control or influence over decision-making. Certain socio-cultural practices provide the leading cause of gender disparity and the inferior status of women is evidenced by factors such as high fertility rates; high infant and child mortality rates; high adult female illiteracy rates; exclusion of women from receiving certain services and instruments in rural areas such as land, extension services, credit and inputs; and the disproportionate workload in agriculture allocated to women.” (Quoted in the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, 1999. p. 16).¹⁴

Most households are polygamous, including indigenous groups and Muslims. A man can have up to four wives under Islam, and as many as he wishes under customary law. Polygamy is technically prohibited under Sierra Leone’s Penal Code and is punishable by eight years in prison, but it is authorized in customary marriages (Gender Equality Bill). Polygamy is much more prevalent in rural areas, as it can be quite expensive to maintain in an urban setting. Women in polygamous households are expected to generate their own income and be mainly responsible for their children. Polygamy can offer women economic security, but only if the husband is relatively prosperous. (Steady, 2006).

The 1973 Citizenship Act allows a Sierra Leonean man to confer Sierra Leonean citizenship on his foreign wife, children and grandchildren but does not extend this right to women. The subordinate status of women under both formal and customary law is also evident in the practice of “widow inheritance” (prevalent in other countries as well), whereby a widow is married to the brother of her deceased husband—with or without her consent.

Marriage and the home are regarded as the appropriate activities for women. Although even before the war a number of women worked outside the home (Denzer, 1987), the havoc created by the decade of conflict has forced thousands of women, particularly those displaced from their homes, to turn to alternative survival strategies, including artisanal mining and prostitution. Although a direct manifestation of the feminization of poverty, prostitution is mainly viewed as a female offense, with impunity for the male clients. Prostitution also contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS, as does armed conflicts and the involvement of military or peacekeeping forces, which also occurred in Sierra Leone. Traditional cultural practices, such as widow inheritance,

¹⁴ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act 2000, Parliament of Sierra Leone, 2000. Accessed at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20051230045239/www.sierra-leone.org/trcact2000.html>

polygamy, dry sex¹⁵, and the myth of child rape (“HIV/AIDS virgin cure”)¹⁶ also play a role in HIV transmission, as does poverty itself.

Despite the egalitarian nature of the Constitution, the Family Code is highly discriminatory to women (Gender Equality, 2008). The consent of both parents is required for marriages under customary law, but no minimum age is specified. Early and forced marriages are common. The average age of first marriage is 15.5 years with girls sometimes pledged to marriage at 9 or 10—a cause of the high drop out rate of girls from school. An estimated half of girls between 15 and 19 years of age were married, divorced or widowed. (UN, 2004.)

Common in Sierra Leone, as elsewhere in tropical Africa, is the practice of paying bride price or bridewealth—property or other valuables—to the parents of a woman for the right to marry her. The bride price may include bride service, the services rendered to the bride’s family by the bridegroom. Wealth can flow from leading families to poorer families through bride price, but weak lineages tend to lack the resources to then protect their women in marriage. In anthropological analysis of marriage and bridewealth, women are often perceived as a commodity of exchange (Schneider 1964). In John Ogbu’s view, instead (Ogbu, 1978) bridewealth is not “purchase money” but a legitimizer of marriage, and he argued that it functions to enhance, not diminish, the status of African women.¹⁷

The balance of evidence, however, leans toward the adverse impact on women. The Truth and Reconciliation Report (2004) found that in Sierra Leone the payment of bride price in fact confers on the husband total control over the wife as her trustee, guardian and protector, and the wife automatically assumes a lower status in the home. Indeed, within customary law, the wife is viewed at par as a minor.

Other problems affecting women include discrimination in the job market and routine beating by men as well as sexual harassment and rape. In 2007, the government of Sierra Leone passed laws to protect women right to be free of domestic violence, registration of customary marriage and divorce, and inheritance, but actual implementation is a long way into the future.¹⁸

¹⁵ In this context, “dry sex” refers to the deliberate drying and/or tightening of the vagina using various methods of douching and/or application of caustic leaf concoctions, powders, or household detergent to absorb vaginal lubrication, in the aim of heightening male pleasure. The lack of lubrication results in lacerations of the epithelial lining of the vagina, creating a portal for HIV entry. In addition, condoms break easily due to the increased friction, exposing woman to other sexually transmitted diseases. (“Understanding the Scourge of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa”. Joseph Inungu and Sarah Karl. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1868366/> Accessed June 10, 2010.)

¹⁶ Meel BL. “The myth of child rape as a cure for HIV/AIDS in Transkei.” *Med Sci Law*. 2003;43:85–88, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12627683>. Accessed June 21, 2009

¹⁷ In a similar vein Hailey, 1957, recounts the initial confusion about the practice by early colonial missionaries, who attacked: “...certain institutions connected with the African marriage system, and in particular the practice of ‘bride-price.’ One result of this misunderstanding was seen in official declarations of policy, such as the demand by Sir Harry Smith in 1848 that the Natives of Kaffraria should ‘abolish the sin of buying of wives. ... In effect, the *lobolo* (or *lowola*) as the payment of cattle among the Bantu enabled the bridegroom to remove the bride from the village of her kin to the village of his own family and to recompense the bride’s parents for the loss of her service.” (p.51)

¹⁸ UNFPA and UNIFEM, *Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone*. A National Research, Volume I, Government of Sierra Leone Statistics.

The supremacy of the husband is further heightened by the practice of polygamy, which among other things increases the chance of older wives and their children being abandoned and left economically insecure if the husband favors the other wives. In principle, parental authority is shared by both parents, but tradition dictates that children belong to their father (McFerson and Bolles, 1998).

The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1960 provides for divorce, judicial separation and restitution of conjugal rights for persons married under the Civil or Christian Marriage Act. Either party to the marriage may also initiate divorce proceedings in the local court or an arbitration tribunal). However, under formal law divorce is expensive and time-consuming. Under customary law, women find divorce very difficult to obtain, while the husband may terminate the marriage unilaterally, driving the wife from the matrimonial home or returning her to her parents. Under Islamic law, divorce is granted by religious leaders and the husband can also divorce his wife by repeating three times in Arabic “I divorce you” in front of witnesses.

Women have been particularly affected by the whims and demands of traditional chiefs, who control allocation of the land and mining sites. Opportunities for women are changing, however, as many women have shifted to gold mining over agriculture, and accounted in 2008 for 90 percent of Sierra Leone’s small-scale alluvial gold prospectors. Discrimination and lack of skills—reflecting high illiteracy—prevent many women from entering the official workforce, and many feel they have a better chance of earning money as informal traders or artisanal miners (IRIN, 2009). However, such unregulated mining, particularly in the eastern and southern regions of the country, has also left vast areas deforested and degraded. The uncontrolled exploitation of mineral resources, coupled with the absence of conservation programs has resulted in environmental degradation with dire socioeconomic consequences, and a further negative impact on the livelihood of women, who were heavily involved in rural agriculture before the war. An estimated 120, 000 hectares of land have been denuded in different parts of the country with minimal efforts at reclamation (Maconachie, etal, 2009).

Limited property rights

Land tenure is defined as the set of social relations determining who can use what land and how. (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997). A person, household, or group does not possess, use, and transfer land independent of and isolated from other persons and institutions. A person’s rights to land are derived from relations with other persons in the household and in the community, and are determined by local and national laws and custom. These interactions give the system as a whole strength and resilience, and make it extremely difficult to reorient it away from structural gender discrimination. Women face legal discrimination in ownership of land and inheritance, even though three gender bills intended to correct inequities, passed in 2007. In most cases, women can be given the right to use land only if they obtain consent of the husband. Under customary law marriage rules, a married woman is not entitled to manage a couple’s property, because she is considered one of her husband’s possessions, thus, she becomes part of the inheritance. A land tenure system is interwoven with other social structures and institutions, including the lineage system and marriage and inheritance traditions, all of which tend to reinforce each other.

The laws on inheritance are problematic, especially if intestacy is an issue. Only a small fraction of the population makes a will. Inheritance is thus governed by “personal law”, as determined by the ethnic group and the relevant traditional law, as, for example, for Muslims, or to the different provinces. But, in general, prevailing inheritance rules discriminate against women, whether customary or Islamic. Although some indigenous groups grant women the right to inherit property, in most cases widows are not entitled to inherit land belonging to the household. The civil legislative system is also discriminatory. When a wife dies, her husband obtains all joint property; by contrast, if a husband dies, his wife can obtain only a portion of the couple’s property. Again, there is a distinction between Freetown and the rest of the country. Land ownership in the Western Area is based on pre-1925 English property laws and allows for individual ownership, including of course by women. In the other provinces, land ownership is governed by Chiefdom Councils, as noted earlier, and allows only for group ownership.

Although women constitute the largest group of agricultural laborers, they have never had full access to land. In the north and west, women can theoretically own plots of land, but in the south and east, they can only access land through their husbands or other male family members (Gender Inequality). In addition, there are two main types of farmland ownership. Under the community system, land belongs to the community or government, and individuals wishing to use it must acquire permission from the local authority. In most cases, women can be given the right to use land only if they obtain the consent of the husband. The customary system does provide for private ownership, but the land belongs to the family and is most often administered by the male head of the household. Finally, under customary marriage rules, a married woman is not entitled to manage a couple’s property because she is considered to be one of her husband’s possessions, nor is she to make economic decisions, such as securing loans, without the guarantee of the husband or a male relative. Combined with restricted property rights, which rule out putting up land as a collateral, Sierra Leonean women are, as are women in other African countries, thus under a very heavy handicap in getting credit, which makes micro-credit especially important (Joireman, S.F. 2008).

International institutions such as the African Development Bank and the World Bank have promoted land registration and titling for the poor, partly in order to provide them with the collateral to qualify for credit, which can be then be invested in income-producing activities. However, most initiatives have not adequately considered the restrictions on women’s ownership and control of land, and may inadvertently perpetuate gender inequality and aggravated women poverty. (Dennis and Zuckerman, 2006.) Thus, in addition to considering the impact on women when designing land titling and registration regulations, laws are needed to explicitly protect women’s rights of access to property. However, formal laws in and of themselves have been largely ineffective in other African countries, either because they have deferred to discriminatory customary law or because they have simply not been enforced--in part from lackadaisical enforcement by the male-dominated judiciary and in part because women are not always aware of their legal rights. Dissemination of information could therefore have a significant positive impact on Sierra Leonean women property rights and poverty alleviation. “Affirmative efforts” are required, both in the enforcement of new legislation and to address gender-specific disadvantages in effective and concrete ways. (McFerson, 2009.)

The impact of the civil conflict on women and girls

Civil conflicts are characterized by a total breakdown of law, security and community structures, with gross human rights violations against civilians. As in most civil wars in Africa and elsewhere, women and girls are often the most directly affected.¹⁹ Women and girls were deliberately targeted for kidnapping as sex slaves and routine rape by all the rebel groups in Sierra Leone (and by some in the government army and peacekeepers as well). As a consequence, a high percentage of women today suffer from traumatic genitourinary fistula, resulting from gang-rape or forced penetration of objects into the vagina or the rectum. Fistula is an abnormal connection between organs or vessels that are normally unconnected, rendering the victim incontinent.²⁰ In addition to the grave physical symptoms of their condition, women also bear the psychological consequences, as well as the double social stigma from both the unpleasant odorous manifestations of incontinence and the diminution of social status as an object of sexual assault. Moreover, the civil war weakened the scarce maternal and child health care services, with a further negative impact on already-vulnerable pregnant women and mothers.

The extreme violence against women perpetrated during the conflict has spilled over into the post-conflict period, and rape has become almost routine (and sometimes used as a deliberate tactic of political struggle). Family Support Units (FSU) were established in police departments to deal with domestic violence, provide support to victims and raise awareness about the consequences of gender-based violence, but so far without much evidence of positive impact. FSU statistics recorded 823 cases of sexual assault in 2006. It can be estimated that at least 90 percent of rapes go unreported, either because of the stigma suffered by the victim and/or because of the low probability of any follow-up action by the customary or formal authorities—suggesting a total of at least 10,000 rapes a year (Barnes, Albrecht and Olson, 2007). Ninety-one percent of reported sexual assaults involved girls under 18, and rapes were documented of girls as young as a few *months* (IRC, 2009). Of the small minority of sexual assaults that were reported, fewer than 40 percent of the perpetrators were charged, and only five were convicted. (U.S. Department of State 2007). With the implied odds of being punished being just 5 in 10,000, there is a *de facto* immunity for rape. A December 2009, assessment of the Family Support Units in the context of Sexual and Gender Based Justice (SGBV) was scathing, with particular attention paid to the poor quality of justice victims regularly receive. Gbanabom Hallowell (2009) notes that: "...the indigenous Sierra Leone community...is culturally patriarchal, [therefore] the success of any laws dealing with SGBV is bound to face ...'masculine challenges.'" He reports that 75 percent of rural women interviewed stated that men are the real obstacle to accessing justice.

¹⁹ Rape was used as a systematic method of terrorizing local populations for "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkan wars after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

²⁰ There are no solid estimates of the prevalence of traumatic gynecologic fistula, but it is a high proportion of the overall genital fistula caseload in places where rape has been used as a weapon of war or instrument of political struggle. (See USAID, "Traumatic Gynecologic Fistula Resulting from Sexual Violence" www.fistulacare.org/pages/what-is-fistula/traumatic-fistula.php. See also "Traumatic Gynecologic Fistula as Consequence of Sexual Violence in Conflict Settings: A Literature Review." 2005. www.acquireproject.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ACQUIRE/traumatic_fistula_review--final.pdf. Both accessed on June 18, 2009.

Aside from rape, domestic violence against women--endemic in Sierra Leone as in many other African countries--has also been aggravated by the decade of conflict, and is now so ingrained in local attitudes that 85 percent of Sierra Leonean women feel that a beating is justified for actions such as going out without telling the husband, arguing with a husband, refusing sex, or accidental burning of food (U.S. Department of State, 2007.) Women suspected of marital infidelity are subjected to physical abuse, and frequently beaten until they divulge the names of their partners. Because a husband can claim monetary indemnities from his wife's lovers, beatings often continue until the woman names several men, even if no such relationship exists (Human Rights Report 2009).

Along with a weak and corrupt government and fragile local administration, the conflict over control of minerals had its heaviest impact on marginalizing and disempowering vulnerable rural groups, especially women and male children (who were subject to conscription as child soldiers).

A concluding hope

Looking to the future, only political empowerment can progressively uplift the situation of Sierra Leonean women. The formal legal framework for improvement largely exists. The 1995 Charter by the African Commission on Human Rights includes prohibition of female genital mutilation, right to contraception and family planning, prohibition of forced marriage and other protections. The October 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace, and Security" (which builds on earlier conventions, such as the Convention Eliminating Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Operations) is the first UN resolution to focus specifically on the impact of war and conflict on women's lives, as well as acknowledge their contributions to peace building efforts at the local level.²¹ And specific to Sierra Leone are the core recommendations of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission which extend to Sierra Leonean women their basic human rights protections. The legal framework must still be complemented by a repeal of sections 27 (4) d and (e) of the 1991 Constitution, which permits differential treatment of women but is in other respects in place.

At action level, as women prepare for the 2012 elections there is some movement toward political mobilization. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) established in Freetown launched a Gender Policy in June 2011, to encourage the active political participation of women in the country (*Freetown Daily News*).²² The Gender Policy has a provision of 30% inclusion of women in politics at all levels of government. In addition, a coalition of women from the four major political parties has combined into the All Political Parties Women's Association (APPWA), established in August 2008 by UN Security Council Resolution 1829, and has been launched by President Ernest Bai Koroma particularly for attaining the 30% quota for women in elective office.

²¹ For a comprehensive examination see "Women, Peace & Security: Actualising UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Sierra Leone", *Awareness Times*, May 6, 2009. www.awarenesstimes.com, accessed June 25, 2010.

²² David Awe, "NDA sets pace for gender policy", *Freetown Daily News*, August 4, 2011, <http://www.freetowndailynews.com/east%20-%20Copy%20-%2018%20-%20Copy.html>, accessed August 4, 2011.

Unenforced law, however, is no law at all. The 1995 Charter of the African Commission on Human Rights has been largely a dead letter and the TRC recommendations still lack forceful implementation. Also, top-down political initiatives such as the NDA have a dubious record in producing actual and sustainable improvements. Change of such magnitude requires concurrent efforts from the bottom up. The new and enabling formal legal framework and the APPWA coalition open the door to useful results, but only if active women movements emerge from the grassroots—grounded on collective action and on realistic alliances between different segments of the country’s female population, focusing on concrete issues and common interests.

The previous analysis of the social structure in Sierra Leone shows that such alliances—always very difficult to build and even more difficult to sustain—are only conceivable between educated Krio women and other urban women, and between Krio women and leading women from those upcountry groups where women do have some influence over status and assets. Thus, taking the lead from Robert Putnam’s concept of social capital (Putnam, 1993), a first stage of efforts could focus on encouraging the formation of (i) bonding networks among educated Krio and other urban women and (ii) bridging networks between Krio women and women in selected upcountry groups.

In the post-conflict period, a number of non-governmental organizations have emerged spontaneously to help improve the status of women in the country, in part by encouraging action and coalitions at the grass roots. These include organizations such as the Woman At Risk Program, which supports rape victims, women amputees, battered women and war widows; the Grassroots Empowerment for Self Reliance; TEDEWOSIL, and several others. However, the efforts of the local women NGOs are still in their infancy and lack adequate resources. Opportunities for the necessary partnering with international NGOs such as MADRE (see www.madre.org) have not yet been sufficiently pursued. Because the Sierra Leonean women NGOs have limited access to international resources and communication channels, their survival and growth needs an active outreach by international NGOs to twin with the home-grown initiatives. Sustained support in concrete ways would be a major building block of effective women action in Sierra Leone—provided that the foreign partners exercise enough restraint to allow the local partners genuine voice, encourage the development of their leadership and support long-term capacity building.

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