Victims of Violence: African Women and the Consequences of War, An Appraisal of Violence in The Sierra Leone Civil War

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ABSTRACT

Women in all ages and in different countries have been victims of violence, particularly violence emanating from wars. In Africa, women have had to contend with rape, loneliness, shame and rejection among others. The Sierra Leone Civil War brought to the attention of the world man’s inhumanity(168,413),(905,856)

INTRODUCTION

Africa is riddled with diverse conflicts ranging from ethnic conflicts, inter-state conflicts to intra-state wars. There is hardly any part of the continent that has not experienced one form of conflict or the other. Africa is believed to have suffered more from armed conflict than any other continent in the past decade recording 32 wars with seven million lives lost and over nine million impoverished people constituting refugees, returnees or the displaced between 1960 and 1998. In 1996 alone, 14 out of the 53 countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, accounting for more than half of all war-related deaths world-wide (Kin 2001). These conflicts continue to rage in the continent with negative implications for the people particularly women who are usually the victims (Ajodo-Adebanjoko 2013). Conflicts in Africa are the result of many factors ranging from ethnicity as we had in the Rwanda genocide of Hutus against Tutsis where an estimated 67% of women were raped (survivors-fund.org.uk), religion, to competition for scarce resources as in Nigeria; and the struggle for power as in the Sierra Leone civil war of 1991-2002. The war which lasted for 11 years left a devastating effect on the women folk as 215,000 to 275, 000 of them were brutalized sexually (www.womenundersiegeproject.o...). Women were not only victims of violence during the war but became combatants as they conscripted without their consent. It is estimated that 30% of the children involved in the war were girls between the ages of 8 and 18 years (www.telegraph.co.uk). These young girls were captured, raped and forced to take up arms. According to a report, 33% of women and girls who were raped were also abducted while 15% became sex slaves or “bush wives” (www.womenundersiegeproject.o...). As the war came to an end in 2002, they ended up with fatherless children, sexually transmitted diseases, shame, rejection and loneliness.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this paper is the instinctual or frustration aggression theory propounded by Leonard Berkowitz (1962). Albert Einstein, and Bertrand Russell. This theory provides that aggression is undertaken as a natural reaction or instinct and that it is equally the outcome of frustration. In a situation where the legitimate desires of an individual is denied, the feeling of disappointment may lead such a person to express his anger through violence. Such violence may be directed at those he holds responsible or people who are directly or indirectly related to them. In the aggression theory, the root of war is seen as a vestigial instinct of pugnacity that has survived our animal nature. Most conflicts also have their roots in male competitiveness and even sadism. Accordingly, the Sierra Leone civil war can be outbreak of war and war abuses against women are traced to biological factors of frustration which resulted to a situation where men transferred their aggression on innocent women and girls through rape and other forms of sexual violations.

OVERVIEW OF POLITICS IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone known as the Republic of Sierra Leone is a country in West Africa. It is bothered in northeast by Guinea, in the southeast by Liberia and the Atlantic Ocean in the southwest. The country is divided into four administrative regions namely; the Northern Province, the Southern Province, the Eastern Province and the Western Province. The capital city is Freetown. The country has a population of 6, 190, 280 divided among sixteen ethnic groups, each having its own language and custom. The Temne and Mende are the two largest and predominant ethnic groups. Sierra Leone is a predominantly Muslim country with the population being 70% Muslims and a Christian minority of 25% while 5% is worshippers of African Traditional religion (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra_Leone). The country has a large deposit of diamonds which form its economic base. The official language of the country is English but the lingua franca is Krio, a language which is combination of the English Language and the indigenous African languages.

Sierra Leone gained independence from Britain on 27 April, 1961. Its first Prime Minister, Milton Margai, ruled until his death in 1964. At that time his brother Albert efforts to consolidate power and remove opposition (Conteh-Morgan, 1999). Albert Margai and his Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) were challenged during the 1967 elections by Siaka Stevens. On March 21, the Governor General of Sierra Leone declared Stevens winner of the contested elections. Before Stevens could take office, however, a series of military coups and counter coups established a military government named the National Reformation Council (NRC) headed by Brigadier Andrew Juxon-Smith (Conteh-Morgan, p.80). Another coup in 1968 brought Stevens back from exile and restored a civilian government. Under his rule, the economy decline due to alleged mismanagement and corruption. By the start of the 1980s Sierra Leone was increasingly dependent on international assistance—specifically International Monetary Fund loans. Virtual insolvency, high inflation, shortage of power and food, mounting deficits, declining exports, corruption and high unemployment particularly among youth became increasingly severe problems (Pratt, 2001). In 1985, Major General Joseph Saidu Monoh, then head of the military, took over leadership of the APC and the presidency of the country in a peaceful handover. Although Momoh promised economic reform and an end to corruption. His seven years in power were marked by increased deprivation and economic collapse. In 1987 a coup attempt against Momoh took place-believed to have been sparked in part by Momoh's anti-corruption efforts. Although it failed, the coup marked a return to the status quo and the start of Momoh's downfall. In 1990, Momoh instituted reforms including the drafting of a new constitution but before multiparty elections could he held, however, a military coup led by Captain Valentine Strasser overthrew his government.
THE CIVIL WAR

The Sierra Leone Civil war which lasted for 11 years, began on 23rd March 1991 and ended on 18th January, 2002. It started when a group calling itself the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) intervened with the aim of overthrowing the Joseph Momoh government. The small band of insurgents consisted primarily of disaffected youth from the criminal cultures spawned in the urban ghettos of Freetown and the mining regions, though a number of university students who has been radicalized by conditions in Sierra Leone and inspired by the revolutionary teachings expressed in Muammar al-Qaddafi Green Book (Pratt, 1980) also participated. They were led by Foday Sankoh, a former army corporal and photographer who had received military training in Libyan camps. From their base in a particular Liberia controlled by Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the RUF attacked the Southeast region of the country. The NPFL's support for the RUF may have been in response to Sierra Leone's participation in ECOMOG, the West African Regional Peacekeeping Force, which was using Freetown as a staging ground for operations against Taylor in Liberia. Marked by their brutality against civilians and the abduction and forced conscription of children, the RUF raids caused rapid flight by much of the population in the region. In a matter of weeks after the first incursions, the RUF controlled much of Kailahun District in the East, (Pratt p.38). This period was marked by confusion and brutally as rebels committed attacks while dressed in army uniforms and as disaffected members of the armed forces carried out attacks against civilians, which they blamed on rebels. These soldiers by day rebels by night became known as 'Sebels (Conteh-Morgan, P.35). By late 1992, local militias known as the Civil Defense Force (CDF) or Kamajor (Mende for hunter) sprang up to defend areas against he RUF and the 'Sobel's' within a year and a half of the first attacks in Sierra Leone, international agencies estimated that at least 400,000 people were displaced within Sierra Leone.

In 1990, with the RUF not far from Freetown, Strasser turned to the South African mercenary (security) from Executive Outcomes for assistance in pushing the RUF back from their position (Hirsch. 2001). Executive Outcomes succeeded in forcing the retreat of the RUF from the Freetown but were not able to uproot the RUF from their headquarters in Kailahun.

By 1996, civil society and the donor community placed great public pressure upon the government to hold democratic elections and return the country to civilian rule. According to Hirsch, women's groups were especially instrumental in this campaign. In spite of a coup in January in which Strasser was overthrown by his deputy Julius Bio, popular pressure intensified and democratic elections were held as scheduled in February and March, 1996. In the weeks leading up to the elections, RUF attacks on civilians in areas under RUF control became more violent. The RUF hacked off the limbs and other body parts of men, women and children. The RUF particularly employed the amputation of hands or arms as a method of attempting to discourage others from voting in the elections. Despite this, the voter turnout was large and the winner of these elections was Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) officer.

In May 1997, the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) overthrew Kabbah and formed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) regime under Major Johnny Paul Koroma. The AFRC invited the RUF to join in ruling the country. This period was marked by lawlessness, rampant destruction and looting of property, and specific targeting of Kabbah allies (Pratt p.40).

In February 1998, following months of increased CDF and ECOMOG activity against the AFRC/RUF, ECOMOG forces removed the AFRC/RUF from Freetown in fierce fighting. Many civilians were injured and killed in battles throughout the city. Kabbah was restored to power and returned to Freetown in March from exile in Guinea. The RUF continued to brutally attack civilians and together with elements of the SLA, to fight the Freetown government, a policy dubbed by the RUF, "Operation No Living Thing (Pratt p-41) by the of December the rebels were again near Freetown and foreigners began to leave the capital On January 6, 1999, the RUF and AFRC forces entered the Eastern part of Freetown and unleashed in unprecedented wave of terror upon the population-killing, amputating and raping civilians and setting fire to buildings and vehicles. They were eventually pushed back by ECOMOG. During the invasion and their subsequent withdrawal following the ECOMOG
intervention, the rebels committed egregious human rights abuses against the civilian population, leaving at least 50,000-300,000 people dead in addition to war crimes committed against women and young girls.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN SIERRA LEONE

The basic human rights entrenched in many international and regional instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights are found in the 1991 Sierra Leone Constitution, Chapter 3, Section 15-30, which provides for the equal rights of women. Sierra Leone also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1988 but this has not been translated into reality. Though the constitution states that no law should discriminate against any person because of his/her gender, in practice women face structural discrimination under all three types of law which in Sierra Leone include; English, Islamic, and Customary Laws. The effects of discriminatory inheritance practices were particularly devastating to women and children, especially during armed conflict, which has produced many windows. It should be noted that Sierra Leone's criminal justice system remains largely dysfunctional due to a lack of financial and human resources. While high levels of war-related sexual violence have been documented by the PHR study and by other organizations documenting human rights abuses, evidence also suggests that domestic violence against women and children is common, though it is not generally recognized as a social problem (Bangura & Solomon, 2000). Nearly 67% of urban women interviewed for a survey on AIDS knowledge, practices and behaviours revealed that they had been beaten by an intimate male partner, and over 50% reported being forced to have sexual intercourse (Coker, Richeter, 1998). In almost 90% of these cases, a boyfriend or husband was identified as the perpetrator. The police was generally unlikely to intervene in domestic disputes except in cases resulting in severe injury or death. (U.S Department of State, 2001) and though rape is a crime under Sierra Leonean law, historically, the response of the Sierra Leone police and judiciary to reports of rape has been minimal (Bangura 2000). In fact, the successful prosecution of a rape case in Sierra Leone did not occur until 1999. Rape cases are not made a priority and are generally not handled professionally due to improper/insufficient training, lack of means, and structural discrimination against women resulting in a lack of understanding that rape is a serious crime. In response to this problem, the Commonwealth Police have recently established a number of centers called Family Support Units to educate police on sexual and domestic violence, receive rape victims, ensure proper forensic testing has been done assist in processing their cases and a to reach out to the community.

VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DURING THE WAR

Those involved in the war committed a range of serious human rights abuses against the civilian population, other groups, and members of their own groups including extra judicial killing or summary execution, sexual violence including rape, abduction, amputation, destruction of property, disappearance, torture, violations of humanitarian law and forced labour. The crimes committed by rebel forces have been of a particularly heinous nature. In addition to the practice of amputation of limbs and other body parts of men, women and children raped and made to witness torture and murder of relatives and neighbours. More recently, since the November 2000 cease-fire between the government and the RUF, rebel abuses have apparently been on the decline (US Department of State, 2001).

Despite this, several serious incidents involving multiple civilian deaths, including women and children were reported by Human Rights Watch as recently as July 2001. Based on interviews with victims and witnesses, Human Right Watch reported that attacks by the CDF militias in June and July against then RUF-controlled towns resulted in the killing of least twenty-four civilians, and the wounding of another nineteen.
ABUSES BY THE REBELS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY UNITED FRONT

RUF rebels, the ex-SLA/AFRC and an ex-SLA splinter group called the West Side Boys reportedly committed widespread abuses, including killings, abductions, deliberate mutilations, and rape. Rebel forces also abducted civilians, missionaries, aid workers from non-governmental organization (NGOs), and UN personnel; ambushed humanitarian relief convoys; raided refugee sites; and extorted and stole food. The RUF forces continued their long-standing practice of abducting civilians (including women and children) and using them as forced laborers, child soldier, and sexual slaves.

After the Lone agreement was signed, there were reports that the RUF have committed numerous abuses including rape, the execution of civilians and peacekeepers, and execution of their own, allegedly for committing rapes (Dulka, 2001). Mostly rebel atrocities and government allied jet and helicopter gun ships prompted the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of civilians over the past several years.

The extent of the rebel’s signature mutilations reportedly declined in 2000 and 2001. Thousands of individuals including children as young as 2 months had their limbs severed during the conflict, and many more died as a result of their wounds. It has been estimated that for every one amputee that survived, three perished from shock, infection and loss of blood because they were not able to obtain medical care (US Department of State, 2000).

The UN estimates the number of men, women and children abducted by rebel forces from 1991-999 to be approximately 20,000 (US Department of State, 2001) workers, and has taken UNAMSII peacekeepers hostage on several occasions. Rebels forces invaded, looted and burned private and public properties. These destructive actions have played an instrumental role in the terror campaign against civilians—often resulting in the evacuation of whole towns and villages on the first signs that rebels were approaching. The rebels have also looted belongings, crops, animals, medicines and cash for their own use.

THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

At any time during the conflict at least 5,000 children fought alongside adults, the majority with the EUF, which created "Small Boy Units" and "Small Girl Units" and sent them into combat (US Department of State, 2001, p.9). Children were frequently plied with a range of narcotics and forced to commit atrocities, even against their families and communities. Many children who were abducted had "RUF" permanently engraved on their skin with a knife or bayonet, often in places where it is difficult to cover up the makings.

Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which prohibits the recruitment of children under fifteen as combatants, and more recently has made repeated commitment:: to demobilize those under eighteen (Amnesty International, 2001) also ratified the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflicts. In May 2000, however, approximately 25% of combatants fighting with government forces near Masiaka were observed to be under eighteen and some as young as seven (Amnesty International 2001p.5)

ABUSES BY GOVERNMENT FORCES

Evidence confirmed that rebel forces committed the vast majority of abuses against civilians. However, government forces committed serious violations as well. There were reports that government and ECOMOG forces operating in support of the government committed extra judicial killings and summarily executed suspected rebels and their collaborators, particularly in the wake of the rebel occupation of Freetown (Human Right Watch, 2000). There appear to have been fewer reports of human rights violations involving the SLA since the late half of 2000, most likely due to training and reorganization (US Department of States, 2000).

ABUSES BY THE CIVIL DEFENCE FORECE (CDF)

The Civil Defense Forces also committed human rights abuses according to reports. While the number of abuses perpetrated by other groups appeared to have decreased in the later part of 2000 and
early in 2001, violations by CDF seemed to have risen during the same period (Human Right Watch, 2000) including reports of rape by CDF, which in past years had not been reported to have engaged in rape. In June and July 2001 pro-government militias reportedly attacked F.UF-controlled towns killing at least 24 civilians, most of whom were women and children (Human Right Watch 2000). There are reports that the CDF also continued to recruit children soldiers in spite of promises to halt the practice. Like the other groups, the CDF have unofficial roadblocks and routinely extorted money from travelers. The CDF have also arrested and detained suspects illegally (US Department of State, 2000).

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

In 2001 Sierra Leone was the least developed country in the world according to the United Nation Human Development Index (2002). A Sierra Leonean's average life expectancy of 38.3 years is the lowest in the world, and the under-five mortality rate is the highest in the world; nearly one third of children in Sierra Leone die before fifth birthday (UNICEF State of the World Children, 2000). Sixty-eight percent of adults are illiterate, 36% do not have access to health care, 34% do not have access to clean water, and the average per capita annual income is $448 (UNDP Human Development Report 2000). Twelve percent of children aged 0-14 have one or both parent dead. For the majority of people in the country, life is consumed by the challenge of survival, which is threatened not only by violence but by disease, malnutrition, and the limited availability of basic services. Sierra Leoneans live not only with the consequences of extreme poverty, but with the profound insecurity that exists in a society where the infrastructure and rule of law have virtually collapsed and there seems to be little hope for the future in terms of work and education opportunities. The humanitarian assistance community has an enormous task providing aid to the displaced and other war-affected people and beginning to rebuild the country, particularly in the areas of housing, health care, and education.

REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

At the height of the hostilities, more than 3,000 communities were destroyed resulting in the flight from their homes of nearly half the country's population. Many have experienced displacement more than once. At the same time of writing it is estimated that more than one million, approximately a quarter of the population, are either displaced internally or have fled to neighboring countries to escape the conflict (Global Data Base). An estimated 75,000 refugees had been repatriated by UNHCR to Sierra Leone and had returned independently by ship and foot since the beginning of 2001 as a result of the declining security situation in Liberia and Guinea. As many as 500,000, however, remained in camps in Guinea as well as in the Gambia, Ghana and the Cote D'Ivoire (USIAI) Humanitarian Situation Report 2002). As the numbers of returnees grow, particularly in Freetown where IDP camps are already over capacity, the government of Sierra Leone and relief agencies is making efforts to relocate them to host communities in areas deemed secure.

The official cases of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are over 400,000 (Pratt p.23). An estimated 170,000 people reside in eighteen official IDP camps, and thousands more are living with host communities primarily in the Port Loko and Tonkilili districts. Most of the camps in Sierra Leone were generally crowded and unsanitary and most IDPs interviewed by FHR desperately went to return home. The return of the displaced to their home communities, many of which have been occupied by rebels for years, may, however, pose an even, greater challenge to the government of Sierra Leone and humanitarian relief agencies. Sierra Leone's fragile and limited infrastructure may be unable to absorb an influx of refugees from unstable areas in Liberia and Guinea. These difficulties may be exacerbated by the voluntary resettlement of IDPs as the peace process moves forward and areas of the country are secured. The National Committee for Relief Reconstruction and Rehabilitation (NCRRR) which is providing those who return home with seeds, tools and other essential household items. Had reached only 77 of 149 chiefdoms before home or remain in camps, the need for food aid will remain high. Massive reconstruction of shelter and education and health facilities must also be a top priority. Extension of state authority into the Provinces-crucial in order to undertake and sustain programs in key sector- has been hampered by the military, political and economic situation. Government capacity to deliver basic services continues to be limited and civil administration in areas under RUF control
was virtually obliterated. Health and development indicators point to particularly dire conditions in the North. The current needs for displaced populations, the host communities and resettlement far exceed the existing capacity at all levels.

MATERIAL AND CHILD CARE
The political end military turmoil had a devastating impact on those most vulnerable to poverty and disease—women and child. Sierra Leone's maternal mortality rate is the highest in the world. It has been estimated that one in seven women will die from complications related to childbirth (Petrovic 2001). The inability of women to access health service is largely due to their unavailability, but also a problem of access and affordability. Much of the population today is so poor that they cannot pay even small fees that are now required. Inspite of the obstacles, it ha; been reported that 85% of women in Sierra Leone receive some form of prenatal care, and antenatal care from a health care provider with specialized skills. A recent government survey found that 42% of birth were a tended by a doctor, nurse or midwife, though only 22% of births in the North received specialized assistance (Government of Sierra Leone Survey Report on the status of women and children 2000).

The Kissy mental hospital in Freetown, the only hospital providing mental healthcare in the country, is managed by the only Sierra Leonean psychiatrist in the country. Due to limited resources and other constraints the hospitals has been more a refuge for the mentally ill who have nowhere else to go for mental health services. Though they should be more widely available and better coordinated and regulated, anecdotal evidence suggests existing psychosocial services provides almost exclusively by NGOs are providing to be very valuable in some IDP camps in large towns such as Freetown and Kenema. Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) has begun to assist the government of Sierra Leone in coordinating their mental health response to the crisis.

EDUCATION
The government lacks the financial and practical capacity to provide basic education and other services for children, particularly in areas that have been under rebel control. An estimated 70% of schools were destroyed during the fighting and rampant looting has left most facilities still standing without teaching materials and furniture (Global IDP Data Base 1999). Many children feel they are too old to return to the level where they left off and feel pressure to earn income to help rebuilding the lives of their families. Others now must take on the responsibility of breadwinner due to the death of parents of pregnancy resulting from rape.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The impact of wars on civilians has increased substantially in the past century. In World War 1, approximately 5% of casualties were civilian, whereas in the 1990s it is estimated that 80% of war casualties were civilians, many of whom were women and children. Women and children also constitute the majority of the world's displaced and refugee population. This dramatic increase in the impact of conflict on civilians is likely due to the changing nature of conflict itself. Most conflicts today occur within a state's borders and are often characterized by deliberate and systematic violence against civilians and civilians institutions. Of 101 armed conflicts around the world between 1989 and 1996. 95 were internal disputes characterized by the use of light weapons and small decentralized fighting groups. These conflicts have devastating consequences for civilians.

There has been little or no research on the scale of sexual violence, the factors that provoke it, or how to mitigate the problem. Perhaps even less is known about how women recover after the trauma, of rape in war and about the impact of rape on their communities. Documenting sexual violence, already difficult during peacetime, is even more challenging during conflict when lack of ordinary support systems, general instability and collateral trauma further discourage disclosure. Despite this, persistent efforts to do so are increasingly forcing the issue into the light.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Rape, forced prostitution, sexual slavery and forced impregnation are all criminal means and methods of warfare that have attracted more attention in the recent years because of the widespread reporting of such acts in recent
conflicts (ICRC, 2001). The wars in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia focused attention on the use of rape as a deliberate strategy to undermine community bonds and weaken resistance to aggression (Gliller, Swiss 2001). In fact, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and the devastating effects it typically has on communicates reflects a profound and disturbing perspective on the dignity and worth of women and girls that a woman's dignity and worth can be reduced to her sexual purity and serve as a measure of family and community honor. The recent convictions handed down by the ad-hoc tribunals for Rwanda and Yugoslavia on rape as a war crime and crime against humanity send a strong message that impunity and sexual violence can no longer be taken for granted. While rape is receiving increased attention, and emphasis on this particular abuse should not lead to a disregarding of other violations. Instead, sexual violence should be understood in the context of a range of abuses and hardships faced by women during conflict situations.

Health care professionals have a unique role to play in the investigation and documentation of sexual violence in war and in the treatment of survivors. Collecting and presenting sound evidence will help hold perpetrators accountable, restore the rule of law, and limit future violations. Furthermore, increasing medical and social knowledge about sexual violence in war will facilitate the development of strategies that allow the recovery of survivors of sexual violence and their communities. A better understanding of the determining factors and characteristics of sexual violence in war may contribute to the development of measures to better protect potential victims and deter perpetrators in the future. Documentation is also important for the development of international jurisprudence and strengthening the interpretation and implementation of existing international legal standards.

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