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SIERRA LEONE: GETTING AT THE ROOTS OF 'SURVIVAL' SEX

Rape, abduction and sexual slavery are part of the brutal legacy of Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war, which left over half the country's population displaced and destitute. As a matter of survival, both during and after the war, women (as well as men) have been forced into commercial sex, which leaves them vulnerable to HIV infection and other, potentially fatal, problems. In response, a faith-based organization supported by UNFPA is helping girls and young women affected by the war to regain their health and dignity, and is giving them the tools to generate alternative livelihoods. One key to success is responding to their needs in a holistic way. Another is involving partners—as well as the host community—in sensitization and training activities, and providing free education to their children.

THE CONTEXT¹

The multitude of problems facing Africa have no common cause or solution because they occur in such culturally diverse environments. What works in some cultural settings simply does not work in others. Deeply entrenched cultural practices have serious implications for interventions aimed at addressing violence against women and other issues, including reproductive health.

In Sierra Leone, the situation of women has been made worse by armed conflict that plunged the country into chaos for over a decade. As a result of the war, which ended in January 2002, more than half the population was displaced and rendered destitute; 17 per cent of displaced households surveyed experienced sexual assaults, including rape, torture and sexual slavery.²

The population of Sierra Leone is currently estimated at 5.6 million people, based on the projections of a 1985 census. The adult literacy rate is about 31 per cent, 24 per cent for women and 39 per cent for men. The maternal mortality ratio, one of the highest in the world, is 2,100 deaths per 100,000 live births, and the infant mortality rate is 133 deaths per 1,000 live births. Life expectancy is currently 42 years for females and 39 years for males. In 2001, Sierra Leone ranked at the bottom of the Human Development Index.³

About 70 per cent of the population live in poverty, and young adults, aged 15 to 24, are among the poorest of the poor. An estimated 700,000 of the people internally displaced during the war were children and youth. About 9,000 of them were maimed, orphaned or separated from their parents. Most of these youths are school dropouts who earn a living from petty trading, narcotic drug peddling, prostitution and theft.⁴

The majority of the country's female population continue to be confined to their traditional domestic roles. Poverty and sociocultural factors limit the opportunities available to them, which also affects their status and participation in the country's development. Only about 38 per cent of girls are enrolled in school, compared to 52 per cent of boys. Factors such as early marriage, high rates of teenage pregnancy and rising dropout rates have contributed to the problem. It is estimated that half of all girls drop out of school before completing their basic education.

Addressing the Underlying Issues

The notion of a specific category of activities to address violence against women is a new concept in Sierra Leone. After the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, there was a good deal of effort by

1 Statistics in this section came from the following source, except where noted: Government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations Population Fund. 2004. Country Programme Action Plan 2004-2007. Freetown, Sierra Leone.

2 'War-related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone'. 2002. Physicians for Human Rights, with support of the UN Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone. Massachusetts, USA.

3 *Human Development Report 2001*. Published for UNDP. Available at: www.undp.org/hdr2001/back.pdf

4 Government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations Population Fund, 2004.

the Government and civil society organizations to increase women's economic empowerment through vocational training, livelihood projects and access to credit. However, little attention was paid to the underlying cultural and political factors that make women vulnerable to various forms of violence and subjugation by men.

After the war, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, the gravity of women's problems, including crime and violence against them, came to light. Since that time, there have been programmes dealing with war trauma for the general population, but no specific focus on violence against women. Rather, efforts to address such violence are incorporated into the many interventions that seek to combat the spread of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Some traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (which affect more than 80 per cent of adult females in Sierra Leone), are considered off-limits to outside interference, whether by government or non-governmental institutions.

SIERRA LEONE AND CEDAW

The Constitution of Sierra Leone provides for equal rights for women. However, in practice, women face legal, economic and social discrimination. Moreover, their rights and status under traditional law varies significantly depending upon the ethnic group to which they belong. All women born in the Western Area, for example, which is governed by General Law, have a statutory right to own property in their name. Some women born in the provinces, which are governed by customary laws that vary from chiefdom to chiefdom, do not. In the Temne tribe, women cannot become paramount chiefs; however, in the Mende tribe, several paramount chiefs have been female.

Compounding the problem are judges and lawyers that lack the necessary skills to handle cases involving violence against women and an inadequate legal framework for protecting women's rights, which includes laws dating back as far as 1861 (Offences Against Persons Act, 1861). With support from UNFPA, a women's advocacy group known as NEWMAP (Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians) is working to revise these laws.

The Government of Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1988. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, which is responsible for the policies, practices and laws relating to the situation of women and children, has received technical assistance from the Division for the Advancement of

Women in the United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs to chart a plan for the implementation of CEDAW recommendations. In collaboration with the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, the ministry has undertaken a nationwide consultation on these recommendations and draft legislation is in place.

With support from UNFPA, the Government has formulated two policies on gender mainstreaming and the advancement of women, which have been adopted. The implementation of these policies has increased awareness and participation of women in the national decision-making process. Twenty-five per cent of all parliamentarians, ministers and other government decision makers are women in the current Government.

THE UNFPA COUNTRY PROGRAMME

The Third UNFPA Country Programme for Sierra Leone, covering the years 2004-2007, is valued at \$6 million and has four components:

- *Coordination and management*, which seeks to ensure synergy among programme implementers, effective resource mobilization and utilization, the sharing of information and the building of technical and institutional capacity to respond to programme challenges
- *Data and information systems*, which focuses on appropriate data collection methodologies, effective management and in-depth analysis of data, the availability of supportive databases as well as timely publication and dissemination of information
- *Reproductive health services and information*, which ensures the availability and accessibility of quality reproductive health information and services to all target groups
- *Gender equity and women's empowerment*, which seeks to improve the advocacy and implementation capacity of critical groups to ensure the enactment and/or implementation of relevant laws and policies.⁵

Two outputs related to violence against women are planned. The first focuses on increased commitment and support for the implementation of the national population policy and other development policies and programmes, including the ICPD Programme of Action and CEDAW.

The second aims to increase the capacity of law enforcement agents and advocacy groups to address women's rights and gender-based violence. Based on lessons learned from previous programme interventions, the Country Office is targeting policy makers and political

⁵ Ibid.

leaders to promote action in these areas. Uniformed personnel, including the police, prison officials, UN peacekeepers, ex-combatants and the national army are being trained in gender issues, the promotion of women's rights and protection of women against violence and abuse. Likewise, law enforcement agents working within the Family Support Units of the Sierra Leone Police will be provided with skills to ensure that laws regarding gender-based violence and women's rights are enforced. Emphasis is also being placed on partnership-building through collaboration with relevant line ministries and NGOs.

THE PROJECT

The project, called 'Empowering Adolescents and Young Girls Affected by the War through Reproductive Health Services, HIV/AIDS Prevention and Reintegration Opportunities', is identifying, counselling and protecting girls and young women whose lives have been altered by the experience of war.

The project is being implemented by the Women in Crisis Movement (WICM), a faith-based charitable and humanitarian organization that evolved from the Christian counselling and fellowship ministry. "There was so much need to reach out to the girls, to empower them and give them hope," says the organization's director.⁶ "We realized that they needed food, counselling, clothes, skills and much more. We decided to take on the challenge."

The project targets 2,300 women and girls between the ages of 15 and 38 who have suffered abduction, abuse, exploitation and other forms of violence at the hands of warring factions; many of them have resorted to commercial sex work as a means of survival both during and after the war.⁷ The girls and young women have been recruited mainly from commercial sex hubs in and around the capital, Freetown, and in Tongo field, a low-income mining area in Kenema district. They include commercial sex workers, survivors of rape, single parents, people living with HIV, young widows who lost their husbands during and after the war and child-headed households.

The project is empowering these young women through behaviour change communication and skills training that will help them make informed and responsible choices about their sexual behaviour. It also seeks to make them economically self-sufficient through alternatives to commercial sex. The project offers sexual and reproductive

health services, along with capacity-building, to help them regain their self-esteem.

The project also provides for the dependants of the girls and young women. Their children are offered free medical care, education and access to safe playground areas while their mothers are being trained. Partners of the women, including husbands and boyfriends, receive sensitization and condom supplies for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Awareness-raising and training is also provided to prevent gender-based violence and sexual exploitation.

In parallel, WICM staff receive training and are developing skills relevant to their work, in business management, guidance and counselling, project planning and management and other areas.

A functioning health-care system is essential when dealing with this target group. The project is therefore procuring basic equipment and supplies for drop-in health centres, managed by the Government.

Among the project activities:

- Vocational training in areas such as tailoring, hairdressing, gara tie-dyeing, batik- and soap-making
- Adult literacy classes, which are compulsory for all participants. The programme includes a component developed by UNFPA on reproductive health, family planning, prevention of HIV infection, nutrition, sanitation, personal hygiene, sexually transmitted infections and occupational options. The programme gives illiterate and semi-literate women the opportunity to achieve basic literacy, increase their income-earning capacity and enhance their coping skills. It includes basic subjects such as English, arithmetic, home and basic business management, and comparative religious education, using a non-formal education curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
- A feeding programme, which provides a meal a day to participants and their children. The programme not only motivates participants to come to the centre, but has actually saved students and their children from hunger and starvation⁸
- Pre-primary and primary education, which is provided free to the children of project participants as well as the host community

⁶ Juliana Konteh, Director, Women in Crisis Movement, Sierra Leone.

⁷ Commercial sex is widespread and not prohibited by law. However, sex workers are sometimes arrested and charged with loitering and vagrancy.

⁸ 'Empowering Adolescents and Young Girls Affected by War through Reproductive Health Services, HIV/AIDS Prevention and Reintegration Opportunities, 2003-2004'. A Report by Women in Crisis. March 2005. Freetown, Sierra Leone.

- Counselling and psychosocial support, which has been extended to more than 800 girls and young women
 - Advocacy and information, education and communication activities, targeted to project participants, that include leaflets, posters, film screenings and radio programmes on AIDS
 - Free medical care to all the participants and to host communities through six satellite mother-and-child health clinics managed by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation and partner non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The project is also undertaking voluntary mass treatment of sexually transmitted infections and regular family planning and child-care programmes for all participating girls and young women
 - Sensitization about sexually transmitted infections, which creates awareness among the participants and the host community about the availability of HIV/AIDS support services, generates empathy for those affected and helps to eliminate the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS. Condoms are distributed free of charge to those participating in the project
 - A training programme in small-scale income-generation, developed by UNFPA, which gives the girls and young women an opportunity to learn business management skills, including numeracy, profit management, marketing and investments
 - Support in the formation of income-generating cooperatives, in which groups are encouraged to pool their skills and resources to set up small-scale ventures. The women are given start-up kits and receive follow-up support and supervision from trainers.
- Positive changes are happening in the lives of project participants through counselling and psychosocial support.
 - The capacity of project staff is growing through workshops and meetings on sexually transmitted infections, drug abuse, small business management and gender issues.
 - Project participants who have completed the programme are developing alternative livelihoods.
 - There is a sense of self-esteem and competence among girls and women who have graduated from the programme. Many former commercial sex workers are gaining control over their futures.

“As we continued to learn about HIV/AIDS, I developed an interest in and got training as a peer educator. I have also pursued a course in counselling. Unlike before, I am now working to spread good news to commercial sex workers and community members.”

— A project participant

For Men

- Drug use by men is on the decline, which has diminished forced prostitution and sexual harassment of women in the project area.

- There is recognition on the part of men that women have the right to inherit property after the death of their husbands.
- Men are also recognizing women's contributions towards household property and gaining appreciation of gender roles in the home.

For the Community

- Previously marginalized and stigmatized commercial sex workers are now socially active and productive members of the community.
- Positive relationships with project staff have been established through regular involvement in project activities and access to free medical care.
- Strong community and social support networks have been established between the project and the community.
- Physical violence and assaults against women are steadily declining due to community sensitization and awareness-raising on gender issues.
- The education of girls is now regarded with equal importance to that of boys.
- Girls who become pregnant while in school are being encouraged to resume their education and are enrolled in the project to receive training after delivery.
- Incidence of widow inheritance (forced marriage of wid-

RESULTS

For Women

- Knowledge on preventing sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, has increased.
- Prevalence of sexually transmitted infections and associated morbidity and mortality has been reduced.
- Condom use is increasing due to mass awareness campaigns and health education about safer sex.
- More women are gaining vocational skills in areas such as gara tie-dyeing, soap-making, hairdressing and tailoring.

ows to their deceased husband's relatives) and forced early marriage have decreased within the community.

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IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES

The Women in Crisis Movement began its work in 1996 by visiting high-risk communities where commercial sex workers tended to reside. At first they counselled them, then provided some relief aid and medical treatment before registering them as participants in the project and candidates for training. Initially, the staff at WICM started out as peer educators who carried out community outreach to recruit participants into the project. It gradually evolved into a training institution with managers and a board of governors who oversee the management of the project.

UNFPA provided a small amount of initial funding to WICM in 2001, five years after the organization began its operations. UNFPA came in to strengthen the work that was already being done and to use it as a vehicle for awareness-raising about HIV/AIDS in the community, including the partners of commercial sex workers. The way the project was structured was deliberately flexible: Commercial sex workers who were part of the project were allowed to go back to their partners until they themselves decided that these relationships were no longer beneficial to them. Initially, commercial sex workers were poorly regarded in the community. But as the project progressed and the women became more self-reliant, attitudes began to change. This shift was largely attributed to the women's change in behaviour and the fact that they had become economically independent.

In addition to its financial contribution, UNFPA involvement enhanced the work of the WICM by expanding its impact. For example, it encouraged the organization to network with government and non-governmental institutions and UN agencies. And right from the start, UNFPA worked closely with NEWMAP (a group of women parliamentarians and ministers) to advocate for women's rights. Among other activities, UNFPA encouraged traditional and religious leaders to promote the eradication of violence against women through an advocacy programme implemented by NEWMAP. It has also used radio, television and the print media to portray a positive image of women through an organization called Media Alliance.

Though the project is not sustainable without outside financial support, plans are in the works to further diversify project activities to help offset costs. The idea of commercial agriculture, for example, is being developed. There are also plans to introduce small tuition fees, payable by all participants.

PARTNERS

UNFPA-Sierra Leone has overall responsibility for supporting the management and coordination of the project. It has adopted a participatory implementation strategy involving a variety of stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health and Sanitation; Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs; Ministry of Education, Science and Technology; World Food Programme; World Health Organization; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and the National AIDS Secretariat together with NGOs. Major partners and their primary contributions are listed below:

WICM

- Provided land on which project buildings were constructed
- Contributed existing structures, which were subsequently renovated.

UNFPA

- Strengthens the capacity of project staff through training abroad and in-country
- Helps WICM network with Government and other stakeholders
- Supervises the project and provides moral support
- Provides project funding.

World Health Organization

- Provides skills training
- Rehabilitated one of the buildings
- Trains teachers and other staff.

Government through the National AIDS Secretariat

- Provides funds for sensitization activities on HIV/AIDS
- Trains girls and young women as peer educators.

Children of the Nation Ministry

- Cares for some of the participants' children and orphans
- Provides counselling and spiritual support.

Project Participants

- Provide their own uniforms
- Contribute materials they use during training, such as die cloth.

LESSONS LEARNED

The project adopted a variety of strategies in addressing the problems faced by vulnerable girls and young women in Sierra Leone. These include provision of reproductive health services, community mobilization, skills training, peer education, capacity-building for human resources development, the provision of counselling and spiritual support, and a feeding programme. This combination of strategies has been effective, and several lessons can be drawn:

A holistic approach is required to change behaviours and curb harmful practices. Though the project is targeting certain harmful behaviours and practices, it deals with the 'whole' person and those closest to her. The health of women is taken in account, as well as her economic and social needs and issues such as self-esteem. All of these multiple dimensions are addressed. The project provides relevant information on sexually transmitted infections and on gender equity and other issues crucial to women's empowerment. It also offers women an opportunity to develop their business and leadership skills and their ability to negotiate safer sex. Basic survival issues are not neglected: The project provides a daily meal for those in need and free treatment of sexually transmitted infections from six satellite clinics managed by the Government. Project participants are encouraged to visit the clinics regularly and use condoms every time they have sex.

Sensitivity to and respect for the human rights of beneficiaries is key to winning their confidence. Advocacy for the legal and constitutional rights of project participants has helped to win the girls over and build their self-esteem. In post-war Sierra Leone, the sex trade is regarded as a means to survival. The project does not condemn commercial sex workers, but respects them as individuals trying to support themselves and their families. They are looked upon with compassion as vulnerable human beings in need of assistance. They are not forced to denounce their trade but are patiently encouraged to consider an alternative livelihood. At the same time, the project is working to secure their safety as commercial sex workers and the rights of their children.

If improved reproductive health and women's rights are to be realized, men must be targeted during sensi-

tization campaigns. Since women tend to have little control in sexual relations with men, men must be empowered to protect them. Through the project, partners of the women are sensitized to issues including safer sex, drug abuse, and respect and protection of their companions. Awareness-raising and training is geared to the prevention of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation.

Extending the benefits of a project to the host community, and involving them in planning and implementation, can build support and encourage sustainability. Free health and education services for the host community encouraged their support of the project. In fact, a number of women, particularly wives of influential community members who were never involved in commercial sex, have enrolled in courses sponsored through the project.

Host communities were sensitized to issues including gender equality and equity and support and care of persons with HIV or AIDS; they were also involved in project planning and implementation. For example, community members contributed local building materials for project structures, distributed condoms and served as peer mobilizers to other community members in discouraging violence against women, child abuse and commercial sex. They identify themselves with the project and are also involved in planning for its expansion, which will include commercial agriculture.

Providing skills-training to girls and young women helps empower them, especially when complemented by financial and material support. Girls and young women undergo two years of training in vocational skills. On graduation, participants are given start-up kits that include sewing machines and seed money to rent premises from which they can operate a business. They are provided with follow-up support in the early days of their new businesses, and sometimes work with interns wishing to undertake a similar venture. The provision of start-up kits and support supervision helps them translate theoretical skills into practical jobs and sustainable sources of income.

On a parallel track, UNFPA has facilitated training of police officers to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of commercial sex workers and other women and to respond to cases of sexual violence in an appropriate manner, especially in the absence of relevant laws.

Formative research can help reorient a project and maximize its impact. One of UNFPA's contributions to the project was evidenced-based research, which helped

to reorient the project. Among other things, the research looked at the structure of the sex trade, the power dynamics at play, the position of women in these structures and what they would need in order to leave the sex trade. The information obtained helped in the formulation of a holistic approach in dealing with the needs of commercial sex workers. It also resulted in a shift in the target population to include the partners and children of commercial sex workers, who can exert tremendous influence on the behaviour of these young women.

Peer mobilization is an important strategy in delivering relevant messages on HIV prevention and safer sex.

Peer educators have been trained to reach out to commercial sex workers that are still on the streets. A key strategy is enabling peer educators to effectively teach negotiating skills for safer sex, including the use of condoms. Even those who are not trained as peer educators are encouraged to convince their peers on the streets to consider quitting commercial sex work. They are also encouraged to use condoms and seek medical attention for sexually transmitted infections. Testing for HIV is promoted among the project participants so that appropriate care and support can be extended, if necessary.

Music, dance and drama are effective tools for communicating sensitive messages to a cross-section of the population.

The project organized theatrical performances to inform and entertain the community. Project participants choose a pertinent issue and are asked to act it out. Their performances and songs touch on issues ranging from teenage pregnancy and safer sex to rape, violence against women and alcoholism. This has proved to be an effective way to pass on sensitive messages to community members since they learn as they are being entertained.

The educational prospects of young women are not diminished once they have children. The majority of girls and young women who are undergoing training through the project have had children. Despite social norms to the contrary, they are being encouraged by the project to go back to school. Though normally the chances of a young mother returning to school are slim, the project is proving that such women can perform as well in school as their childless peers and even excel. The beauty of the project is that their children are also being cared for. They are provided with food and a safe play area, and children of school age are enrolled at no cost.

Accomplishments by project participants should be acknowledged to motivate others and boost self-esteem. The project held a graduation ceremony for

86 participants who had completed programmes in tie-dying, tailoring and hairdressing. The graduates posed for photos with representatives from UNFPA and WHO. They were given start-up kits, seed money for starting up a new business and a certificate. The ceremony and the wearing of graduation gowns were a big boost for these young women, who previously had little hope of ever being accepted back into the community. It also motivated other girls still on the streets, who now see the training as a viable alternative to commercial sex work.

Technical assistance from the UNFPA Country Office not only motivates the project staff, but ensures that project implementation is on track.

Technical assistance from the UNFPA Country Office has gone a long way in motivating project staff. In addition, it has enabled them to network more effectively with stakeholders and earn the support and goodwill of influential partners. This has helped market the project and increase its impact.

Achieving project objectives is a collective effort.

Successful implementation requires the cooperation and commitment of a variety of stakeholders at various levels. The WICM receives support from UNFPA, WHO, the central Government (through the National AIDS Secretariat), Children of the Nation Ministry and others. At the local level, UNFPA provides funds and technical coordination for project activities in Mayenkineh, which is east of Freetown and Tongo; the World Health Organization is providing similar support at a second site in Freetown. Assistance from the National AIDS Secretariat fills any gaps in the two programmes.

PRACTICES THAT WORKED

Taking the whole person into account through a holistic and integrated project design.

The project was designed to address all of the participants' concerns and ensure that the benefits attained through the project are sustainable. Focus is placed on how young women involved in commercial sex work can be empowered to re-enter society. The project offers counselling and psychosocial support, which also deals with the trauma they have gone through. Practical skills and help in starting a business give these young women the incentive they need to become economically self-reliant. This is supplemented by literacy classes that give them the basics in writing, reading and arithmetic. This design has been effective, since those who graduate from the programme are ready to face the world and compete with others.

Building capacity for project sustainability. One aspect of the project's sustainability has been ensured through

training of project managers and staff in areas including sexually transmitted infections, small business management skills, gender issues, and drug abuse, both in-country and abroad.

Sensitization and education that begins with community 'gate-keepers'. Influential figures in the community, including religious and opinion leaders and local politicians, have been mobilized and sensitized on issues including gender equality and equity, sexually transmitted infections, rape and defilement. This has not only raised awareness but increased their receptivity to the project. The positive environment created has increased community commitment and support of project activities and encouraged more girls to seek alternative livelihoods.

Using music, dance and drama to reach communities. The project has formed drama groups that are being used to sensitize both young people and adults about the vulnerability of young women and the dangers of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Music,

dance and drama have proved to be effective vehicles for passing on sensitive messages, while at the same time giving the young women an opportunity to develop their talents and to use their free time productively.

Networking and partnering with other organizations for better programming. UNFPA has encouraged the WICM to network with other civil society organizations, UN bodies and government programmes to share information about effective programming and implementation. Through UNFPA, the project has established productive relationships with personnel associated with the National AIDS Secretariat, Sierra Leone HIV/AIDS Response Project, Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the Country Coordinating Mechanism, the United Nations Expanded Theme Group on HIV/AIDS and other bodies. Some of these partners have provided financial support to the project. Others have contributed to capacity-building. The National AIDS Secretariat, for example, is training project participants as peer educators. WHO also got involved by supporting a second project site.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SIERRA LEONE

The following describes some of the most common forms of violence against women in Sierra Leone.

Physical Violence

Beating of women by their husbands, boyfriends, acquaintances and other men in the community is common. It is looked upon as a way of punishing women for wrongdoing and of winning their loyalty. The police are unlikely to intervene in domestic disputes except in cases involving severe injury or death.

"If you grew up here, you would know that it is normal to beat up a woman and no one would question you. It's only recently that people are beginning to talk about wife battering as an offence."

— A senior planning officer in the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning

A man takes it upon himself to beat his wife at the slightest provocation since he thinks this shows that he loves her.

"People believe that when you beat your wife you love her, and when you do not, then you have lost interest in her. Taking your husband to court is taboo. You would be an outcast. We want to legislate against such beliefs and practices. A lot of sensitization is needed to change the psyche of people from believing what they do."

— Deputy Speaker of the Parliament

Emotional Violence

Many women are emotionally abused and insulted, especially by their spouses. As a result, they lose their sense of self-esteem. Some women are also restricted in terms of their movements and associations.

"Emotional violence is most common among the rich. Men provide every material need for their wives, but are never there. They have other women with whom they spend time. Since they have all this material support, women dare not complain about the absence of their husbands. They bottle up their suffering and some of them end up developing high blood pressure. Some of these confessions come out when they come for workshops and hear others share their stories."

— National Coordinator, Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians

Sexual Violence

During wartime, girls and women in Sierra Leone were subjected to dehumanizing sexual acts, including gang rape. Others were taken as sex slaves by warring factions. Those who escaped used sex as a means of survival, and are still subjected to violence by their clients. Marital rape is not acknowledged since many tribes believe that a woman gets married primarily to offer sex to her husband. It is difficult to estimate the magnitude of this problem since the majority of cases go unreported. The few defilement cases reported to the police are quickly withdrawn by relatives of young women and girls, who prefer to settle them out of court. The problem is compounded by the lack of relevant laws with which to charge offenders. Legal authorities also lack the technical competence to handle some of the cases.

"Rape is common, but it is something that women hide and perpetrators go unpunished. The most unfortunate thing is that when defilement takes place and the police start to pursue the case, many parents withdraw their complaint. For instance, a man over 40 years old defiled his niece, aged 10. The case was reported to the police, but later the parents withdrew the complaint, preferring to settle out of court. A few months later, he defiled a younger sister of the former victim...."

— National Coordinator, Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians

"Forced prostitution is increasing with time. When parents cannot provide for the girls, they are forced to sell sex so that they can provide for the whole family. Mothers tend to condone this."

— Director, Action for Development Sierra Leone

Early Marriage

Young girls, starting at age 12, are forced to marry usually older men chosen by their parents. Some girls are given away in marriage while still in their mothers' wombs, with the agreement of their parents that the future husband will provide necessary support in exchange for a wife.

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“Early marriage is something we have lived with for a long time. It is rampant, especially in rural areas. It is not unusual to force a girl aged 12 to marry an old man the family has identified for her, particularly if he is rich. If she refuses, they beat her up till she gives in or chase her away from home. This has increased prostitution, because these girls end up on the streets.”

— Director, Women in Crisis Movement

Cultural Practices

Culture plays a significant—and positive—role in people’s lives. However, in Sierra Leone, certain traditional practices restrict women’s rights and freedoms. One of them is female genital mutilation/cutting, which dates back over 200 years and started with the Mendes in the southern part of the country. Today it is practised by all tribes except the Freetown-based Creoles. The ritual used to last for three to four months. During that time, girls would be confined to the ‘bush society’. They would be given an orientation on subjects including child care, their relationship with a husband and in-laws, housekeeping and cooking, in preparation for marriage soon after the initiation ceremony. Since most girls today are in school and do not have time to spend in bush society, what remains of this ritual is the cutting. Originally, girls would be initiated at puberty; today, some tribes initiate girls as young as three years old.

“Female genital mutilation/cutting is a deeply rooted practice. No politician is about to tread on that path because it can bring the whole system down. Maybe education can help, but even medical doctors here claim that it has no grave consequences for a woman’s life and reproductive health. It becomes difficult to know who to believe.... Culturally, the ability of a woman to function well in society is dependent on female genital cutting, because you are not seen as a complete person without going through that ritual.”

— A senior government planning officer

Another practice that promotes violence against women and girls is having sexual relations with a virgin, which is believed to make a man powerful and heal any illness, including AIDS.

“Many men are increasingly defiling young girls, particularly virgins, due to some beliefs and lies from traditional medicine men that having sex with a virgin brings power and wealth. Some men also believe that virgins can cure them of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections. In our sensitization meetings we address all these misconceptions.”

— National Coordinator, Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians

Widow Inheritance

Widow inheritance is common in most tribes in Sierra Leone. Among the Kono tribe, a wife is considered part of the household property. When she loses a husband, all of his ‘property’, including his wife and children, are turned back to his family.

“A widow is given an opportunity to choose a new husband from among the male relatives of her deceased husband. Should she decide not to be inherited, she then leaves the family taking nothing, not even her children.”

— Tribal head, Kono tribe

Any decision-making regarding the welfare of children in the home is made in consultation with the man of the family. Children belong to the man and they take on his name. It is common to hear a man refer to his children as ‘my children’. Such attitudes tend to drain a woman of the confidence she needs to take charge and even to reprimand her own children.

“A woman is rarely valued in a home. She is seen as a stranger who can leave the home anytime. We have a common saying that likens a woman to the handle of a cup. It is the smallest part on the cup and can break anytime. Even when it breaks off, one can still use the cup. This creates insecurity within women who, by culture, belong elsewhere. Ironically, a woman belongs neither to her maiden nor her marital homes. It is now common for older women to advise young women intending to get married to keep some money secretly should their husbands chase them away.”

— Director, Action for Development Sierra Leone