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Laura C. Cullen
University of Western Ontario

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Female Combatants and the Post-Conflict Process in Sierra Leone

By Laura C. Cullen¹

Abstract

Women and girls had a specific and gendered experience of the civil war in Sierra Leone. They filled the role of combatants, 'bush wives', child soldiers, and sexual slaves. As a result of these roles, women are often described as having dual identities of both perpetrators and victims of violence. This duality resulted in the complex question of how to help these women both reintegrate into society and also address the crimes which they are alleged to have committed during the war. In this paper, I argue that these women and girls should be treated as victims due to the fact that their crimes were committed under coercion. I investigate the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process, performing a critique of its gendered assumptions and its inability to provide adequate assistance to females coerced into combat. I perform a critical analysis of the formation and efficacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). I investigate the Special Court's treatment of the women and girls who were victims coerced into war and potentially held responsible as if they were perpetrators. In doing so, critical deconstruction of the treatment of these women highlights both the hybrid court's successes and failures in advocating for these women. Throughout the paper, I explore the question of how the post-conflict reconstruction process should treat women and girls, who are victims but who have discursively been positioned also as perpetrators.

Keywords: Female Combatants, Women Combatants, Special Court for Sierra Leone, Bush Wives, Post-Conflict Resolution, DDR, Child Soldiers, Post-Conflict Resolutions, International Criminal Justice, Hybrid Courts, Gendered Assumptions in the Post-Conflict Process.

Introduction

Women and girls had a specific and gendered experience of the civil war in Sierra Leone. They filled the role of combatants, 'bush wives', child soldiers, and sexual slaves. As a result of these roles, women held the dual identities of both perpetrators and victims of violence. This duality resulted in the complex question of how to help these women both reintegrate into society and also address the crimes which they committed during the war. The complexity of experiences for women and girls throughout the civil war is an issue which went largely unaddressed by both local and international justice initiatives. I argue that one of the most significant causes of this oversight is the stereotype that women and girls cannot be violent. The gendered assumption that

¹ Laura Cullen is a recent graduate from The University of Western Ontario in Canada with a Master of Arts in Women's Studies and Feminist Research in Collaboration with Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Reconstruction. Her research is focused on feminist theory, transitional justice, international justice, and post-conflict reconstruction. Specifically, her master's research centered around the conflict and post-conflict process in Sierra Leone with a focus on women's ability to bear witness and give testimony at the Special Court for Sierra Leone. She is currently gearing her research towards the current mechanisms of justice and the potential of bottom-up approaches to post-conflict reconstruction with the goal of pursuing her PhD and an academic career.

in war men are the active perpetrators of violent acts and women are the passive victims perpetuates the gendered assumption that women are incapable of violence. Though it is essential to challenge these stereotypes, I argue that in the case of the Civil War in Sierra Leone, women should have been treated as victims who enacted violence under the coercion of their captors. It is necessary to acknowledge the complex roles that women and girls had throughout the civil war in order to properly address their needs. These needs include justice seeking for the violence experienced by these women and girls, demobilization and disarmament for female combatants, and most importantly, the reintegration of women and girls into society.

In this article, I argue that these women and girls should be treated primarily as victims due to the fact that their crimes were committed under coercion. I investigate the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process, performing a critique of its gendered assumptions and its inability to provide adequate assistance to female combatants. I perform a critical analysis of the formation and efficacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). I investigate the Special Court's treatment of the women and girls who were both victims and perpetrators, identifying both the hybrid court's successes and failures in advocating for these women. Throughout the paper, I explore the question of how the post-conflict reconstruction process should treat women and girls who are both perpetrators and victims.

Conflict Summary

In March of 1991, Sierra Leone entered into a civil war. Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) entered Sierra Leone on its border with Liberia. These rebels were met with Sierra Leone's army, which was also under attack by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in alliance with the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). At this point in time, the Liberian Civil War had been occurring for almost ten years. The RUF, AFRC, and NPFL were against the government/state forces. Another party which was involved in the conflict was the Civil Defense Forces (CDF), a paramilitary organization which supported the elected government of Ahmed Kabbah against the RUF and AFRC. The Sierra Leonean Civil War was brutal, lasting over ten years, and it is "estimated that at least 50,000 people died, with hundreds of thousands more affected by the violence and some 2,000,000 people displaced by the conflict" (Britannica). Due to the scale of this war, it is clear that Sierra Leone is still experiencing post-war repercussions to this day including food insecurity, continued displacement of individuals and post-war poverty². This is partially due to the fact that the post-conflict process failed in aiding individuals directly affected by and involved in the war. Furthermore, women and girls as a group did not receive the proper aid in both justice-seeking and demobilization initiatives. Not only did they not receive enough attention from the post-conflict process, but the entire process was highly gendered, leading to inadequate reintegration of these women and girls into the post-conflict society.

Civilians were directly affected and targeted throughout the war. Women and girls were taken as sexual slaves and placed in forced marriages with the high-ranking men in the rebel forces. These women and girls were given the label of 'bush wives' and were coerced into following the orders of their captors with the consequence of refusal being life-threatening. Boys were often taken and forced to be child soldiers, enacting violence under the coercion of their abductors.

²See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/13/its-been-25-years-since-sierra-leones-brutal-civil-war-heres-what-we-know-about-helping-communities-recover/?noredirect=on> for more information on the post-war reality in Sierra Leone.

These violent acts included the killing of the victim's family, sexual violence against women and girls and the brutal murders of civilians. As the war progressed, girls and women who had been abducted were forced into the roles of female fighters, perpetrating violent acts under the coercion of their captors. Often, these women and girls were under the influence of drugs as well as the restriction of their agency and choice over their actions.

As a result of the length and brutality of this war, it was essential that the international community be involved in both peacekeeping and justice seeking efforts. The ways in which the international community became involved were deeply flawed and in need of interrogation. At the end of the war, there was a truth commission and a hybrid special court. There was also a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program implemented by the United Nations (UN) and the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) (Asiedu, 151). This program was highly gendered with the goal of reintegrating adult members of a fighting force who could present their weapons and/or ammunition (152). It is essential to critique this process as it informs future DDR program formation and regulation and therefore can lead to a productive outcome which adequately provides aid to all who were involved in the perpetration of violence in a conflict. Though the Special Court is considered an accomplishment for international justice-seeking initiatives, it was still quite flawed. A key flaw throughout the post-conflict process in Sierra Leone was the treatment of women and girls. They were not taken up as combatants and perpetrators of violence due to coercion but rather the passive victims of the war.

Dual positionality of women and girls

Women and girls held the dual identity of victims and perpetrators of violence throughout the Sierra Leonean Civil War. This positionality created the complex question of the roles of women and girls in the war. In this section I will begin with an analysis of the victim aspect of women and girls war experiences, followed by an analysis of the ways in which they were also perpetrators. This is a strategic analysis that I will employ in order to clearly show the complexities of the gendered experience of war. First, I will look at experiences during the war, followed by experiences of the justice seeking and post-conflict process, and finally the reality of post-conflict life in Sierra Leone for women and girls who held the dual roles of perpetrators and victims.

The war experiences for women and girls often began with an abduction. The narratives of abduction often began with an attack, followed by rape and the abduction from their homes with looted items for the rebels (Coulter, 96). Those who were abducted were often taken to a house in the village and kept in a room with other girls. The rebels would come and rape these girls and women whenever they wanted with the consequence of refusal being death. The women and girls had no choice but to do whatever they were told – the only 'choice' was between life and survival or death. After being abducted, the women and girls were often taken into the 'bush' with the rebels. Many became 'bush wives' to the rebels and were subject to sexual violence as a part of their everyday in the bush. Others became female fighters who were trained to carry and use weapons. These women, though trained as combatants, were not exempt from sexual violence. The women and girls who were abducted were also given a variety of drugs. They were given cocaine, marijuana and other drugs that they were "injected with... to make [them] strong and brave" (108). It is evident that the abducted women and girls were the victims of countless human rights abuses. They were sexual slaves, placed in forced marriages, and often under the influence of hard drugs against their will. These women should have received aid after the war in not only

seeking justice but overcoming the drug addictions that they may have developed throughout the conflict.

The women who were victims throughout the war, also held the identity of perpetrator of violence and other crimes against humanity. Again, it is essential to note that these acts were mainly committed under coercion and therefore the women held a specific duality. Women who were abducted were trained to fight and use guns. Though not all women became female fighters, they were trained in combat in case of an attack or ambush. Chris Coulter, a social anthropologist who has done work in Sierra Leone states that, “The presence of female fighters both disturbs and complicates conventional notions of war” (Coulter, 126). These conventional notions are best described as women being passive victims of conflict while men are the active perpetrators of violence. The disturbance of conventional notions moves even further when considering Sierra Leonean culture and the gendered expectations within. “The life of a female fighter was far removed from a submissive feminine ideal. In Sierra Leone, during and after the war, stories of the brutality of rebel women became a popular theme” (Coulter 136). As a result of the stereotype of women as peaceful and passive, the transgression of this ideal was unintelligible and considered unnatural and as a result of this, women who transgressed the ideal and expected feminine behaviour ran the risk of being stigmatized within their society (139). This is important to note as female fighters had a more difficult time reintegrating into postwar society and this difficulty is partially due to the lack of DDR and resources for female combatants.

It is impossible to discuss women’s identities as victims and perpetrators as separate narratives of war. To continue the discussion of women’s experiences as combatants in the Sierra Leonean civil war, a consideration of the conditions under which these women were forced to commit violence and atrocity is essential. “If a female combatant hesitated when ordered to kill, her own group could later punish her, often through rape, and if she fell into enemy hands, she would likely be raped before being killed” (Coulter, 139). John Lahai also explains that, “...during the conflict, while rape was used to promote male power, it was its systemic use as a weapon of war that contributed to the destabilization of affinities and communal relationships” (Lahai, 139). The author goes on to cite an interview with a former female combatant who had been abducted by the RUF. She stated that,

I fought alongside the top rebels... I led several successful reconnaissance missions. But when the war came to an end, because some of the men who had forced me to have sex with them [at this time she began to sob as she was showing me scars on her hands, where they had tied her up to gang-rape her] were in the disarmament camp, I did not go for the DDR process (139).

This recounting of the constant threat of sexual violence which female combatants experienced demonstrates that they had very little choice with regards to their actions. As a result of the fear that was generated from the precarious position of abducted women, they clearly had no choice other than to follow orders or be killed. Rape and sexual violence were used as, on a large scale, a tool of war and, on a smaller scale, a tool to control abducted women. Women in Sierra Leonean society were not stereotyped as passive and peaceful, rather they are considered wild and dangerous and therefore need to be controlled (Coulter, 142). This is important to unpack as it demonstrates the difference of Western societies’ view of womanhood in contrast to that of Sierra Leonean society. This difference was arguably not taken into consideration by the international

community when seeking justice, but also when deciding how to run DDR programs and other post-war rehabilitation measures.

“Bush wives”

Throughout the Sierra Leonean Civil War, women and girls were abducted into the ‘bush’ and placed in forced marriages. The common name for these women is ‘bush wives’ as they were taken from their homes and forced to perform ‘wifely’ duties for their abductors. Bush wives had a distinct gendered experience of the civil war as they were not only sexual slaves, but they were also forced to cook, clean, raise children and care for their ‘family’ in the ‘bush’. The women who were abducted stayed with the rebels anywhere from a few weeks or months to up to ten years before escaping (Coulter, 95). Although violence and abuse were a prevalent aspect of the everyday reality with the rebels, it is reported that rebel life still had many similarities to ‘traditional’ life before the war (95). This normative creation of a daily life within the rebel camps mirrored ‘village life’ with main difference being articulated by the killing, the reversal of traditional age-based hierarchies, and the extreme use of drugs (95-96).

The abducted women and girls were often directly involved in the conflict, enacting violence under the coercion of their captors. Their bodies were used as a strategic tool of war, with rape, gang rape and sexual abuse pervasive in the everyday. When women were abducted, it is described that they experienced a high volume of sexual and gender-based violence until they were ‘claimed’ by a higher-ranking officer who made her his wife in the bush. This created the illusion of a heroic, lifesaving act on the part of the bush husbands. Chris Coulter interviewed multiple women and girls who were taken as bush wives in the Sierra Leonean Civil War. They explain that,

“about half of the girls and women ... said that they were trained as fighters during their time with the rebels, soldiers, and CDF, but many admitted to having fought only intermittently, in between serving as spies, laborers, bush wives, or sex slaves, making the definition of who was a fighter more complicated” (126).

Another key aspect of these women’s and girls’ experiences is the complicated identity as both victims of sexual and gender-based violence and their identities within the rebel forces. The violent acts carried out by these women were not of their own volition. This is evident through interviews where women explained that they were ordered by the commander or group leader to kill someone and it was known that they either carried out that order or would be killed themselves (135). It is clear that these women were choosing between the lives of other victims or their own survival. I argue that as a result of the coercion and the need for survival, the women who were abducted should have been primarily treated as victims, but I also argue that they should have been entered into a DDR program that specifically addressed their experiences of victimhood and violence under coercion. It is essential to resist the stereotype that within conflicts, men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. The dangerous result of thinking through the binary of men versus women not only essentializes an experience, but falsely recounts the history and ‘Truth’.

The Post-Conflict Process

The official end-date of the Civil War in Sierra Leone was in January of 2002 when the UN mission declared the disarmament of 45,000 fighters (BBC). The first election after the war was held in May of 2002 with Ahmed Kabbah winning the reelection. Kabbah's administration aimed to bring about reconciliation, leading to both a Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) and UN-sponsored war-crimes tribunal (the Special Court for Sierra Leone) (Britannica). The Special Court for Sierra Leone is an important milestone in international peacekeeping and criminal justice as it was a hybrid court and the first of its kind. It was unique as it was also the first international tribunal to sit in the country where the crimes took place and empowered prosecutors to bring charges for war crimes, crimes against humanity, violations of international humanitarian law and violations of Sierra Leonean law. The nature of the court and cases are a mix of the incorporation of both international and national features such as staff and laws and therefore brought about the term 'hybrid court' (PICT). The Special Court is considered one of the most significant advancements for international criminal justice mechanisms.

Throughout the trials, many women were able to come forward and give testimony to their experiences of crimes against humanity and the sexual and gender-based violence that occurred during the civil war. Although most women felt that they were able to fully testify and be acknowledged by the court, some women felt silenced. This factor was greatly influenced by the judges presiding and the structure of the questioning of witnesses. An element of the postwar reality in Sierra Leone was highlighted by the DDR program implemented by the UN and NCDDR. This program aimed to invite combatants to surrender their weapons and go through the process of de-militarization and reintegration into post-war society. The DDR program in Sierra Leone was widely regarded as a success within the field of international peacekeeping, but it was greatly flawed due to the oversight of female fighters and girl soldiers who should have had access to DDR targeted at their unique, gendered experiences. In reference to the formerly cited interview conducted by Lahai, the female combatant stated that,

I have yet to be treated for the harm I sustained in the hands of the guys [the men]. It is true that I was with the RUF. I fought alongside the top rebels... I led several successful reconnaissance missions. But when the war came to an end, because some of the men who had forced me to have sex with them [at this time she began to sob as she was showing me scars on her hands, where they had tied her up to gang-rape her] were in the disarmament camp, I did not go for the DDR process. Instead I chose to stay away. Since I did not go there, I registered with the government as a war victim of sexual abuse, but nobody has come to help me. So this peace is victory for the rebel men. They are the winners, and the women, the losers (Lahai, 139).

I argue that this experience of avoiding the DDR program in order to avoid further violence was a common narrative amongst female ex-combatants in Sierra Leone. It is essential to understand the reasons behind the avoidance of the DDR program as well as the barriers which women and girls faced when attempting to access DDR.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

At the end of the war in Sierra Leone, the Lomé peace agreement was signed by the government of Sierra Leone and the RUF. This agreement came with the requirement to establish a TRC within ninety days of signing and in spite of that agreement the TRC was not enacted until 2000 and lasted until 2004 (Thapa, 81). The objective of the TRC was primarily to identify and address crimes and violations of human rights that occurred during the civil war. The TRC sought to “address impunity, break the cycle of violence, and provide a forum for both the victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to tell their story, get a clear picture of the past in order to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation” (Sierra Leone TRC, 24). The TRC also sought to restore rights and dignity in the pursuit of reconciliation by providing the forum for truth telling by both perpetrators and victims while also attempting to establish peace (Thapa, 82). The TRC was made up of both local and international commissioners which was done intentionally in order to focus on a variety of areas. “Among the seven commissioners, four men and three women, four were Sierra Leoneans and three were internationals from Gambia, Canada and South Africa... the lawyers sought justice, human rights figures could seek the truth, and religious leaders could promote healing and forgiveness” (Thapa, 83).

This was an important factor of the TRC as it serves as an example of how the international community has the potential to come together with a post-war country and work to generate reconciliation and seek truth. It is important to note that the chairman of the TRC was Sierra Leonean because the structuring and implementation of the TRC therefore remained within the Sierra Leonean control rather than an international takeover. The report from the TRC concluded that the war was influenced by both internal and external factors. These factors made the conflict inevitable and “included years of bad governance, greed, endemic corruption, nepotism and the denial of basic human rights. In combination, these factors created deplorable conditions and deprived the nation of its dignity and reduced most people to a state of poverty” (83-84). External factors which influenced the war were of course those that spilled over from Liberia. The Sierra Leonean army failed to prevent attacks at their border with Liberia, bringing in the conflict and adding to the collapse of their political system (Thapa, 84). “The people lost all faith in the ruling class to act with integrity and to deliver basic services. Hence, the resulting civil war can be seen as the final convulsion of a failed system” (84-85). These findings are incredibly important for the understanding of how conflicts arise. TRCs are essential when seeking the truth from all sides of a conflict, that being said, they are a steppingstone in justice seeking and there must be further action in order to ensure that the perpetrators are handled properly, and justice is found.

The TRC made recommendations for the rebuilding of Sierra Leone with a focus on human dignity, tolerance and the respect of rights for all people (Thapa, 85). The TRC sought to protect human rights by confronting the legacies of dehumanization and hatred and most importantly, it sought reparations rather than retribution.

“The TRC’s core recommendations related to the protection of human rights, the establishment of the rule of law, improved security services, promoting good governance, fighting corruption, and protecting the human rights of youth, woman and children. The recommendations also included the promotion of regional integration and unity by external actors, accountability for the proceeds from mineral resources, the building of the national justice system, reparations, and reconciliation - including guiding principles and reconciliation activities” (85).

On top of these recommendations came the most important goal of the TRC which was to promote a ‘permanent’ peace in the country. I argue that the concept of peace and furthermore, permanent peace is overly ideological. This is because in order to ever bring about an absolute or permanent peace, every single individual in a society would have to be at peace. That means that cultural, socioeconomic and gendered divides would have to cease to exist. This would present a post-racial, post-feminist society and ultimately that is a utopia which is almost impossible to reach. Though I argue that peace is not fully possible, I assert that setting a goal of peace and interrogating structural factors which prevent peace is a productive model to follow. This will promote the questioning of structural inequities and highlight the need to continuously work towards peace. The TRC’s goal of establishing permanent peace is therefore an aim which should be approached with caution and the acknowledgment that permanent and perpetual peace is an ideal.

Overall, the TRC was a necessary and important step in seeking truth and promoting healing within Sierra Leone. It primarily addressed the cause of the conflict and sought to generate recommendations for peacebuilding and reconciliation. It served as a symbolic gesture of reparation and healing for both victims and perpetrators. The main setback of the TRC was the failure “communicate its purposes and procedures to the local communities... the delays in establishment, the shortness of time and its limited budget...severely limited its success” (Thapa, 87). Many people did not have the opportunity to testify and when they did they had a specific time frame allocated for testimony. These limitations are highly problematic as they fail to acknowledge structural and social inequalities already present within a society and therefore the TRC was already preventing healing for all those affected by the war. As a result of this, the TRC should be regarded with both admiration and inquisition. It should be treated as progressive but also problematic. It is clear that Truth Commissions can uncover the root causes of a conflict, but if it is not properly funded and run, it fails to allow every victim to tell their narrative. The effects of the limits within truth commissions become evident in post-truth commission realities. Heidi Grunebaum highlights that,

...in South Africa in the time after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the discursive economies of reconciliation have been shaped as much through social structures of denial as through the interconnected workings of institutions of power that archive, occlude, silence and revise the domesticating accommodations of nation-building ideology and neoliberal forms of political democratization which characterize South Africa’s postapartheid political landscape (Grunebaum, 2).

The author continues to stress the point that the post-truth commission reality is centered around the politics of memory and justice established by the commission (Grunebaum, 2). I argue that this is directly related to the victims’ ability to recount their narratives throughout the commission. This is especially relevant when looking at the duality experienced by women and girls throughout the civil war. The TRC had a great deal of potential to address women’s experiences, both as victims and as perpetrators. Ideally, it would have created a ‘safe space’ for women and girls to testify without the fear of prosecution. Therefore, I argue that the TRC should be treated as a stepping stone, a structure to model future truth commissions after but one which should also be interrogated and improved in order to allow for space for every individual who wants to share their experiences and narratives from a conflict.

Special Court

In 2002, the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) was established as a result of an agreement between Sierra Leone and the United Nations. It was a hybrid court, and the first of its kind, meaning that it incorporated elements of the Sierra Leonean justice system and the international structure of tribunals (Currie et al., 942). For many, the SCSL was ground-breaking in international justice seeking as it was the first time that the both the local and international courts were combined. This is a progressive form of court system as rather than imposing Western ideal of justice, the local community is directly involved in the creation and implementation of the tribunal. Multiple legal articles went into the creation of the SCSL including those addressing the competency of the court, crimes against humanity, violations of the Geneva Conventions, serious violations of international humanitarian law, crimes under Sierra Leonean law, individual criminal responsibility, jurisdiction over persons of 15 years of age, and amnesty (Currie et al., 942-944). These articles demonstrate the benefits of a hybrid court and the ways in which they incorporate both local and international law. In this section I analyze the SCSL's handling of gender-based crimes and the ways in which it did or didn't handle cases involving female combatants.

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the specific experiences that women had throughout the war. The duality of victim and perpetrator identity was not addressed properly by the special court. It is evident that the court primarily treated the women as victims of war but in doing this it also failed them. After conducting a thorough ethnographic study, anthropologist Friederike Mieth concluded that,

“For many Sierra Leoneans, the Special Court is not perceived as having delivered justice to those affected by the war. So far, in academic discourse, the many reports about the Court's legalistic procedures seem to ignore the fact that many Sierra Leoneans talk about justice as something that should affect them directly – for example in the form of efforts to restore their livelihoods. At the same time, Sierra Leoneans' perception of their own judicial system is characterized by mistrust which is partly the result of its unfairness. This also has to be seen in the context of structural inequality that many experiences in their everyday lives; “justice” would include the removal of these inequalities” (Mieth, 20).

From these conclusions it is clear that though the court provided a forum through which to seek justice, most of civil society did not trust this system. As a result of this mistrust and the lack of stability within Sierra Leone, it is clear that the court was flawed. Thus, access to DDR programs was also highly limited, especially for female combatants.

DDR

DDR for Sierra Leone was a highly patriarchal process which failed to address the experiences and needs of female fighters, girl soldiers, and bush wives after the Civil War. The DDR process was divided into three phases, the disarmament phase, the demobilization phase, and finally the reintegration phase. The disarmament phase of the program collected, registered, and destroyed all conventional weapons and munitions and was hosted at 45 reception centers across the country (Asiedu, 154). The issue with this stage of the program was that many combatants did not qualify for DDR as a result of their use of unconventional and homemade weapons. There was also a lack of trust among combatants from different militant groups which resulted in a hesitant

nature to surrendering weapons (155). The demobilization phase of the program aimed to reorient ex-combatants by dismantling command structures and separating children from adults who were then sent to care centers to reunite with their families. This phase encountered many problems such as the how to accommodate the dependents of ex-combatants, and the housing of men and women together (157). The main problem with this was the oversight that many of these women were housed with their perpetrators and the gendered nature of the war was overlooked. The Reintegration phase of the program had the goal of finding employment or education opportunities for ex-combatants. This phase was highly problematic as it mainly provided opportunities for men and when they did find opportunities for women, they were highly gendered. This set women up for lower pay and a higher dependency on others for financial stability. The program taught women gendered skills such as sewing, rather than agriculture and other skills which would have provided a more stable reality for female combatants. Mazurana and McKay highlight the reality that, “[s]pontaneous (self, continuous, “going straight home”) reintegration of girls is by far the most common way girls return from fighting forces and is largely a hidden process, whereby girls are assimilated directly back into their communities” (McKay and Mazurana, 34).

Girls and women who returned after the war were also faced with the stigma of being the wife of a rebel and/or the mother of a rebel’s child, leading to a gendered experience of discrimination and stigma within their communities. John Lahai interviewed an ex-combatant who explained that,

Though the war came to an end many years ago, my family is still angry with me. They have kicked me out because I joined the rebels. And all my efforts to make peace with my known victims (women and men) and their families have also failed. At the moment, I cannot return to my village for fear of becoming a victim of “honor killing” (by my family) or “revenge killing” (by the family members of my dead victims) (Lahai, 140).

Though it is unclear as to whether or not this woman was a bush wife, her experience of rejection resulting from her association with the RUF is similar to that of former bush wives and mothers. Girls in particular had an extremely complicated reintegration experience because they were so young at the time of abduction and they often had children with their captors as a result of the systematic rape in the bush. Susan McKay explains that,

The presence of these ‘war babies’ can worsen their situations, because these girl mothers and their children are often subject to resentment, due to the children’s unknown paternity, or because their fathers are known to be rebels (Carpenter 2000; McKay and Mazurana 2004). Returning is particularly difficult when one or both of a girl’s parents -- especially her mother -- are dead, or her community has been destroyed (McKay, 20).

This is an aspect of the gendered experience of war which the DDR program did not acknowledge. Without the consideration of women’s ability to return to post-war society after being both victims of atrocity and perpetrators of violence, women are placed in positions of precarity. They may not be welcomed back into their communities or even into their households. They may be rejected by their husbands from before the war since—although against their will—they had sexual relations with their captors and other combatants. These women also should have

received proper rehabilitation for their drug addictions, as well as the opportunity to find work in fields where they would be able to fully provide for themselves rather than relying on others. As a result of the lack of demobilization efforts for girl and female fighters, they had the most difficult time reintegrating into post-conflict society. Therefore, though the DDR program is seen as a progressive 'step' towards international peacekeeping and conflict resolution, it had the critical flaw of inadequate aid to women and girls who were trying to reintegrate into the post-war reality in Sierra Leone.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed the specific experiences of women and girls throughout the Civil War in Sierra Leone. I discuss the war itself, followed by the post-war efforts critiquing the ways in which women and girls were treated. Women and girls were abducted into the bush, repeatedly raped and violated, and often assigned a bush husband. These experiences of victimhood were also characterized by women and girls' roles as combatants and fighters. They were trained in the bush and taught how to use guns. They have to follow the orders of their superiors and if they refused, they risked being raped and killed. The post-conflict process treated these women solely as victims and as a result of this, they did not receive the proper DDR after the war. It is essential to analyse the ways in which the DDR process in Sierra Leone treated female combatants in order to adjust the structuring of future DDR programs. Theories and analyses of previous post-conflict processes can highlight both successes and failures of justice seeking.

I argued that though these women should have been treated primarily as victims of atrocity they should have also been treated as perpetrators. I do not argue that they should have received retributive action but rather, that they should have been taken up as combatants in need of aid and assistance in demobilizing and eventually reintegrating into society. As a result of the lack of adequate resources for female combatants, the post-conflict process failed women and girls. It is essential to consider the gendered aspect of war, especially when sexual and gender-based violence are a key element of the conflict. In future conflicts, women and girls will undoubtedly pick up arms and if the post-conflict process does not approach reconstruction from a gendered perspective, the issues discussed in this paper are likely to be repeated. There needs to be a clear understanding that women are capable of violence. Women and girls who take up arms need gendered DDR in order to reintegrate into postwar society. It is essential to challenge the current models of post conflict processes in order to work towards a more equitable and gender-sensitive approach to justice seeking.

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