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Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone

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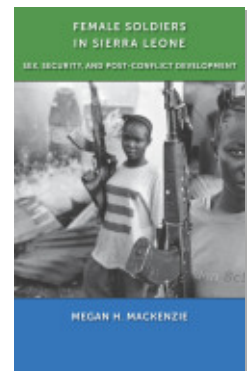
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The History of Sex, Order, and Conflict in Sierra Leone

If de clause day—O ye big men
 O ye men who go to Church;
 O ye men who get the money:
 O ye men who get the voice;
 Stand up—wake up—things day bad, mind
 Save de little girls from death
 Save de Creole girls from ruin¹

The majority of the current literature on Sierra Leone tends to focus on one of the following: the “chaotic” nature of Africa in general and West Africa in particular,² the eleven-year civil conflict³, the role of blood diamonds in conflicts,⁴ child soldiers,⁵ and the lessons to be learned from the United Nations’ mission and intervention in the Sierra Leone conflict.⁶ There is a dearth of critical scholarship that explores the roles and activity of women during the war or their lives post-armed conflict. Perhaps the most notable omission in this literature is in primary data such as individual interviews—not just with female soldiers but also with local citizens in general. In effect, much of the literature about the Sierra Leone conflict and the post-armed conflict period is not inclusive of voices and perspectives of the country’s citizens; rather, the literature is characterized by accounts in which investigators “speak for” the citizens of Sierra Leone. This chapter provides an overview of the historical context of Sierra Leone with a focus on what information is available on gender ordering and sexual regulation. This chapter is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of Sierra Leone’s history; rather, it should highlight for the reader the sociopolitical context of gender ordering and sexual regulation in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone is situated on the west coast of Africa. It is bordered by beautiful beaches and the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Liberia to the south, and Guinea to the north. With a population of more than 5 million, Sierra Leone has remained at the bottom of the United Nations’ Human Development Index for well over a decade. Its struggling economy, with a gross domestic product per capita of approximately \$806, is primarily based on the mining of diamonds and minerals as well as small-scale cash crop farming. Despite

the gloomy reports for Sierra Leone's economic development, the country has witnessed some major successes in the past few years, including its presidential election in 2007—its second peaceful and democratic presidential election since the end of the civil war.

Long before colonizers set foot in the territory that is now identified as Sierra Leone, assorted ethno-cultural groups, dominated by the Mende, Temne, and Limba, were established in the area. The region was also home to distinctive groups that had migrated from North and East Africa over centuries.⁷ Tribes were organized under a chiefdom system whereby a local chief ruled each major region. Most ethnic groups practiced some form of animism while Islam was introduced early to the northern regions of Sierra Leone, and eventually—through colonization—Christianity was brought to the region.

Gender Norms and Ordering in Sierra Leone

This book is focused on conjugal order and the continuities and discontinuities in current sexual norms and regulations related to gender in Sierra Leone. A look at secret societies can provide some insights into historical and contemporary gender roles in Sierra Leone. Secret societies are organized, all-male or all-female cultural organizations that have existed in West Africa for centuries. Secret societies are organized according to sex rather than ethnicity; the female-only groups are often referred to as Bundu or Sande societies, and the male-only groups are called Poro.⁸ These groups initiate members through sacred ceremonies, and members receive education and training particular to their society. Both male and female secret societies focus on teaching their members local history as well as training them in relevant skills for survival and success. Although the details of each society are “secret,” it is generally known that male members are taught skills such as hunting, harvesting palm oil, climbing trees, catching animals, and building houses.⁹ Female societies train women in skills such as cooking, breast-feeding and child rearing, and running a household.¹⁰ The practices and structures of each society vary according to geography; societies teach their members skills that are relevant to their particular region or period of time. For example, Father Joseph Momoh, a Sierra Leonean priest, explained that some secret society training was “warlike” to teach members how to fight and survive battle because “the community develop[ed] its identity through war.”¹¹ He

also reported that some societies teach signs and signals known only to that particular group and that members have used these communication skills to signal to one another on the road or during conflict.¹²

In the past, persons entering adulthood were initiated into secret societies. Most accounts indicate that the average age of initiation into the societies is anywhere from twelve to eighteen; however, because of poverty or the disruption of regular society practices and traditions due to conflict, these ages have fluctuated dramatically over the years. Such secret societies are viewed as a rite of passage for the girls and boys of a community; when a child is nearing adulthood, he or she is initiated into one of the local secret societies—usually the same society that his or her parents belong to. The sole definition of adulthood for some communities in Sierra Leone rests on initiation and membership in a secret society. Momoh explains, “If you have a boy of fifteen that goes through a local ceremony to adulthood...and another man of sixty who has not gone through the same ceremony, you treat the fifteen-year-old as a man to be respected and as the elder.”¹³

Due to the significance of membership within communities, exclusion from secret societies can be detrimental. Membership not only is required to be considered an adult but also is a source of respect and trust, a requirement for leadership, and a foundation for many trade and business relationships. A Mende woman summarized the importance of membership: “If you don’t belong to the secret soc [*sic*] up in the provinces, you cannot make any decisions, and you would be excluded from positions of authority, no matter how old you are....If you are not a member of the Society, oh I tell you, you feel so left out.”¹⁴

The historical roots of the societies extend to well before colonial times. As a result, the Creoles—the landed population of freed slaves—have not traditionally participated in secret societies. Some Creoles regarded these groups as “backward”; in particular, Creoles have been critical of the tradition of circumcising both male and female inductees. In addition, there has been increased international pressure on female secret societies to discontinue circumcision in their initiation practices.¹⁵

The Colonization of Sierra Leone

The following section includes an overview of how Sierra Leone came to be colonized, by whom, and some legacies with a specific focus on prostitution, family law, and marriage. This context informs subsequent

discussions of current sexual regulation and sexual ordering in Sierra Leone and the claim laid out in the introduction that current gender norms are partially reflective of Sierra Leone's colonial legacies. Sierra Leone's colonial era began with the establishment of Freetown as a British post and a settlement for former slaves in 1787. It was designated as an official crown colony in 1808.¹⁶ Descriptions of the early years of colonial Sierra Leone vary from a stunning paradise to the "white man's grave"—in reference to the number of settlers who died of various tropical diseases.¹⁷ With the help of the discovery and exploitation of natural resources, for years Sierra Leone flourished as a colony. As a result of landmarks such as the establishment of Fouray Bay College—the first university in western Africa—during the 1800s Freetown was deemed "the Athens of West Africa."

Sierra Leone's history has been shaped by waves of regional and international migration. In the early years of colonization, in addition to the colonizers and the indigenous tribal groups, Freetown became home to freed slaves from the Americas, slaves captured on shipping vessels by the British, Arab traders, a small number of British merchants, a powerful group of Lebanese traders, and British military personnel.¹⁸ After the abolition of slavery, Freetown was designated as the future home for freed slaves. The diverse groups of Africans that arrived in Freetown as a result of the abolishment of slavery became uniformly known as Creoles. The Creole language was a confection inspired by English and the various dialects of the settlers.

British colonizers tended to distinguish the Creoles from "the natives"—or the some fourteen existing ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. The Creoles, or "trouser blacks,"¹⁹ were considered an elite class largely because they had descended from liberated Africans who were seen to have "cultivated [Western/British] habits and [had] come to accept their way of living."²⁰ By some accounts, the British saw Creoles as partners in their mission to civilize West Africa.²¹ This categorization, combined with the fact that most Creoles lived in the crown colony (the Freetown area) as opposed to "the provinces" (areas outside Freetown were not included in the colony until 1896), offered Creoles significant advantages over the rest of the population in Sierra Leone. According to the 1931 census, more than half of all children enrolled in schools lived in the Freetown area.²² Although Creoles constitute only 2 to 3 percent of the current population in Sierra Leone today, they remain a significant portion of the country's political and economic elite.

Similar to other British colonial projects, one of the objectives for colonial administrators in Sierra Leone was to “civilize” the local population through education and the alteration or elimination of “traditional” social practices. Lansana Gberie has argued that the British regarded their colony in Sierra Leone as “an experiment in ‘conversionism.’”²³ The tools of conversion included not only education but also the introduction of religion and legal codes to restrict colonial subjects. Historian Leo Spitzer summarized the colonizers’ belief that “social redemption and elevation of submerged groups would not occur through the removal of legal disabilities alone: that the state or established religious, philanthropic or educated institutions would be required to bring about the integration and social adjustment of the emancipated.”²⁴ The British enacted their moral superiority to justify their regulation of the colony, with the control of sexuality and the establishment of a particular form of conjugal order at the heart of governance strategies.

Colonization and Sexual Regulation

Authors such as Richard Phillips have pointed to the connections between the regulation of sexuality and imperial power. In *Sex, Politics and Empire: A Postcolonial Geography*, Phillips concludes: “Colonisation schemes were organised around sexual arrangements.”²⁵ Lenore Manderson also argues that colonial authorities used sex as a basis to justify what she calls the “moral logic of colonialism.”²⁶ In particular, Mariarosa Dalla Costa has argued that colonizers worked to create and enforce the nuclear family unit because of the administration and economic benefits.²⁷ Harris also noted that the heterosexual nuclear family was considered the building block for the agricultural colonization of various parts of the world.²⁸

Prostitution

An examination of the regulation of prostitution in colonial Sierra Leone can provide a useful glimpse into the priority that sexual regulation held for colonial administrators, the assumed moral superiority of the British, and the way in which the British characterized the African female subject. Josephine Butler, an advocate of legalizing prostitution in the British Empire, argued that “the way people and government treated prostitutes and other sexual outsiders—a category in which we might include sexually active

younger people and those with lovers of the same sex or a different race—spoke volumes about their domestic and imperial society, about the way it was and the way they wanted it to be.”²⁹ Prostitution was deemed a necessary aspect of colonial life in part due to the high number of single males sent to administer the colonies. Despite the acceptance of prostitution, there is a great deal of evidence indicating that colonial authorities were determined to regulate it.

Prostitution was generally regulated under contagious disease (CD) laws; however, these laws were never passed in Sierra Leone. This aberration in British colonial practice has been explained as a financial decision resulting from the prevalence and uncontrollability of prostitution in the country.³⁰ Instead of CD laws, the British enacted numerous regulations “to improve public morals” in Sierra Leone, including banning public nudity, dancing after dark, and walking or loitering in any thoroughfare or public place for the purposes of prostitution.³¹ Prostitutes were not charged for their sexual activity; rather, they were charged with “loitering with intent.”³² The charge had nothing to do with a sexual act but was for walking publicly, indicating that the regulations surrounding prostitution had more to do with the regulation of women within public spaces than it did with sexual activity.

There are other indications that colonial governors wanted to control the public activity of African women in response to the perceived threatening potential of their unregulated sexual behavior. The image of the African subject as highly sexualized and lacking moral restraint informed both the specific regulations associated with prostitution and the general “moral logic” of colonial missions.³³ In fact, it can be argued that the legitimization of the colonial mission was dependent on the sexualization of the would-be colonial subject. Richard Burton’s work exemplifies this argument. An English traveler and author, Burton concluded that there was a “great gulf, moral and physical, separating the black from the white races of man.”³⁴ Burton’s construction of African women as “vicious” and the men as “bestial” was said to have informed Sierra Leone’s colonial officials. Burton’s writings also influenced larger discourses on African sexuality and broader debates about the moral justification for colonialism at the time. In particular, Burton described Sierra Leone as a region of “primal disorder” characterized by “savagery” and immorality—a place “effectively awaiting colonization.”³⁵

Marriage

For the colonizers in Sierra Leone, the promotion of the heterosexual nuclear family model was a key colonial objective. Similar to learning to eat with knives and forks, and covering their bodies with clothing, colonial administrators and missionaries saw marriage as essential to the civilizing mission. There was a particular emphasis on eradicating polygamy and female circumcision and replacing “fluid” customary unions with legally defined marriages.³⁶ Colonial authorities devoted attention to enforcing recognized models of marriage, while missionaries and “purity campaigners” concentrated on marriage unions. In turn, marriage became what Kristin Mann called a “virtual obsession” in West Africa during the late nineteenth century.³⁷ An Anglican bishop summarized the church’s position on marriage:

The Great desideratum in the social life of the colony is the sanctity of the marriage relationship, and the creation and maintenance of home and family life . . . the comparative absence of the ideas of love and fellowship from the marriage tie, utterly wrong views about the relative duties of husband and wife, tend to encourage concubinage, and this degrades women from her true place, becomes the fruitful source of strife and disunion, and children dragged up under these circumstances are apt to see and hear much that is most unfortunate.³⁸

This quotation reiterates the significance of recognized, Christian marriages to the colonial project. Efforts to encourage recognized marriage—that is, legal marriage—did not end with the colonial period. Since the 1950s, the Sierra Leone government has made great efforts to standardize the various types of marriages that exist within the country. In a research report on family law in Sierra Leone conducted in the 1970s, the authors continued to portray marriage as a solution to social chaos: “The absence of an effective method of recognizing the legal status of these marriages leads to many problems, including problems of maintenance, legitimacy, bigamy and inheritance.”³⁹

Family Law

An analysis of the laws regulating the family today in Sierra Leone is complicated by the fact that, as a result of the damage and chaos caused by the

conflict, as well as the lack of resources and attention given to maintaining records, many of these laws are “scattered around” or have “gone out of print.”⁴⁰ This means, literally, that some copies of various legal documents cannot be located because the remaining paper copies of the documents are lost or have been destroyed.

The second source of complication stems from the initial separation of the official colony of Sierra Leone with the rest of the country, or “the provinces.” The result of this bifurcation was that the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans were never under direct colonial rule and not subject to colonial law. This meant that customary law was, and continues to be, the most recognized system for the majority of Sierra Leoneans. Although customary law marriages were equated in law with civil and Christian marriages after 1965, there remain some essential differences among these forms, particularly in terms of inheritance rights and paternity rights.⁴¹ Further information about the major types of marriages and marriage customs can be found in chapter 6, and a more detailed description and analysis of paternity, custody, and adoption laws is provided in chapter 5.

The Conflict

Numerous authors and researchers commenting on the conflict in Sierra Leone have concluded that these eleven years were the century’s most violent and vicious.⁴² In fact, explanations of the sources of the civil war are often overshadowed by fantastical descriptions of Sierra Leone as a location of unearthly Armageddon. Sierra Leone has been depicted by authors such as Robert Kaplan as “barbaric,” exhibiting “new age primitivism,” and “pre-modern.”⁴³ Former British prime minister Tony Blair’s foreign policy adviser Robert Cooper conveyed a seemingly common image of West Africa when he declared that the region, as a “pre-modern world of failed states...of ‘barbarians, chaos and disorder,’” posing a threat to Western civilization because “it can provide a base for non-state actors who may represent a danger to the post-modern world.”⁴⁴

More cerebral accounts of Sierra Leone’s history and conflict tend to link the sources of the conflict to the legacies of colonialism, international and local exploitation of resources, systemic government corruption, extreme poverty and inequality, and the outside influence of Charles Taylor and his troops from Liberia. David Keen argued that it was the combination of the absence of employment opportunities, growing poverty in the face of corruption, and a decrepit state that inspired men and women

to join armed groups.⁴⁵ For Keen, rebel groups and the Sierra Leone Army offered protection and resources that were unavailable to civilians, making warfare attractive and lucrative for many young Sierra Leoneans. Lansana Gberie, a journalist who covered the Sierra Leone conflict, has written extensively about how rebels were enticed by the prospect of controlling the nation's diamond wealth. This hypothesis that diamonds were a central motivation behind the conflict has been supported by a number of experts, including Ibrahim Kamara, Sierra Leone's permanent representative to the UN during the conflict. Kamara has been quoted as saying that the root of his country's war "is, and remains diamonds, diamonds and diamonds."⁴⁶

Fighting Forces

The main groups of fighting forces that were involved in the Sierra Leone conflict included the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Civil Defence Forces (CDF)—or the Kamajors, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and the Sierra Leone Army (SLA). The CDF was a paramilitary group that supported the Sierra Leone Army against the RUF. The CDF fought alongside and often mixed with the Kamajors, originally a Mende male hunting group that developed into a fighting faction to defend civilians. The Kamajors were often described as a mystical battle group because some believed that magical water and rituals would make them invincible to bullets. The Kamajors' name comes from *kamajoi*, a Mende word meaning hunter; although it was originally a male-only group, there are some indications that women participated as Kamajor soldiers. By March 1994 it was estimated that more than 500 Kamajors were involved in combat activity.⁴⁷ It has been argued that abuses conducted by the Kamajors during the war were largely overlooked because of their image as defenders of civilians.⁴⁸ There were also some concerns that the Kamajors were not included in the disarmament process at the end of the conflict.

The RUF is the most notorious armed group and was the dominant rebel force for the entire eleven-year conflict. It is reported that some original RUF rebel commanders such as Foday Sankoh received military training in Libya, although this link has been contested by a number of researchers.⁴⁹ The RUF was largely a product of Charles Taylor and his desire to influence the politics and diamond industry of Sierra Leone. Original members of the RUF were unemployed or underemployed young men who were attracted by promises of diamond wealth and political power. Throughout the conflict, the

membership of the RUF expanded and diversified to include a large number of children (many abducted), women and girls, and disgruntled members of the national army. The stated objective of the RUF was to liberate civilians from a corrupt government; however, its mission became muddled and overshadowed by greed, violence, and brutal displays of power.⁵⁰ Several accounts of the RUF conclude that the group manifested disaster and horror rather than revolution.⁵¹

The Sierra Leone Army seemed to morph into a variety of forms over the years of the conflict. As already mentioned, a number of SLA members who were dissatisfied with low wages and poor conditions joined the RUF at various stages of the war. There were also members of the SLA who maintained their status as members of government forces but collaborated with RUF members and participated in rebel activity such as diamond mining, looting, and sexual violence. These “sobels”—soldiers by day and rebels by night—served to diminish the authority of the government and undermine civilian trust in government forces.

The SLA was supported by several groups throughout the civil war. The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was sent in as an intervening force during the early stages of the conflict. Led by Nigerians, ECOMOG had several successes in Sierra Leone, including ousting the AFRC—a group of rebels that ousted an elected government and briefly held control of the country—in 1998 and maintaining control over the airport during the worst periods of the civil conflict. Despite the praises offered to ECOMOG, some blamed its inefficiency for the eventual brutal invasion of Freetown in January 1999; other reporters and civilians claimed that ECOMOG committed atrocities similar to those of the RUF during the conflict.

Executive Outcomes (EO) was another militant group from South Africa that was hired in 1995 by the leader of one of Sierra Leone’s many coups, Captain Valentine Strasser of the National Provisional Ruling Council, to help control rebel activity. The EO included Angolans, Zimbabweans, and Namibians and was described by *Harper’s* as “a collection of former spies, assassins, and crack bush guerrillas.”⁵² Finally, United Nations soldiers acting as part of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) supported the Sierra Leone government and managed the disarmament process along with a cohort of British troops. About 110 International Mission and Training (IMAT) British troops continue to train SLA members today.

Conflict Time Lines

Although the manifold factions, coups, peace accords, and international interventions make it difficult to succinctly summarize the conflict, it is helpful to describe the war as occurring in several distinct periods: 1991 to 1996, 1996 to 1997, 1997 to 1998, January 1999, and February 1999 to January 2002. The first period, from 1991 to 1996, saw the beginnings of the conflict and two military coups, and ended with democratic elections. During most of this period, the deaths and destruction caused by fighting in Sierra Leone were largely ignored by the international community. The beginning of Sierra Leone's civil conflict is often cited as Charles Taylor's announcement on the BBC on November 1, 1990, threatening to attack and destroy Sierra Leone's airport. Taylor was distraught that Sierra Leone had allowed ECOMOG, whose mission was to control Taylor and his forces in Liberia, to be based in Sierra Leone.⁵³ After this announcement, the first RUF rebel forces—largely members of Taylor's own fighting factions—infiltrated Sierra Leone's eastern border areas.

Shortly after the RUF invasion, led by Corporal Foday Sankoh, the RUF launched an offensive on farmers, villagers, and miners. The objectives at this point were primarily to demonstrate the weakness of then president Joseph Momoh. Momoh struggled to recruit troops to help resist the RUF, resulting in a large number of young and untrained men joining the SLA. In April 1992 several junior officers of the SLA carried out a coup forcing Momoh to flee to Guinea. The National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) was formed as the ruling power with Captain Valentine Strasser as chairman. Although the NPRC was initially successful in pushing the RUF out of the diamond-rich areas and into Liberia, the RUF soldiers regrouped and returned with intensified attacks on civilians. The NPRC initiated another recruitment campaign that primarily attracted uneducated and untrained youths. Due to poor training and sporadic pay, this particular group of soldiers—or sobels—was frequently accused of looting, theft, and collaboration with the RUF.

From 1991 to 1996 the RUF gained power over the diamond areas in the east, terrorized and murdered countless civilians, looted and destroyed houses, schools, and hospitals, and systemically used sexual violence to terrorize populations. By 1996 more than 15,000 people had been killed, 70 percent of the country's schools had been destroyed, only eighty health centers were still functioning (mostly in Freetown), 900,000 citizens had registered for food aid, and nearly half of the population were displaced.⁵⁴ It

was reported that by March 1996, 75 percent of school-age children were out of school, and the country's economy had shrunk to an annual growth rate of negative 6.24 percent.⁵⁵ At this time, Strasser relied heavily on Nigerian troops to protect Freetown and eventually hired Executive Outcomes to support the SLA.⁵⁶

The years 1996–1997 constitute the second distinct period, beginning with a tenuous phase of stability and democratic elections. Through the help of EO and Nigerian troops, the RUF forces were contained and driven from Freetown in 1996.⁵⁷ At this time, despite RUF terror tactics, there was significant pressure from civil society groups, particularly women's groups, for elections to be held to replace the military government. Leading up to the elections the RUF used amputations to discourage citizens from voting. The mantra of the RUF at this time was “No hands to fingerprint, no fingerprints no vote.” At the end of February 1996, presidential elections were held, and after a March run-off ballot Ahmad Tejan Kabbah won the presidency. Shortly after taking office, Kabbah initiated peace talks with the RUF in the Ivory Coast; however, the hope offered by these talks and by the Kabbah presidency was short-lived. In May 1997, just fifteen months after the elections, young and dissatisfied members of the SLA formed a group called the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council and launched another coup. Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who was being held in prison awaiting trial for treason, was declared the leader of this group after troops streamed into Freetown and opened the Pademba Road prison, releasing Koroma along with more than 600 prisoners.⁵⁸ The AFRC declared that it wanted to form an alliance with RUF members and encouraged rebels to join its movement.

The next period of the conflict, from May 1997 to March 1998, was described as “bloody chaos”⁵⁹ and a “normative collapse of the long suffering Sierra Leone state.”⁶⁰ Journalists opposing the AFRC ruling regime were threatened and tortured, the disarmament process that had been initiated was rejected by the new government, and widespread violence and terror escalated. Understandably, there was a massive national rejection of the AFRC, with approximately 400,000 Sierra Leoneans deciding to flee during the first three months of the coup. Although the AFRC promised to retain power until 2001, ECOMOG troops increased their number of forces and pressured the AFRC to negotiate a peace deal. After a military embargo and growing pressure, the AFRC agreed to reinstate Kabbah by April 1998. By February 1998, ECOMOG troops had taken control of Freetown and attempted to secure the capital for Kabbah's return in March. Upon Kabbah's

return, he announced his third cabinet at the end of March while continuing to rely heavily on ECOMOG troops to maintain security.

Despite diplomatic efforts by the reinstated president, the security situation in Sierra Leone continued to deteriorate until, out of fear and desperation, international agencies and the UN began withdrawing foreign staff in December 1998. On January 6, three days after the United Nations Observation Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) mission evacuated its last members from the country, rebel groups initiated what was easily the most brutal attack of the entire conflict. On this day RUF forces descended on Freetown in what was called "Operation No Living Thing."⁶¹ The motivation for the attack was unclear but may have included the objective of releasing Foday Sankoh from Pademba Road prison. In a sick twist of fate, rebel forces raided a World Food Program warehouse outside of Freetown before the attack and found hundreds of new machetes that had been purchased for farming tools. Instead of being used for cultivation, these machetes became the primary weapons for hundreds of rebel forces, resulting in multiple amputations and slayings. During this attack on the capital, it is estimated that more than 5,000 civilians were killed, 3,000 children were reported missing, and one-third of the total population was homeless.⁶² Although the full scope of the horror of these days cannot be summarized here, Gberie's account provides an effective glimpse into the events:

Civilians were gunned down within their houses, rounded up and massacred on the streets, thrown from the upper floors of buildings, used as human shields, and burnt alive in cars and houses. They had their limbs hacked off with machetes, eyes gouged out with knives, hands smashed with hammers, and bodies burned with boiling water. Women and girls were systematically sexually abused, and children and young people abducted by the hundreds.⁶³

If anything beneficial could be seen as resulting from this campaign of terror, it was that the international community finally turned its attention to Sierra Leone. The UN approved a peacekeeping contingent of 6,000 that was authorized to use deadly force.

On July 7, 1999, the Lomé Peace Accord was signed between the Sierra Leone government and the major fighting forces. The accord had serious problems: rebel forces were pardoned for the atrocities they had committed, and, shockingly, the RUF's Foday Sankoh was appointed director of the National Resources Commission—giving him control over the country's

diamond industry.⁶⁴ The phase that followed this accord up until the end of the conflict in January 2002 was perhaps the most trying time in the history of UN peacekeeping. UNAMSIL's commitment following "Operation No Living Thing" was welcomed by the citizens of Sierra Leone, but the peacekeepers were ill matched and ill prepared for rebel activity. UNAMSIL soldiers were only lightly armed and, initially, could not use force unless under direct threat. As a result, there were several reports of civilians being killed by rebel forces while UN soldiers could merely watch. The peacekeepers failed to convince both civilians and rebels of their authority in the country. UNAMSIL was referred to as "U-nasty" and peacekeepers were called "beachkeepers" because cohorts could often be found enjoying the country's beaches.⁶⁵ The disarmament process had slowed to a near halt due to a lack of coordination by peacekeepers and bullying by RUF soldiers. UNAMSIL troops also failed to prevent the virtual failure of the Lomé Peace Accord.

The UN has been accused of rendering West Africa a "laboratory for the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping."⁶⁶ The UN mission in Sierra Leone had been watched by the international community with great interest and scrutiny not only because it was the largest UN peacekeeping mission in history—before the mission ended its troop numbers exceeded 20,000—but also because it was contrasted to concurrent missions of the United States in Somalia and the UN mission in Kosovo. There is no denying that the UN mission in Sierra Leone went through a steep learning curve during its first few years. Perhaps the greatest challenge came in 2000 when RUF soldiers kidnapped 500 UNAMSIL peacekeepers.⁶⁷ The kidnapping was a response to the refusal of the UN to accede to the RUF's demand for the return of ten fighters who had given up their weapons during the disarmament process. The kidnapping of UN troops was humiliating for the relatively new and ambitious mission in Sierra Leone. The international community began to question the role of the UN and its relevance and capabilities in conflict zones. This pressure led to a rethinking of UNAMSIL and the institution of reforms to the mission—the most significant was the mandate to kill RUF soldiers as the situation required and to accelerate the disarmament process. Despite its challenges, over time the mission has become largely viewed as a success and a model for future interventions.⁶⁸

The Official "End" of Conflict

There was no single event or peace accord that ended conflict in Sierra Leone. There are claims (particularly by British soldiers) that British troops sent in after the embarrassment of the UN kidnapping ordeal effectively

“cleaned up” UNAMSIL’s mess and restored peace. There are other claims that general war fatigue, combined with the increasing effectiveness of UNAMSIL and British soldiers, led to the surrender of RUF fighters: “The RUF probably thought that the UN peace process was more attractive than dealing with British troops and the Sierra Leone government forces.”⁶⁹ With the ending of the adult disarmament process in January 2002,⁷⁰ President Kabbah declared the war over.⁷¹ By this time 72,490 adult combatants had been disarmed and 42,000 weapons were collected.⁷² In July 1999, through the Lomé Peace Accord, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had been initiated to produce “an impartial body of historical record” of the war and to “help restore the human dignity of the victims and promote reconciliation.”⁷³ Although it was criticized for its timing, its Eurocentric focus, the lack of dissemination, and its narrowness, the 50,000-page TRC report was released in October 2004.

The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Process

The following are the most common definitions of each of the three phases of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process: first, disarmament is “the collection of small arms and light and heavy weapons within a conflict zone”; second, demobilization is the “process by which parties to a conflict begin to disband their military structures, and combatants begin the transformation into civilian life”⁷⁴; finally, reintegration is “the process which allows ex-combatants and their families to adapt economically and socially to productive civilian life.” In 1998, in the midst of continued violence and insecurity, the government of Sierra Leone announced it had designed a plan for national disarmament. The Sierra Leone government and the World Bank established the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) to solicit funding from the international donor community for the DDR, with the World Bank, UNICEF, UNAMSIL, and the Sierra Leone government providing a significant portion of the funding. The National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) was created to oversee the three-phase process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. The ultimate goal declared by the NCDDR was “to support the national strategy for peace that include[d] the consolidation of the political process and security, which form the basis for a viable post-war national recovery programme.”⁷⁵ The initial mandate was to target 45,000 soldiers from the Revolutionary United Front, the Civil Defence Forces, and the Sierra Leone Army; however, by the time the program finished its mandate in 2002, more

than 75,000 combatants were disarmed at more than sixteen demobilization centers around the country.⁷⁶

Those who went through the DDR were given vocational skills training in one of the following areas: carpentry, metalworking, auto mechanics, tailoring, fabric dyeing, soap making, hairdressing, plumbing and masonry, electrical works, computer skills, building material production, and basic construction and technology. Training in all areas typically lasted between three and nine months, depending on the trade.⁷⁷ The apprentice program offered similar trades and was designed for those with limited education. Other initiatives included special programs for child ex-combatants and disabled ex-combatants and “family stabilization measures,” including microcredit programs for the wives of ex-combatants and female ex-combatants.⁷⁸

According to NCDDR statistics, 39 percent of ex-combatants chose formal education, 23 percent chose skills training, 10 percent chose an apprenticeship, and approximately 4 percent chose public works and job placement.⁷⁹ In addition, about 2,385 ex-RUF and CDF soldiers were recruited into the Sierra Leone Army.⁸⁰ Although the NCDDR did not investigate the numbers of males and females enrolled in the assorted trades, interviews with staff and facilitators of training programs in Sierra Leone indicate that women and girls enrolled almost exclusively in either fabric dyeing, soap making, tailoring, catering, hairdressing, or weaving.⁸¹ In addition, the few programs that targeted female soldiers as beneficiaries consistently offered these select trades.⁸²

Looking Back

At the end of the DDR, the government of Sierra Leone declared that “all the armed units of both the RUF and the CDF were disarmed.”⁸³ The improvement of security in the country was deemed the greatest achievement of the disarmament process. The international community largely saw the process as a success and even recommended using the Sierra Leone DDR as a model for future post-conflict situations. Despite earning praises, each phase of the DDR had significant flaws. Funding was perhaps the most consistent obstacle to the successful implementation of the DDR. There are a variety of reasons as to why the DDR in Sierra Leone was constantly destitute, including the gross underestimation of the number of ex-combatants who would arrive for disarmament. Also, perhaps because Kosovo and East Timor were receiving more attention and more funding, only half of the needed \$50 million had been donated to the Sierra Leone DDR by the end of 1999.⁸⁴ Funding

shortfalls led to difficulties such as insufficient camp provisions at demobilization centers, delayed payments to ex-combatants, and the slow establishment of demobilization centers.

Particular concerns with the disarmament stage of the DDR included inadequate information about the armed groups in Sierra Leone and the challenge of ongoing violence and insecurity. Francis Kai-Kai, executive secretary of the NCDDR, admitted that “right from the planning phase, it was difficult to get reliable military information on troop strength, location and quantity of weapons in possession of respective fighting forces.”⁸⁵ Without this information, the NCDDR had difficulty estimating the total number of forces in particular areas, the number of children, and the number of female soldiers. This imprecision complicated the planning and implementation of the entire DDR. Security was a major concern during the disarmament period. Throughout the first phase of the DDR more than 50 percent of the country was inaccessible due to violence and the RUF control of territory.⁸⁶ During some periods, the RUF even managed to prohibit UNAMSIL from operating in eastern areas. There were also reports that Foday Sankoh and other RUF commanders were preventing their troops from participating in the disarmament.

The demobilization phase of the DDR also faced distinct obstacles. The organization of the demobilization phase led to misunderstandings and tension between combatants and facilitators. A significant number of combatants who had been disarmed never completed the demobilization process. Some combatants were intimidated by the photo identification process that was established and believed the data would be used to prosecute them later. As will be discussed further in chapter 4, women were particularly apt to leave demobilization centers due to a lack of security or stigma. Not all demobilization centers had separate areas for women and girls, and sexual violence was reported as a concern at numerous locations.

Criticisms of the reintegration phase of the DDR primarily emphasize funding shortcomings and the limitations of training programs. The goal of providing all combatants with skills to support themselves financially was obstructed by inadequate funding for programs and the extreme destruction of the national economy. Abbreviated reintegration programs graduated combatants who were not only poorly trained but also trained in skills that were often useless in their home region or community. The NCDDR admitted the need for an assessment of “the relevance of the various skills area in the context of the needs of the economy.”⁸⁷ However, a labor market analysis was never consulted during the implementation of the reintegration

programs. As discussed in chapter 4, women were greatly impacted by the limited training options offered to them. Although reports indicate that combatants were free to choose any of the trades offered, there are strong indications that women and girls were expected to choose one of the highly gendered options mentioned earlier. Sulay Sesay, one of the coordinators for the DDR, recounted that he could recall only one woman enrolled in the male-dominated trades.⁸⁸

War and Sexual Violence

Throughout the conflict, rape, sexual violence, and sexual slavery were primary tactics of warfare. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report recorded the testimonies of more than 800 women and girls who had been raped. These women and girls represent a small portion of the total estimated number of victims of sexual violence. According to Physicians for Human Rights, more than 200,000 women and girls may have been victims of rape during the conflict in Sierra Leone. When Physicians for Human Rights conducted a specific study among 991 internally displaced women and their family members, it found that 94 percent of respondents had experienced some exposure to war-related violence and 13 percent had experienced war-related sexual assault.⁸⁹ Although rape was used throughout the eleven-year conflict, a higher number of incidents were reported during the 1999 rebel incursion into Freetown. Between March 1999 and March 2000, a total of 2,350 rape survivors were registered in Freetown alone during the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Rape Victims Programme.⁹⁰ Of these survivors, 2,085 were between the ages of zero and twenty-six, and 165 were older than twenty-seven.⁹¹ It was reported that “many” other victims of sexual violence did not come forward for treatment.⁹²

Women and War

One of the downsides to the publicity surrounding sexual violence and the Sierra Leone conflict is that it helped to create a general picture of women and girls exclusively as victims of the conflict. Many accounts of the war describe women as victims of sexual violence or sex slaves, victims of the economic impacts of war, or captives of their rebel commanders. The Lomé Peace Accord mentions only female victims and does not even make reference to female soldiers. Although women and girls were certainly victimized in unimaginable ways, their experience of, and participation in, the war

was not merely as victims. Little is written about women and girls as agents within the civil conflict; however, there is evidence that women—particularly female soldiers—were empowered through their roles in the conflict.

Some of the various activities that women and girls were reported to have participated in during the war include killing, using weapons, commanding armed groups, spying, looting, raping, and burning houses.⁹³ In some cases women were reported to have dressed in rich clothing and lived for months in villages the RUF was planning to attack.⁹⁴ There are other stories of powerful female commanders such as Adama Cut-Hand, who was said to be among the most brutal RUF members. Other famous female warriors include Marie Keita and Willimina Bintu Fofana, who were said to have mystical powers against bullets.⁹⁵ Edward Anague, director of a small organization called the Community Extension Development Association (CEDA), reported that “some of the most vicious soldiers and commanders were women.”⁹⁶ Despite this evidence, there are still huge gaps in terms of what we know about female soldiers in Sierra Leone. Specifically, there are conflicting statistics on the number of female soldiers and varying reports of the roles that women played as soldiers.

It is nearly impossible to be absolutely certain of the exact number of female soldiers who participated in the Sierra Leone conflict. Most estimates are based on disarmament data, or numbers provided by NGOs or individual researchers. By comparing exit data from the disarmament program with other reports on the numbers of female soldiers during the conflict, we now know that the majority of female soldiers did not participate in the program. The numbers are further complicated by estimates of the number of women in particular armed groups such as the RUF, the Civil Defence Forces, the AFRC, child soldier ranks, and the Sierra Leone Army. Estimates of females within particular fighting factions are not always helpful because they have been confused with the total number of female soldiers.

Most of the estimates of women’s involvement in the war are derived from the number of women in the RUF. Of the total number of RUF soldiers demobilized (24,352), Conciliation Resources, an independent charity working internationally to end violence and promote peace, has estimated that the number of women soldiers may have been 10,000.⁹⁷ This same source estimates that up to 9,500 of these women may have been abducted or donated by relatives. Myriam Denov has reported that up to 30 percent of RUF child soldiers were girls.⁹⁸ As indicated in chapter 3, my own data indicate that anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of the various factions of fighting forces during the conflict in Sierra Leone were females.

Also discussed in chapter 3 is the effort made post-conflict to differentiate female soldiers from female abductees, camp followers, sex slaves, and domestic workers. It was often assumed that women and girls fell within one of the later categories and were seldom categorized solely as soldiers. Despite this, there is growing evidence that women and girls took part in all aspects of conflict—including combat. Due to the lack of information and reliable statistics about the number of female soldiers, reintegration programs—including training programs, counseling, health care, and family tracing—for these women and girls were insufficient or nonexistent. Andy Brooks argues that post-conflict reintegration programs tend to be based on the assumption that male adolescents are the primary beneficiaries.⁹⁹ The few programs directed at females after the conflict tended to target female victims, abductees, or sexual violence victims rather than female soldiers. UNICEF's Girls Left Behind program defined its beneficiaries as women and girl *abductees* who were associated with the fighting forces but did not benefit from the disarmament process. Further, in the UN report *From Peacekeeping to Peacebuilding: UN Strategy to Support National Recovery and Peacebuilding in Sierra Leone*, in a section on child protection issues, it is recommended that the UN “assist and support girls/young women who were *forcibly abducted* and are being prevented from returning home.”¹⁰⁰

The impact of major programs such as this was that only women and girls who fit the list of “acceptable” roles during the conflict were eligible for benefits post-conflict. There were no specific programs for violent women or women leaders, for example. The lack of programs targeting women and girls soldiers who voluntarily joined served to define “female soldier” as someone who was a victim, captured by men, and forced to serve with an armed group. A further impact is that statistics gathered from such programs may be skewed as a result of women and girls adjusting their wartime stories and experiences in order to qualify for the desperately needed benefits of reintegration programs.

Moving Forward

One of the objectives of this chapter was to provide an overview of colonial and postcolonial sexual regulation and its legacies. An understanding of the way in which sex, marriage, and childbirth have been regulated throughout Sierra Leone's colonial and postcolonial period helps contextualize current conjugal order, social relations, stereotypes, and hierarchies. The following chapters will move from this general introduction to Sierra Leone to a more

specific analysis of particular issues related to “post-conflict” development. A second objective of the chapter was to signal the magnitude and complexity of the civil conflict in Sierra Leone. Appreciating the various phases, actors, tactics, motivations, and strategies of the conflict disrupts portrayals of the conflict as merely irrational unabated chaos. Likewise, details of the conflict support the claim that one-size-fits-all post-conflict policies, such as the DDR model, are blunt instruments that do not necessarily address the specific causes, events, or impacts of particular conflicts.

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