

The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution Case Study: Sierra Leone (1991-2002) Maazouzi Karima Tahri Mohammed University (Bechar)

Abstract:

Conflicts arise when different opinions from different individuals or groups pursuing different goals collide. Sierra Leone is among the West African countries which witnessed a brutal civil war that broke out in 1991 and marked the beginning of mayhem for the country. The conflict in Sierra Leone was caused by economic factors, mainly greed. Violence against women and children became the norm during the decade long civil war. This motivated women to play a vital role in conflict resolution and the establishment of a lasting peace.

The target of this article is to examine the role of women in conflict management and resolution, using Sierra Leone as a case study. It argues that despite the traditional challenges women faced they were able to contribute significantly to the conclusion of the 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone, and have since earned a position of respect in society that has given them a larger role to play in government, politics and the private sector.

Key Words : Sierra Leone, Civil war, Women, Role, Management, Women organizations, Resolution.

ملخص:

تنشأ الصراعات عندما تتصادم وجهات نظر مختلفة من مختلف الأفراد أو الجماعات تسعى إلى تحقيق أهداف مختلفة. سيراليون من بين بلدان غرب أفريقيا التي شهدت حرباً أهلية وحشية اندلعت في 1991 و كان ذلك علامة على بداية الفوضى في البلاد. ويرجع الصراع في سيراليون إلى العوامل الاقتصادية، أساساً الجشع. أصبح العنف ضد المرأة والاطفال القاعدة خلال الحرب الأهلية الطويلة الأمد. هذه المرأة لعبت دور حيوي في حل النزاعات وإقامة سلام دائم.

الهدف من هذه المقالة هو دراسة دور المرأة في إدارة الصراعات وحلها، وذلك بالاستناد على منطقة سيراليون في هذه الدراسة. على الرغم من التحديات التقليدية التي واجهتها النساء كانوا قادرين على المساهمة بشكل كبير في انتهاء الحرب الأهلية التي استمرت 11 عاما في سيراليون، ومنذ ذلك الحين حصلوا على موقف من الاحترام في المجتمع الذي منحهم دور اكبر في المساهمة في الحكومة والسياسة والقطاع الخاص،

الكلمات المفتاحية: سيراليون، الحرب الأهلية، المرأة، دور تسيير، المنظمات النسائية، حل.

Introduction

In West African countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast, women performed significant combat roles in war situations. They were not 100% peace promoters in war situations. Women were, often exploited and suffered atrocities and they also acted as agents of destabilization and destruction through their supports of the various armed factions. They contributed immensely in armed conflicts, especially in mobilizing the war assets, and they also played great roles in mediation and peace processes.

1. The Role of Women in Sierra Leone Civil War.

1.1 Women and the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone.

Traditionally, women in Sierra Leone had a lower status than men. In the Provinces a strong cultural belief existed that “women should be seen and not heard”.(1) But in the colony as early as 1787, women had enjoyed access to various levels of education. The Krios, descended from an immigrant culture did not have any such entrenched traditional belief systems that barred women from political participation. They had come to Freetown to express their desire for freedom in all spheres of life. The culture of independence that they brought with them facilitated the participation of Krio women in modern politics. So, how did women in Sierra Leone become involved in politics?

The participation of women in politics on a mass scale in Sierra Leone was largely limited to the provision of moral support, the raising and collection of party funds, voluntary labour and the organization of catering or entertainment in their various political parties.

At the end of the First World War, women of Krio origin, born in the Colony,(1) made their voices heard in the political arena. At the same time, in the Protectorate, a few women wielded political power by becoming Paramount Chiefs or Section chiefs. In Freetown, women of the Protectorate extraction from Mende and Temne ethnic groups served as both Section and Tribal Headwomen. In 1938, Constance A. Cummings-John became the first woman to stand for office in Freetown in the municipal elections.(2) In 1951, the Sierra Leone Women's Movement (SLWM), a non-political representative organization, was established, its broad based membership had numbered up to five thousand women by the time of independence. Its goals were "to improve the status of all Sierra Leonean women, whether born in the Colony or in the Protectorate, and to seek female representation on government bodies concerned with education, social welfare and the economy." In 1954, the formation of this group culminated in the rise of Mabel Dove, one of the founding members as the first woman in West Africa to be elected to the legislature.(3)

Women made real progress in the political field, as a result some of them succeeded to hold political office in the 1950s in Sierra Leone. In the 1957 election, Madam Ella Koblo Gulama, a Paramount Chief, became a Member of Parliament. She also became the first female Minister in Sierra Leone, although she was never in charge of any specific ministry.(4) In 1958, three women: Constance Cummings-John (1918-2000), Lena Weber (1898-1951) and Stella Ralph-James became members of the municipal council while, in 1960, one woman was elected Deputy Mayor of Freetown and another, Nancy Koroma, was elected Mende Headman in Freetown.(5) Two other women (Constance-Cummings-John and Etta Harris) were also made delegates to the constitutional talks that resulted in Sierra Leone's independence.(6)

Upon achieving independence, women were shocked when men failed to share positions of power equitably. According to the historian LaRay Denzer:

"Naturally, [women] expected to reap the reward of their loyalty and service [by] obtaining party support for election and campaigning appointments to decision making bodies and government committees, and reforms

in discriminatory laws. Instead, they were shunted aside as male leaders monopolised the spoils of office. By and large, male leaders defaulted in their commitments to their female colleagues.”(7)

Women personalities continued to make their voices heard on political issues in Freetown right through to the time of independence, despite the fact that the vast majority of them were excluded. In spite of this kind of resistance, Cummings-John became the first black African woman to govern a capital city on the African continent in 1961.(8) Alongside Cummings-John, notable women became political leaders including Adelaide Casely Hayford, Stella Thomas Marke, Edna S. Elliot-Horton, Lorine E. Miller, Lottie Black, Mabel Dove, Nancy Koroma and many others.

After independence and undeterred by the fractious political climate that ensued over the years, some women continued to forge on in politics, with interesting results. During the reign of the APC Government of Siaka Stevens, another women’s organization, the National Congress of Sierra Leone Women (NCSLW), headed by Nancy Steele, was formed based on a Marxist approach.(9) This organization managed to achieve some success, but lost relevance as the gap between the APC and the population became wider and wider and was eventually ousted from power. Among its other accomplishments, the NCSLW raised the level of women’s political consciousness and paved the way for the appointment of women to high office. This continued momentum culminated in five women gaining office in Freetown City Council in 1975. In 1977, a woman again became the Mayor of Freetown. Moreover, from the Provinces, a woman Paramount Chief called Madam Honoria Bailor-Caulker represented Moyamba District in Parliament.(10) Were women voluntary partners in the war or were they reluctant actors being manipulated by ruthless army officers? How was their situation during the conflict?

It is important to examine the methods of recruitment of women and girls into different armed factions in West Africa. Certainly the modes of conscription varied as was the case for boys and men.(11) While many women were forcibly conscripted to bear weapons and act as sexual partners and nurses for wounded soldiers, others voluntarily took part in

the war.(12) In Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, warlords and militias recruited most of their soldiers male and female through coercion and, as a result, many women and girls were trapped and thus became female combatants and wives to male soldiers.(13) In the case of Sierra Leone, rebels chose "very young women or girls because they were assumed to be virgins, healthy and resilient. Many women and girls were kept with rebel forces for many years and they gave birth to children fathered by rebels." (14) Wolte gives a disturbing account of the mode of recruitment and exploitation of women and girls during the civil war: "Some women and girls were forced to become combatants for the rebels. Forced women combatants were repeatedly raped by the rebels. Before they were sent to fight, some women and girls were given drugs. The rebels carved with razor blades the names of their faction onto the chest of the abducted women and girls." (15) If these marked women and girls were caught by pro –government or other rebels they would often be killed. Yet, depending on the situation, some women tried to flee with the first opportunity.

Moreover, once recruited, women and girls had numerous roles, including that of frontline fighters. In fact, nearly half (44 percent) of the study population received basic military and weapons training from their commanders or captor husbands.(16) However, nearly all women and girls performed additional roles: 72 percent as cooks; 68 percent as porters; 62 percent as assistants for the sick and wounded; 60 percent as "wives;" 44 percent as food producers; 40 percent as messengers between rebel camps; 22 percent as spies; 18 percent as communications technicians; and 14 percent as workers in diamond mines for their commanders or captor husbands.(17)

Table One: Estimated Number for Total Forces, Girl Soldiers.

Force	Total	Girl Soldiers
RUF	45,000	7,500

AFRC	10,000	1,667
SLA	14,000	1,167
CDF	68,865	1,722
TOTAL	137,865	12,056

Source : Dyan Mazurana and Khristopher Carlson, *From Combat to Community : Women and Girls of Sierra Leone* ,Hunt Alternatives Fund, 2004,12.

Despite that women had been subjected to widespread violence, poverty and the traditional challenges that they faced, they were able to contribute to some extent in the political field and some of them continued to forge on in politics, with fruitful results. Furthermore, they performed considerable roles and they gradually became active agents and participants in the conflict.

1.2 Women as Mediators and Peace Makers.

Generally, women play active and multiple roles in mediation and peace processes. Increasingly, their emerging roles at national and international levels are widening the scope of their participation in mediation teams. Although statistics on their impact are sparse, quite a number of women have been recognized globally for their effectiveness in mediation and peace processes.

In Sierra Leone, despite the patriarchal nature of this society that positioned women as second-class citizens and made them virtually voiceless, from the early days of the war, in both rural and urban centers, they mobilized to protest the atrocities and call for peace. Their involvement provided a striking model of how women were able to work against the odds in the destructive civil war. They navigated their way to talk to rebels and warring factions during the conflict, attempting to convince the parties involved to end the rebel hostilities. They had proved their capability by risking their lives during the conflict to get the

groundwork ready for negotiations to proceed. So, in what way did women contribute in the peace process?

The period between 1994 and 1995 witnessed a great momentum in women's agitation for peace in Sierra Leone. Their roles in peacemaking became more noticeable with the formation of women's civil society groups through which they mobilised and galvanised society. Both rural and urban women from all classes and ethnic groups mobilized to form active organizations, conduct marches, and lead rallies for peace, democracy and justice.

In February 1995, through the untiring efforts of women like Zainab Bangura, Lavalie, and others, the Women's Movement for Peace organised a march for peace in the country's two biggest cities of Freetown and Bo. A month earlier, Mrs. Lavalie led a peaceful demonstration organised by the Eastern Region Women's Movement for Peace. Women's agitation for peace climaxed in March 1995 when the organisation, Women's Movement for Peace, organised a press conference in which a letter sent to the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, was read calling for the end to the senseless war. At the conference, the Public Relations Officer of the organisation, Mrs. Isha Dyfan asserted: "women have a specific role in conflict resolution and our concern here is to bring the war to a speedy end with independence and neutrality being our main focus." Supporting Mrs. Isha Dyfan, Fatmata Kamara added: "since the public is in full support of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, we are going to keep harping on this until the warring factions come to the negotiating table." (18)

These movements and others including, the Mano River Women's Peace Network, Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Sierra Leone Women's Forum and Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians, educated civilians on electoral proceedings, recruited and trained observers, and pressured the military to respect the results of elections. Their efforts were critical in shaping informal and formal peace processes, and in bringing about an eventual end to the conflict.

Women's quest for peace climaxed in the aftermath of the January 1996 coup d'état. Women's groups, led by Women Organized for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN), pressured Bio's military government, the National Provisional Ruling Council to hold democratic

elections.(19) At Bintumani II, women delegates reached a consensus that was made public:

We support that peace negotiations and elections must go hand in hand as

previously agreed. We therefore demand that the elections...go ahead on 26

February 1996 as agreed at the National Consultative Conference and approved

by the NPRC Government the political parties, civil society and the Interim

National Electoral Commission.(20)

It is interesting to note that women were active in their inquiry for peace. They used to form organizations such as Women in Action, Women in Need, Women Accord, etc. These organizations gave a high profile to women leaders of civil society and more women were chosen to head such civil society organizations. When the military sacked the democratically elected government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, women carried on their progress to challenge this illegality and confronted the AFRC. During these tense periods, women organized mass rallies, and civil disobedience that virtually handicapped the country and made life dire for the junta. The deposed first lady, Mrs. Patricia Kabbah, appealed strongly to the Sierra Leone women not to give up their fighting for democracy. As a response to the coup d'état of 25May 1997, many women went into exile and coordinated opposition to the military regime. For example, Zainab Bangura mobilized the civil society from neighbouring Guinea while her Campaign for Good Governance office in Conakry became the meeting place for all civil society groups to discuss their strategies and coordinate their tasks. Through Radio Democracy (F.M 98.1) regular contacts were made with those activists at home. Women, through the Women's National Salvation Front, confronted the Junta and exposed to daylight their numerous atrocities were exposed on Radio Democracy. Anti-Junta discussions were aired on Radio Democracy which, undoubtedly, kept the civil society united and increased the tempo of their opposition to military rule. All these efforts by women bore fruits as they encouraged ECOWAS to intervene; an intervention that happily resulted in the return of democracy in March 1998. These vital roles

played by women in bringing peace back to the country confirm the success of women's roles in conflict preventing as contained in the Kigali Declaration. The Declaration argued that society should "recognize women's traditional peacemaking roles and their rights to equal involvement in all peace initiatives, including early warning mechanisms and swift responses at national, regional, and international levels."⁽²¹⁾ It was an important step that could pave the way for women to be involved in peacemaking at a large scale.

Moreover, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA),⁽²²⁾ as a founding member of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, played a leading role in the negotiations that led to the signing of the 1999 Lomé peace accord, officially ending the war.⁽²³⁾ Two women were involved in the Lomé process: one was a member of the government delegation and the other a representative of the RUF. Although they were not chief negotiators, the final document reflected at least some gender-specific issues as a result of women's participation. For example, Article 28 calls for special attention to victimized women and girls in formulating and implementing rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development programs. ⁽²⁴⁾

Despite the Lomé accord, Sankoh had the intention of continuing the war, as a result, women assembled in the streets demanding "Not again! Enough is enough!"⁽²⁵⁾ Their slogan was a response to both the inadequate representation of women after the 1996 elections and Sankoh's tactics, which the women understood to be a means for him to re-arm for war. The women on the streets called for an end to male domination and male-biased decisions within parliament. They were particularly critical of the decision to appoint Sankoh as a minister and repeatedly called attention to the fact that he was refortifying for war. ⁽²⁶⁾

In 2000, women's activism climaxed, playing a catalytic role in bringing an end to the conflict. A group of elderly women, representing churches and mosques, asked for a meeting with Sankoh, who was living in Freetown. The women came as an inter faith folk requesting for peace at any cost. When they reached there, they were abused by Sankoh, as well as his guards, and advisors, who opposed them and did not like to listen and mistreated them. They opened fire, killing a number of the protesters.

The assembled older women acted in a courageous manner. They stood outside the house of Sankoh, hitched up their skirts, bent over, and bared themselves.

When hearing what had happened in the streets, people were shocked. But at the same time, they were stimulated and encouraged to face the violent treatment of both Sankoh and the RUF. The conduct of women mobilized people and men in particular to defend the power and honor of these respected, senior, religious women. Furthermore, the families of the women, religious organizations, labor and trade unions, and adolescents and school children committed to join the peace protests. Consequently, May 8th, 2000 marked a turning point in the conflict and was set as the date for mass peace protests and demonstrations.(27)

From the early days of the war, women in rural and urban centers mobilized to protest the atrocities and call for peace. The majority of women could have full access to the (DDR) Program since they had experience, and played a great role in the conflict; most of them had contributed in some way to the war. Many had ambitions for education and independence; they felt tremendous responsibility for their offspring and aspired to give them a better future.

Yet when the (DDR) program was implemented, there was virtually no recognition of the multiple roles women played or the skills they had gained. Unfortunately, they were marginalised and their existence and the complexity of their situations were not taken into consideration in the DDR process and their needs were subsequently neglected.

It was estimated that about 30% of the child soldiers in the Sierra Leone conflict were girls.(28) Between 1999 and April 2002, only 8% of the total number of released and remobilised children were girls. (29) Dr. Francis Kai-Kai, Executive Secretary of the NCDDR stated “we had about eight percent of them...In the designed program we made every provision for the female ex-combatant.”(30) During the last demobilisation phase in November and December 2001, this number sank to 3%. (31)

According to the UN Department of Peacekeeping, at the end of 2002, out of the 75,000 combatants demobilized, 4,751, or 6.5 percent, were women. Additionally, the number of girls who entered the demobilization program was far less than expected. Only 0.4 percent of the estimated 1,772 girls in the CDF entered the process; for the RUF, it was 6 percent

of the estimated 7,500; and for the AFRC, only 2 percent of the estimated 1,667 girls within their ranks entered the DDR process.(32)

One part of the requirements for accessing the benefits of the DDR programme was that they had to hand in their weapons first.(33) This proved to be a particular problem for women and girls who did not always have a weapon in their possession. Although they had been in the fighting forces, many female ex-combatants found themselves without weapons. Many in the CDF were ordered to hand in their weapons prior to demobilization. Other girls indicated that their guns were taken away by their commanders to whom they were attached deliberately. They intentionally removed the guns from many of the girls and handed them to male fighters whom they preferred, thus preventing the girls from accessing the program. Many commanders, deeply suspicious of the motives behind the NCDDR, declared their readiness to take up physical violence against these girls if they should disobey them and take part in the DDR process. (34)

Table Two:Girls in Fighting Forces and Formal DDR

Force	Estimated Number of Girls in Force	Number of Girls in DDR
RUF	7,500	436
AFRC	1,667	41
SLA	1,167	22
CDF	1,772	7
Total	12,056	506

Sources: Names withheld. Personal interviews. August 2002; September 2002; Sesay; Statistical Data from the National Committee on

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration; Statistical Data from the United Nations Children's Fund.

Another factor contributing in the exclusion of hundred of females from the DDR process were the images of war created and circulated by the media. The media had created a situation where people tended to associate the expression 'child soldiers' with images referring to portrayals of boys and not girls carrying weapons. Consequently, many girls could not access DDR, yet they were also unable to access any services from the National Commission for Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation, as they were not considered to be internally displaced persons.(35) The absence of girls in such significant numbers from the DDR process contravened UNSC Resolution 1314 of August 2000, which demands that special attention should be given to the needs of women and girls in the wake of armed conflict, including securing their rights, protection and welfare.(36)

Women's exclusion had compromised their reintegration into society, their economic and social needs were not addressed. Socially, the girls would have stood a better chance of acceptance if they had acquired the necessary skills or education, as they would have been perceived as potential contributors to the development of their families and communities. Instead, they were often regarded as unwanted economic burdens on their families and society.

Indeed, despite their positive roles in nation building, there are multiple challenges and constraints that inhibit the effectiveness of women in this endeavour. Since women's roles are fundamental in conflict transformation, there is then an urgent need to encourage women's participation in politics by incorporating their views in decision making. Throughout Sierra Leone's history, women had held leadership roles. As a reward, the authorities were supposed to provide them with fresh opportunities to acquire skills and education. Moreover, it was essential that the government should take note of the omission of girls from its programmes and act swiftly to make amends, and pave for them the way to attain positions of authority and subsequently, be engaged in the political sphere. Other public sector offices, as well as international and local NGOs, should channel their activities to support the government in addressing the needs of these forgotten women. Despite the widespread

violence, they were fundamental to the reorganization of civil society, mass mobilization for peace, and the eventual cease-fire.

Conclusion

Sierra Leone is a highly patriarchal society, where women had been excluded from positions of power and subjected to widespread violence and poverty. These situations were the by-product of cultural norms developed over the years in a male dominated political and socio-economic national history.

As in the other West African countries, women's role in Sierra Leone was not limited to perform their work at home as nurturers, homemakers, and life givers, but they forced themselves through lobbying to take part in the armed forces. But, they continued to endure inadequate representation in political and decision-making because of formidable socio-cultural discrimination against women's participation in higher education. Lack of formal education had been continuously limiting women in attaining political equality with men. Furthermore, despite the proliferation of women's civil society organizations, cooperation among them was weak as a result; they became more vulnerable to domination.

Women's roles in managing the conflict in Sierra Leone became more noticeable with the formation of women's civil society groups through which they mobilized and galvanized society to call for peace, democracy, and an end to hostilities.

Indeed, it is an undeniable fact that in spite of their visible roles in managing the conflict in Sierra Leone, and the post-conflict peace building process, they are still faced with the mammoth problem of overcoming patriarchy in the Sierra Leonean society; they still face major challenges in their quest in achieving an increased involvement in politics and decision making.

Notes

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10-Brett Rachel (2002), *Girl Soldiers: Challenging the Assumptions*, Geneva: United Nations Quaker Office.

11-MacMullin Colin and Maryanne Loughry (2004), “Investigating Psychosocial Adjustment of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone and Uganda”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4.

12-These female combatants who are married to male soldiers are often referred to as ‘bush wives’.

13-Sonja Wolte , *Armed Conflict and Trafficking in Women*, Eschborn, Germany: Deutsche Gessellschaft fur Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH,2004.

14- Ibid

15- Report of the Sierra Leone Truth&Reconciliation, Vol Three B Chapter Three Women and the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone Graphic Packaging Ltd,GPL Press,Accra,Ghana,2004,171.

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20-Women leaders launched a sensitization campaign raising the awareness of the danger of such postponement. Through these activities, the plan was defeated.

21-Badmus, I.A. *Explaining Women’s Roles in the West African Tragic Triplet: Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d’Ivoire in Comparative Perspective*, Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences Vol. 1, No 3,2009,827.Available at: www.japss.org/upload/15.badmusarticle.pdf, Accessed on 13/09/2010..

22-(YWCA), a Christian based Women’s Association was established with the primary aim of promoting education and Christian values among young women. This group established a vocational institution for girls who dropped out of school in 1961.

23-Mansaray, “Women Against Weapons”, 139-162.

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