Sierra Leone:
Women, Civil Society and the Rebuilding of Peace

In March 2005 I spent a week in Sierra Leone. My main purpose in going there was to meet a remarkable organization called the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET). I had met one of its members, Rosaline M'Carthy, at a conference in Bogota, Colombia, some months earlier. But if I was to understand the significance of their activism, I had a good deal of reading to do before I arrived in Freetown – about the history of Sierra Leone, the reasons for the terrible war its people experienced between 1991 to 2002, and the extent of the post-war task of social reconstruction.

In this profile I start with a time-line of events. Then I describe the war and what some writers see as its causes and effects. I go on to discuss the importance of civil society in counteracting the violence and demanding the reinstatement of electoral democracy, and again, the importance of women's organizations within the civil society movement. Finally I describe different kinds of intervention women are making in the recovery from war, and in particular the work of MARWOPNET.

POLITICAL EVENTS: A TIME-LINE

Colonial past

Contemporary wars in Africa can only be understood in the light of the continent's subjection to colonization. Colonial penetration from Europe began in the 15th century. The seizure and enslavement of African men, women and children, first by Arab and Moorish traders, then by Europeans who transported an estimated 12 million in the transatlantic trade between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, destroyed and corrupted African communities. At the Berlin West Africa conference of 1884 and 1885, European states divided control of the continent among them and thereafter exploited their respective colonies, extracting raw materials for small, nil or negative returns.

Many of the effects of colonialism can still be seen in West Africa today. Coastal cities were developed for the limited purpose of sustaining European operations, while the interior was ravaged or neglected. Inequalities and enmities were created between and among local populations. Local cultures were diminished and damaged. Education and health provision under the colonial regimes, such as it was, was mainly by effected by missionaries and was conditional on conversion to Christianity (Reader 1998)

Liberia and Sierra Leone, adjacent countries on the West African coast, were both founded on European initiative as homelands for returned slaves. Slaves from the USA were mainly relocated in Monrovia, Liberia; the British returned freed slaves to Freetown, which would become the capital of Sierra Leone. The forebears of the returning slaves had not necessarily originated in this region. The returners were unprepared for conditions in Africa. Many died. Relations between the surviving immigrant population (they were called Krio, or Creoles) and the tribal societies of the hinterland (mainly Temne and Mende) were often difficult and sometimes exploitative.

In the second half of the 20th century, in response to demands of African people, world opinion as expressed in the United Nations, and changing perceptions of self-interest among the imperial powers, many African colonies were given their 'freedom'. Sierra Leone achieved independence from Britain in 1961. The country today has a population of 6 million. Its land area is 72 thousand square kiLométres, approximately that of the island of Ireland. Life expectancy is 42 years. There is a very high prevalence of death or debility from infectious diseases. More than two thirds of adults are illiterate. The country is extremely poor. In 2002 on the UNDP Human Development Index rating (UNDP 2005) Sierra Leone scored lowest of all countries of the world.

1968-92

A formative factor in Sierra Leone's post-colonial history was the long rule of the labour-based All People's Congress party (APC), first under the presidency of Siaka Stevens (1968-85), subsequently under Joseph Momoh (1985-92). The APC regime became increasingly centralized, corrupt, brutal and authoritarian. The rural areas were neglected, and civil society stifled (Bangura 2004). In 1978 Stevens, after a fraudulent referendum, introduced a one-party constitution. The main opposition party, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), supported by the upper and middle class, professionals and the paramount chiefs was disabled. All opposition was banned, including trade unionism and the student movement. One effect of this repression, ironically, was to prompt more critical consciousness among students and urban youth, who had not till then shown much radicalism (Rashid 2004).

1991–96

In 1991 Momoh, under pressure, restored multiparty politics – but many doubted the promised elections would be free and fair. In March, an armed force calling itself the Revolutionary United Front entered Sierra Leone from neighbouring Liberia, crossing the border in Kailahun district. It was a mixed force of Liberian and Sierra Leonean combatants led by Foday Sankoh. Sankoh had struck a deal with Liberian rebel Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia whereby the NPFL would provide base facilities and training for Sankoh's subversive project in Sierra Leone in exchange for support for their own bid for power in Liberia.

The RUF's initial targets in Kailahun were the traditional chiefs and office holders, local traders, the more prosperous farmers and religious leaders,

who were subjected to forced labour, various forms of humiliation and public beheadings (Abraham 2004b). Momoh sent the state army to counter-attack in Kailahun. But one year later, in April 1992, a group of these disgruntled young soldiers would return from the front and storm into the city. Initially protesting about poor pay and conditions, they eventually threw out the corrupt politicians of the APC – to the initial delight of many Freetown inhabitants. Mainly in their twenties when they took power as the National Provisional Ruling Counci (NPRC), they went on to control the country for four years.

A major resource in the war, and some would say its principal purpose, was control of diamond extraction. The RUF exported huge quantities of diamonds illegally to Western diamond merchants with the assistance of unscrupulous international middlemen. Sankoh paid Taylor with diamonds for his sponsorship of the RUF. Now the army too wanted a share of diamond wealth. Individual solders in large numbers turned rebel and adopted RUF tactics, looting and committing similar atrocities. They were termed 'sobels' – soldiers by day, rebels by night. The NPRC command, the provisional government of Sierra Leone, also became involved in large scale illicit mining in the diamond areas. By 1993 the aim was no longer to end the war but to prolong it to the benefit of both sides. Ibrahim Abdullah writes '…the NPRC…mercilessly plundered what was left of the country and, through collaboration with the RUF, destroyed all central and local institutions' (Abraham 2004a:107).

On March 29, 1996, pressured by by Western donors and an acutely disillusioned civil society (of which more below), the NPRC reluctantly ceded power to a democratically elected government led by President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah (Kandeh 2004b). Kabbah remains President of Sierra Leone today, but his government has been overthrown and reinstated twice in the turbulent times since 1996. First, however, on November 13, 1996, a peace agreement was signed between Kabbah and Sankoh at Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast. It involved major concessions to Sankoh and the RUF in exchange for an end to the violence (Abraham 2004b). The RUF was to become a legitimate political party, the combatants reintegrated into society (Koroma 2004). But the peace was shortlived.

1997-98

Apart from a small peacekeeping army (ECOMOG) supplied by the Economic Organization of West African States (ECOWAS), the only effective military force under President Kabbah's command at this time was Executive Outcomes, a S.African mercenary company. Now the International Monetary Fund, as a condition of assistance, required him to terminate EO's contract, leaving the government defenceless. Four months later, on what became known as 'Bloody Sunday' May 25, 1997, Kabbah's civilian government was overthrown by a force of subaltern soldiers and RUF rebels calling themselves the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) (Abraham 2004a).

The rank and file of the army had resented the return to civilian rule following the Abidjan agreement. They were 98.1% males, very young, with a high percentage of illiterate school drop-outs. They knew demobilization would mean the end of the pay and free facilities they had received while in the army. The *coup* was led by Johnny Paul Koroma, a former sobel, freed in a prison break that also liberated many common criminals to join the mixed ranks of soldiers, sobels and RUF rebels attacking the elected government (Gberie 2004).

The city was wrecked. Kabbah, along with an estimated 400,000 of his compatriots, fled the country. Foreigners were evacuated. The AFRC junta was condemned by the United Nations and many foreign governments. The Organization of African Unity reinforced ECOMOG with 10,000 Nigerian soldiers. A mass Movement for the Restoration of Democracy now emerged in Freetown, involving a wide array of pressure groups and civil society organizations. It was supported by an armed force known as the Kamajoisia. The Kamajors (eventually 37,000-strong) were armed men of the 'hunting societies' of the traditional Mende rulers of the south and east of Sierra Leone. They had formed themselves, for the most part without pay, into a Civil Defence Force for the return of democracy and civilian rule. By mid-February 1998 the Nigerian soldiers of ECOMOG with the Kamajors' help had freed the capital from a nine months reign of 'subaltern terror'. The president returned and established a government comprising mainly members of the SLPP. Foday Sankoh was arrested (in Nigeria) and in October that year was brought to trial, sentenced to death by hanging - and returned to jail pending appeal (Gberie 2004).

1999-2000

But the forces of the AFRC and RUF (now led by Sankoh's second-in-command, Sam Bockarie) had not been disarmed. They had withdrawn 'to remote areas of the country where they would soon launch an operation 'No Living Thing' – a calculated campaign of genocide[1] designed to alienate rural people from the government and cripple the infrastructure of the country.' (Gordon 2004:193). Sankoh was still on death row when, on January 6 1999, they regrouped and marched on Freetown, storming and sacking the city. It was, writes Arthur Abraham 'the most brutal offensive in the then eight-year war' (Abraham 2004b:211). Again the prisons were emptied of criminals. The invaders seized thousands of women and children and used them as human shields to deter counter-attack by ECOMOG troops. By the time the Nigerian peacekeepers had regained control, around 5000 people had been killed in the city and 3000 children were missing. Thousands of homes had been torched and one third of the population were homeless (Abraham 2004b).

The USA sent the Rev. Jesse Jackson to mediate between Kabbah and Sankoh. He urged Kabbah to compromise, and in July 1999 brought the two men to the peace table, this time at Lomé, capital of Togo. Again a peace

[1] It is one of the features of the Sierra Leone conflict most difficult to comprehend or explain that the RUF used genocidal methods not on a supposed 'other', as in Rwanda or Bosnia, but against its *own* society.

agreement was signed that conceded many of the RUF's demands. It established a government of 'national unity', awarding a full pardon to Sankoh and amnesty to rebel combatants. Indeed, the RUF was offered four cabinet posts and Sankoh himself became vice-president and (unbelievably) chair of the new Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development, thus acquiring official responsibility for the diamond fields he had been systematically robbing (Abraham 2004b). Kabbah's capitulation was deeply unpopular in Sierra Leone civil society and shocked many international human rights observers (Gordon 2004).

In any case Sankoh and the RUF did not observe the terms of the agreement. In October 1999 the United Nations approved a peacekeeping mission (UNAMSIL) in support of the West African peacekeepers. It would eventually expand from 6000 to 17,000 troops, becoming the largest UN mission to date. The RUF continually obstructed UN operations in the countryside. On May 5, 2000 they took hostage 500 Zambian peacekeepers. In Freetown, some days later, the civil society movement organized a massive demonstration for their release. Supported by Kamajor troops they headed for Foday Sankoh's residence. He fled the house, but twenty-two civilian demonstrators were killed by his bodyguard. There were rumours of an imminent RUF attack on Freetown (Koroma 2005).

The United Kingdom government then acted unilaterally, sending 2550 marines and seventeen ships to Sierra Leone. They secured the airport and capital city and freed the UN hostages. This intervention effectively ended the war.[2] Ironically, the safest policy with regard to the now demoralized, unemployed and angry former junta soldiers, sobels and rebels was deemed to re-employ them as the new national army. The British remained to undertake their re-training and re-equipment (with arms imported from the UK) (Koroma 2005). Sankoh, recaptured, would shortly afterwards die in prison.

In January 2002 Tejan Kabbah made a declaration that the conflict was at an end. National elections held in May 2002 gave his Sierra Leone People's Party a clear majority, while the RUF failed to win a parliamentary seat (Abdullah 2004a). At the time of my visit, in March 2005, the country was stable and the atmosphere, despite continuing extreme poverty, one of cautious optimism.

AN EPIDEMIC OF EXTREME VIOLENCE

The 11-year war in Sierra Leone killed between 50 and 70,000 people and caused between one-third and two-thirds of the population to flee their homes. The large gap between these lower and upper estimates can be taken as an indicator of the chaos of these years.The state barely existed. It was, in the

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[2] For peace activists in the United Kingdom this was a divisive moment. Some saw the British response as a characteristic militarist reflex, attempting to put right by force what more intelligent policy could have prevented going wrong. Others were alert to what many Sierra Leoneans were saying: that nothing less could have saved them from what seemed like a bottomless downward spiral of killing.

words of a Human Rights Watch observer, 'the carcass of a state' (Bergner 2005:149). Public administration had almost collapsed. For example, by March 1996 an estimated 75% of school-aged children were out of school and 70% of the country's educational facilities, inadequate before the war began, had been destroyed. Only 16% of Sierra Leone's 500 health centres were functioning by that date, and almost none of them were in the rural areas (Gberie 2004).

Sierra Leone and its war are not unique. The African continent has 10% of the world's population but currently 60% of its civil war deaths (Bergner 2005). Arthur Abraham writes 'Contemporary Africa is at the crossroads, with nearly one-third of the continent convulsed in intra-state wars that are characterised by a kind of violence against civilians unprecedented in the history of conflicts on the continent' (Abraham 2004:199). In terms of its atrocious sadism, however, this war may have been in a class of its own. The practices of the Revolutionary United Front have been compared to those of RENAMO in Mozambique and the NPLF in Liberia, but the terror in these latter countries was, in the view of local writers Abdullah and Rashid (2004:252) 'reproduced tenfold in Sierra Leone'.

The killing was random and wanton. A particular feature of the violence was the hacking off of hands and feet by machete, leaving victims alive but maimed and helpless. The 'cutting' campaign intensified during the run-up to the election of 1996, boycotted by the RUF. With black humour the rebels asserted: no hands, no fingerprints; no fingerprints, no vote. It is estimated that there were 10,000 living amputees by the end of war (Abraham 2004b, Abdullah 2004b).

A particular feature of the war was the deployment by the several forces of an estimated 4,500 children. As the RUF began to feel a lack of manpower they abducted under-age boys, many as young as nine or ten, mainly from the rural areas. They plied them with mind-bending drugs and often forced the child first to commit a crime against his own family, leaving him no option but to run away with the rebels. They were quickly made to witness and participate in every kind of atrocity, including eating body parts of victims.

It was not only the RUF that committed such atrocities. Many destitute children enrolled themselves voluntarily into the army and the CDF, but once enlisted were used in similar ways, terrorized into inflicting terror. One 12-year old forcibly recruited into the Army, when interviewed by Sierra Leonean authors, for example, recounted how he was required to make RUF captives dig their own graves and 'depending on orders given we will plug eyes, cut off the nose, ears, fingers and then bury them half dead' (Abdullah and Rashid 2004:248).

The war was of course profoundly gendered. An unknown and inestimable, but certainly large proportion of women and girls were repeatedly, brutally, raped in these years, by individual men and by gangs. Their genitalia were injured with sticks, bottles and weapons, so that many died of their wounds.

Many pregnant women were cut open and their foetus removed. Sometimes their killers gambled on the sex of the unborn child. Thousands of girl children were captured by the rebels and pressed into service as cooks and carriers, forced into sexual servitude as 'wives' of rebel males. Many became pregnant and bore unwanted children while still no more than children themselves.

Possible causes of the eleven-year war

The causes of the war of 1991-2002 in Sierra Leone are widely disputed. One author has suggested that Sierra Leone is a typical instance of the widespread surge of anarchy of the post-Cold War order – witness to a new barbarism (Kaplan 1992). Foday Sankoh is certainly often termed a 'psychopath'. Another author, to the contrary, sees the war as a rational response to a crisis in traditional patrimonial relations, brought about by popular disillusion with the 24 years of APC rule.[3] He sees the RUF as a rational organization fighting for a revolutionary egalitarian society (Richards 1996).

In support of this argument, it is often pointed out that Sankoh had spent time in Libya and appears to have been influenced by President Gaddafi's Green Book, sometimes drawing on its populist vision in describing his own purposes. However Sankoh had no coherent programme of societal transformation, and the RUF were never at pains to win the people to any revolutionary ideology – their brutality seemed designed to alienate ordinary Sierra Leoneans and reduce the country to dereliction (Abraham 2004b, Bangura 2004). This chimes with the argument that such wars are the effect of leaders shrewdly profiting from chaos itself – an 'instrumentalization of disorder'. In their analysis of contemporary Africa, Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Deloz write 'What we mean here is that the notion of disorder should not be construed, as it normally is in classical political analysis, merely as a state of dereliction. It should also be seen as a condition which offers opportunities for those who know how to play that system' (Chabal and Deloz 1999:xix).

Some see the war as more about greed than grievance (cf. Berdal and Malone 2000). In Sierra Leone, they say, the conflict was essentially about resources. At the top of the scale, the RUF was enabled to make possibly $125 million a year from the sale of illicitly mined diamonds. At the bottom, it may have been a simpler calculation: in a hungry country 'whoever has weapons eats first' (Kapuscinski 2002:255).

It seems impossible to point to a singular cause of this terrible war. One Sierra Leonean author in fact proposes that 'the combatants themselves are pulled by a complex of contradictory forces…In other words, RUF violence does not have only one logic but several.' They include the logic of political violence, but also logics of banditry, hedonism and sheer brutality (Bangura 2004:24).

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[3] Patrimonialism has been defined as a 'system of resource distribution that ties recipients or clients to the strategic goals of benefactors or patrons' (Bangura 2004:25).

Youth culture and violence

This last observation raises an important question about youth culture in Sierra Leone – another deeply gendered phenomenon. Several SL analysts point out that the RUF incursion of 1991 and the seizure of power by the young soldiers of the NPRC a year later were both manifestations of a rebellious youth culture in search of a radical alternative to the bankrupt APC regime (Abdullah 2004b). On the other hand these youths had little in the way of an emancipatory ideology or programme. Radical leftwing politics had not been a major characteristic of the students and middleclass youth of Freetown in the years before and after independence (Rashid 2004).

In the 1980s however there was a rise in unemployment and a convergence of student culture with that of uneducated urban youth. There are pejorative names for such 'lads' in many African countries. Often they are known as 'rarray boys' or 'bayaye'. Academically they have been termed 'lumpens', with the meaning:

> the largely unemployed and unemployable youths, mostly male, who live by their wits or who have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy…prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs, drunkenness and gross indiscipline (Abdullah 2004b:45). [4]

Referring specifically to Sierra Leone, Ibrahim Abdullah goes on to describe these young men as

> predominantly second-generation residents in the city, whose abode, the *pote* (historically a popular peri-urban *rendez-vous* for unemployed youths) was also a cultural/leisure space constructed around the *odelay* (masquerade). They were known for their antisocial culture: gambling, drugs – initially marijuana, now crack cocaine, petty theft and violence (Abdullah 2004b:45).

The jail breaks of 1997 and 1999 boosted the criminal element in this social milieu (Gberie 2004:149). It was young men from this environment that both the army and the RUF recruited and armed. The drug culture was central to the social practices of both forces. However these young men were not only actors in the violence. They were simultaneously its victims. Brutalization and trauma go hand in hand. This is what makes demobilization of combatants and their reintegration into society the most serious challenge faced by Sierra Leone today.

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[4] Rashid uses the Marxian term 'lumpenproletariat' in this connection to describe 'a conglomerate with diverse social and ethnic origins… those strata of society that cannot fully employ or sell its labour power..' (Rashid 71)

Fortunately, these disaffected and volatile young men, although numerous in the city and towns, and very influential, are not representative of *all* Sierra Leonean youth. They were and remain a *sub*-culture. It is a source of hope to remember that, as Yusuf Bangura writes, 'Most young people are linked to wider social structures that bind them to broadly shared community values and family-based systems of accountability'. The majority of young people, earning a living on the land and as labourers and traders, did remain opposed to the RUF, and today want peace, not a return to war (Bangura 2004).

These descriptions of the particular culture shaping the individuals who would become the raw material of warfare are interesting to a feminist eye, in that they disclose a profound masculinism. This delinquent masculinity, of a particular quality and at a particular moment, spans both 'civil' and 'militarized' youth. So the gender culture of cities and small towns in the eighties helped to make plausible and possible the gendered practices of the rebel forces and the army in the nineties. Yet the lack of an explicit gender dimension in analyses of the Sierra Leone war is striking. In the only reference I have found to gender in the texts I have reviewed, Ibrahim Abdullah described the 'lumpen' culture as 'a male-specific oppositional culture that easily lends itself to violence' (Abdullah 2004b:45).

I want to suggest though that, even if academics are blind to it, the masculinity of the youth culture that fed the violence is well understood in a more popular sense – and that it is a significant factor in the present day activism of women against war in Sierra Leone.

WOMEN, CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY

In this decade of mayhem, when so many of the 'collective social actors' in Sierra Leone were drawn into violence, there was one positive phenomenon: repeated interventions by elements within Sierra Leonean civil society for electoral democracy and peace. Jimmy D.Kandeh writes,

> The only redeeming aspect of Sierra Leone's turbulent Second Republic has been the unflinching support by popular sectors for democratic rule. The role of civil society in ending the NPRC dictatorship and resisting this AFRC sequel is unprecedented in the annals of military rule in independent Africa (Kandeh 2004b:179).

When the NPRC took power in 1992 it was as a 'provisional' government. They promised multiparty elections, *after* they had dealt with the RUF threat. As it became clearer that the NPRC lacked the capability to defeat the rebels, and indeed had lost any motivation to do so, an articulate, organized and mainly urban element of civil society began to call for 'elections now'. Under pressure, the NPRC set up an Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) to prepare the ground for possible elections and pilot a transition to democracy. Sankoh refused to register the RUF as a political party and threatened to disrupt the elections. But INEC fostered the involvement of civil

society. It called two National Consultative Conferences. The first was held in August 1995 and the second in February 1996. In retrospect these conferences are called 'Bintomani 1 and 2', after the name of the hotel in which they were held. The key matter on the agenda was elections. The military regime and the RUF

> began to argue for 'Peace Before Polls', a nice slogan that essentially meant the continuation of military rule. But vocal and widespread public support soon developed for a contrary idea: 'Polls Before Peace'. Sierra Leonean civil society played an extremely important part in this, particularly a coalition of women's organisations known as the Women's Forum (Smillie et al, cited in Barry 2000:35).

In 1994, prompted by the preparations for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995, more than forty women's organizations had come together to create the Women's Forum – mentioned in the quotation above. Among the founding affiliates were the National Organization of Women (NOW), the Network of Women Members of Parliament (NEWMOP), the Women's Association for National Development, the SL branch of WILPF, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and trade union women of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) played a major role, providing office support and taking the first turn at the rotating 'chair'. They drew up a constitution and held monthly meetings of delegates from member organizations.

Now, two years later, these activist women were taking a keen interest in the forthcoming National Consultative Conference. Around this time, Zainab Bangura had been instrumental in setting up the Women's Organization for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN). The idea, she explained when I interviewed her, was 'We'd train women through the strong network of mosques and churches, most of which have powerful women's organizations. They are very organized in Sierra Leone, the women in those contexts. It's the women that hold the mosques and the churches together here.'[5]

Zainab and other women noticed that the invitation list to Bintomani 1 included scarcely any women. With the support of the US Embassy they obtained agreement from the INEC to better representation – at least one extra seat for a woman from each of the 13 districts. They didn't leave things there. Zainab explained, 'We met in advance, we organized an agreed position. We printed copies of our nine main points and distributed them to all the participants at the conference.' Because nobody had time to read the long official document a lot of the participants voted for the women's well thought-out and simple

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[5] Although the majority of the population, especially outside Freetown, are Muslim, the various denominations of Christianity have many adherents in Sierra Leone and are overwhelmingly active in civil society. It is quite usual for political and activist meetings to begin and end with a prayer. I was told that there is little tension between Christians and Muslims in such groups and activities, and they will comfortably join each other in prayer.

manifesto. 'Yes,' Nana Pratt told me, 'It was the women who saved the day. Because we strategized. We were a united voice for 'elections now'.'

The outcome of the National Consultative Conferences was an overwhelming vote (three to one) for the democratic process as a necessary step to ending war, not (as the NPRC and the rebels were stating) something that must wait for a ceasefire. Mass demonstrations backed up this demand. Eventually held in March 1996, the elections resulted in a narrow majority for the Sierra Leone People's Party (the main opposition to the APC prior to the one-party dictatorship of 1978) and brought Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to the presidency. Soon after came peace negotiations and the Lomé peace agreement (where the Women's Forum had an observer seat).

Many civil society groups had feared the worst from the massive concessions the Lomé Peace Agreement made to the rebels. Zainab Bangura with some male colleagues had founded an autonomous NGO to monitor government activities and enhance government capacities. This Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), as the organization came to be known, attracted generous support from various international funders (Kandeh 2004b:178). It grew to be a sizeable human rights organization with six staff and monitors around the country. Its three principles, Zainab told me were from the start: democracy, human rights and gender. She said, 'We hadn't known democracy in all my lifetime. We didn't know what voting was.' Neither, living in the city as a young adult, had she been aware of rural poverty, especially 'the feminization of poverty'. Then, studying political science, travelling to the USA, meeting feminists, she began to make the conceptual connection between democracy and the disadvantage of women.

But the watchfulness of civil society was not enough to avert another collapse into military misrule. The restoration of electoral rule was cut short, as we saw above, by the AFRC coup of May 25, 1997. This time however the varied groups of civil society were better prepared. They quickly responded to the coup with a broad-based Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) incorporating many (now redundant) members of Parliament, and all the main pressure groups and civil organizations, including the Women's Forum and its many affiliates, the National Union of Sierra Leone Students (NUSS) and the Labour Congress. The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) were a significant element of the alliance, because journalists who opposed the coup were frequently beaten up, detained and tortured. The local militias, the Kamajors, constituted the MRD's 'armed wing', and were known as the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) (Gberie 2004).

The civil society movement, and the women's movement within it, often had occasion to be on the streets in the turbulent years between 1996 and 2002. 'Yes, we marched!', Agnes Taylor-Lewis told me, 'In the Women's Forum we marched. In Sierra Leone, women have always been marching – and praying!' The march that is most burned on their memory is that of May 6, 2000, when women went *en masse* to Foday Sankoh's house to demand the release by

the RUF of their UN hostages. The even bigger mixed march two days later (May 8) would result in 22 dead, among them one woman participant.

Picking up the pieces after war

Although the women I met, three years after the end of the fighting, did not talk much about men and boys, masculinity and male violence, they seemed to me to have a gendered perception of what had happened in Sierra Leone during the terrible '90s. They also had a clear sense that women, as a sex, had the potential to intervene non-violently for peace, and particular reasons for doing so. In fact some felt that women and girls were the best hope for peace.

Several also expressed to me the thought that peace could best be sustained through work on two fronts: *education* and *democracy*. This was clearly illustrated in the various contemporary women's initiatives I visited or heard about while in Freetown.

1. Working with commercial sex workers to address HIV/AIDS

Among many others I spoke to, Mabell Cox recalled the dreadful moment when the war entered Freetown. She woke up to hear people shouting 'they're burning the houses!'. She leapt from her bed as the armed men approached her house. '*But God stopped them*!' she said. Faith is central to Mabell's life. She is a Christian Scientist, and everything she does for women and peace is done through her religious 'calling'. Her operational base is the Christian Science Reading Room (CSRR) in Freetown, where she is the librarian.

Mabell's main activism is on the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Official statistics for Sierra Leone are believed to grossly underestimate the prevalence of infection. The extraordinary extent of rape during the hostilities is thought to have spread the virus very fast.

CSSR, a faith-based organization, linked up with Sisters Unite, a secular organization sponsored by Mrs Kabbah, the Muslim President's Christian wife, to create a project that would address the problem of HIV/AIDS through awareness training for commercial sex workers, followed by practical training to make available an alternative means of livelihood. In 2003, the project, CSW, received funding from the World Bank and from the Sierra Leone Government under the SHARP programme (Sierra Leone HIV/AIDS Response Program).

They began with 'peer education' of 50 commercial sex workers from Lumley and Aberdeen, two districts of Freetown. Community social workers helped recruit participants and also served as teachers. Mabell showed me videos of the groups of young women undergoing training. I saw how the women, in their teens and twenties, learned the principles of reproductive health, the basic facts about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, their diagnosis and prevention. They learned how to care for those living with HIV/AIDS.

The program distributed brochures, posters and T-shirts - and thousands of condoms, of both 'male' and 'female' design. Mabell explained that while she herself, in the light of her religious beliefs, favours abstinence rather than contraception

> the female condom does give women control. It enables them to act without their husband's knowledge. There are cultural difficulties for women in this country -- women have problems communicating with their husbands and controlling them.

The project has gone on to train counsellors and has given some commercial sex workers a monthly allowance to enable them to obtain hairdressing, tailoring and small-business skills. They have also trained community elders to help 'reinsert' the participants into the community after their experience on the program.

2. Working through education with young women war survivors

Christiana Thorpe was the inspiration behind what has now become an international organization with branches in 33 countries - the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). It was founded in 1995 in Sierra Leone when Christiana was Minister of Education in the NPRC government. I was particularly interested in their work with girl children abused during the war. As described above, during the war sexual abuse was integral to the violence and it continued on epidemic scale in camps for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). FAWE alone have had dealings with 10,000 girls suffering the emotional and mental effects of sexual abuse; of these 3000 were pregnant; in Freetown alone 3500 rape cases have come to FAWE's attention. And this is the tip of the iceberg.

In Sierra Leone in the late '90s there were an estimated 10,000 children living on the street. At the same time the education system was in a state of general collapse and 80% of females were illiterate. Christiana told me, 'First we appealed to the headteachers of local schools to make the effort to take them into their classes. That way about half of them were absorbed. But what to do about the other half?' They responded with an emergency school program for 4000 boys and girls in an IDP camp at Wellington, near Freetown. They taught maths and language, but more importantly counteracted trauma through the provision of food and play.

The emergency school program was for both boys and girls. Now they wanted to do something in particular for the latter. FAWE were coming across girls of 11 or 12 years old who were pregnant. Official policy banned them from school. Florie Davies, the Education Manager of FAWE's Sierra Leone chapter, said, 'Women and girls are the most deprived and always have been the most deprived in Sierra Leone, not only educationally but in a lot of other ways. And they are the ones who have been worst affected by the war. Yes, the boys were drugged and brutalized. But girls were too - and they were additionally raped and made pregnant with unwanted children.'

So FAWE set up a centre at Grafton, near a large displaced persons' camp outside Freetown. Florie took me to see it. I met some of their very committed women staff and some of the young women who had come to the centre, when pregnant or as young mothers, for medical care, basic numeracy and literacy education, and skills training. Of course, there were babies, so it was necessary to provide a day nursery, and soon a kindergarten for the toddlers. This in time led on to a primary intake. And I saw the shell of the simple building now under construction to permit of a junior secondary intake. 'We hope to make it a centre of excellence' Christiana said, 'quality education for girls from very deprived situations. And our longer term aim is to start four similar centres in different regions of the country.'

3. Networking for small arms control

Women are also active in the Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms (SLANSA). This too is a partnership of faith-based and secular organizations. The World Council of Churches has an Ecumenical Network on Small Arms (ENSA). It works in partnership with IANSA – the International Action Network on Small Arms. The latter worldwide body is organized on a regional and country basis, and among its affiliates is a West Africa Network on Small Arms (WANSA).

A key person on the small arms issue in Sierra Leone is Florella Hazeley. Her formal position is Advocacy Officer of the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone (CCSL). I met her in her office in Freetown. The CCSL is an umbrella body of the 19 denominations of the Protestant churches in the country, including some of the Evangelical churches. (It does not include the Catholics or the Pentecostals.) In what Florella describes as a 'quite exciting and new' development in the middle '90s the CCSL introduced *democracy* and *advocacy* into church work. For example they monitored the elections in 1996. Florella sees this as putting into practice the term 'faith without action is dead'. 'But we had to persuade them! They had to understand that addressing current issues didn't mean you were being partisan.'

In 1998 ECOWAS agreed a moratorium on small arms imports and exports by West African countries. All the governments of the region, including that of Sierra Leone, signed up to it. 'But then they went back home and kept quiet about it,' Florella says. Civil society organizations were alert, though, and picked up the issue and kept people informed. Yet it remained a sensitive issue.

In 2001 the World Council of Churches launched a 'decade to overcome violence'. One aspect of the campaign was a 'micro-disarmament' programme, focused on cities. Freetown joined Durban, Río de Janeiro, Boston and other cities in a network called 'Peace to the City'. But Sierra Leone was ahead of the game. Already in 1999 after the signing of the Lomé peace agreement the CCSL had launched a campaign against small arms. They have been campaigning for the West African governments to turn the moratorium into a binding convention.

The government of Sierra Leone use a language of 'licit and illicit' arms. Thus 'licit' arms were being imported by the government, who for instance had a contract with Sandline, a British arms exporter. 'Illicit' arms were being infiltrated into the country by the rebels - the characteristic arms route was from Libya via Burkina Fasso, Ivory Coast and Liberia. But SLANSA reject this terminology of licit and illicit weapons. A feature of the war in Sierra Leone has been the defection of individual combatants from one force or faction to another and back again, carrying their arms with them. Much of the supposedly 'licit' small arms and light weapons of the state army's arsenal eventually passed into the hands of the rebels and the Civil Defence Force. United Nations weapons (which, cynics pointed out, they were in any case not permitted to use) were also commandeered and put to illicit use with a vengeance. [6]

SLANSA was intent on closing down this cycle. They urged ECOMOG to destroy the arms they collected from the rebels, rather than to give these 'blood weapons' to the army. The Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme was only for combatants. But civilians also had to be given their chance to hand in weapons. This was achieved through the Sierra Leone Police's Community Arms Collection and Destruction Programme (CACDP). The process of arms gathering worked district by district, chiefdom by chiefdom, and ward by ward. SLANSA have a mobile unit, with a video projector, for work in the countryside. Their role was 'sensitisation' or 'public relations', preparing the ground, distributing leaflets and posters to persuade people to hand in their weapons. Some people, afraid to speak directly to the police for fear the latter would expose them to their communities as informers, were prepared to trust the Council of Churches with information.

Because civilians, unlike combatants, could not properly be 'rewarded' with cash payments for handing in weapons, an Arms for Development programme was prepared by the Police, and funded by UNDP.[7] A voluntary hand-over of weapons would be conducted, followed by a police cordon-and-search operation. If the area was found to be arms-free, the local authority would receive a certificate and be entitled to $20,000 for community development. At the policy level SLANSA are now looking for a legal framework to control guns, ammunition and explosives. They want a new act of Parliament that would make it necessary for every weapon to be numbered, licensed, and re-licensed annually.

Florella was taking a gendered approach to the question of arms -- in fact she was in the process of writing a thesis for a masters degree in gender studies

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[6] UNAMSIL stands for United Nations Armed Mission in Sierra Leone. It succeeded the unarmed UNOMSIL (UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone) in 1999. UNOMSIL came to support the (armed) ECOMOG. The latter was eventually taken over by UNAMSIL. Note of clarification supplied by Maureen Poole,see section 4 below.

[7] Information supplied by Maureen Poole.

at the University, on the theme of women, men and small arms proliferation. She said

> It's about the human face of small arms. When you say small arms, it's a man's face that comes to mind. Women are seen as the victims. You don't think of women holding, trading and smuggling small arms. But they do. They are active in this at all levels.

The perennial violence against women in the community is, true enough, she says, often exacerbated when men bring arms into the home. And women have till now been absent when it comes to policy-making on this issue. She has no doubt that Sierra Leone is a patriarchal society. But she sees women too often buying into this system, not resisting it. She says 'I see a lot of problem with women, a lot of work that has to be done with women. They accept the situation they are in. They have internalised the stereotypes. And a lot of them won't come on board the small arms programme!'

4. Army, police and prisons: organizing women and wives

Nothing could be more important, immediately after war, than converting armed services that have been brutalized, corrupted and demoralized, into a source of security for ordinary people instead of a source of fear. I met Maureen (Mo) Poole, a retired police inspector from Staffordshire, England. She had originally come to Sierra Leone in 2000 in answer to an advertisement for an adviser on 'local needs policing' in a the post-war situation. She explained that local needs policing means 'community policing that is tailor-made for each community. It is a system or style of policing that meets the needs and expectations of the individuals and local communities, while at the same time reflecting national standards'. When her contract ended in 2004, she stayed on to create a local non-governmental organization called *Uniform Solutions* which is primarily aimed at alleviating poverty, increasing food security and reducing corruption in the Security Sector Families. It was prompted by the Kenema Branch of the Police Wives Association. *Uniform Solutions* is a non-profit making organization for wives of the men employed in the army, police, prison service and fire service as well as for the women employed in the security sector, usually in quite lowly grades.

Security sector workers such as these are grossly underpaid. They simply do not earn enough to live on. Mo Poole explained

> Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world and the state does not generate sufficient revenue to give them a pay rise. As such, they live below the poverty line and cannot provide the basics for their family, especially if they have two or more school-age children in the family.

In this as in other ways, poverty leads to criminality.

> Hard choices have to be made, and meeting their need can become a
> source of corruption, making the personnel extremely vulnerable to
> bribery. If you're starving you may be tempted to steal a cup of rice or a
> loaf. Perhaps you'd like to borrow it instead – but what is the point if
> you can't afford to replace it?

The aim of *Uniform Solutions* was to economically empower women so that
the ultimate benefactors would be the service families who would, Mo hoped,
no longer be tempted to resort to criminality and corrupt practices to eke out a
living.

All women in the security sector were targeted, even those who were
employed, Mo explained, because although they may appear to have an
income, many are single, some single parents, and the majority are in the
junior ranks. For example, there are 7797 police officers in Sierra Leone, of
which 1142 are female. While there are a few women in police operations,
they are employed mainly in the traffic section, or work as clerks, cleaners, or
tailoring uniforms. They work full-time, but they don't earn enough to live on.
The majority of security sector personnel live in terrible conditions, in
overcrowded barrack rooms. Traditionally, women are the ones responsible
for providing the food, water and firewood, and it is the women that
desperately need small loans (micro-credit) to help them set up small
enterprises. One of Mo's projects involves scientifically breeding small
animals in captivity for food.

There's one aspect of the work of Uniform Solutions that directly addresses
peace. Mo tries to get her women members active in setting up, funding and
managing projects for what she calls 'the angry people' of Sierra Leone. By
these she means women and men whose plight causes disaffection and
rebelliousness in themselves and those around them, and could lead again to
war. They include people who have no job and see no prospect of one;
personnel forcibly retired from the services and so made destitute; war
widows who were paid no compensation; amputees who received no
rehabilitation; people paralysed by polio, who were cheated of immunisation
when they were children; child soldiers whose childhood was stolen from
them and who have been abandoned to trauma. She sees this component as
underpinning the remainder of her project, because 'without peace there is no
point finding paid work outside the home for women'.

5. Academic work on gender, peace and conflict

Fourah Bay College, one of the colleges of the University of Sierra Leone, has
a programme for Peace and Conflict Studies. Currently the students may
study towards a certificate or diploma. Soon they will be able to obtain a BA
degree -- it will be the first degree course in this subject in Africa. I met
Memunata Pratt, who heads up this program. She told me they are providing

a training module on peace and conflict for the military. They are also trying to introduce the subject into teacher training.

Fourah Bay also has a Gender Research and Documentation Centre, GRADOC, and Memunata lectures in Gender, Conflict and Human Rights. So she teaches about the gender-specific experience of women in war, women's lack of rights in Sierra Leone both in peace and in war, and the part women can play in conflict resolution. Her department interacts closely with the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University in the UK (where Memunata herself is enrolled for a PhD).

Memunata has published work on women and sexual abuse, on women and reintegration, and on transition initiatives after the war.

> Women experience problems with access to land and property (she says). Widows are denied ownership and often have to come to the cities to search for a living. Sierra Leone is a highly patriarchal society. Women are discriminated against in access to resources, and power and policy-making.

A lot of gender-awareness training is being done in these post-war years, much of it funded by local and international NGOs. But she feels too much of it is 'pretty basic, unfortunately. Just a question of understanding gender roles and so on. We need to go deeper, to raise questions of culture, masculinity, feminism'.

From as early as 1985 Sierra Leone had a Women's Bureau in its Ministry of Social Welfare. As part of the process of democratisation after the Lomé peace agreement, the 'gender' function was upgraded so that there is now a Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare. CEDAW has been adopted by the Sierra Leonean government, but not 'domesticated' into local law, so it is not applied. There is no law of affirmative action. But two policies, drawn up by the Ministry and introduced in 2001, have partly filled the gap. One provides for 'gender mainstreaming', by which is meant a commitment to equal numbers of women and men in all social structures and policy areas. The other concerns the 'advancement of the status of women' and addresses specific issues unique to women such as maternal health care, and particular cultural practices.

The Lomé peace agreement provided for the creation, with considerable international funding, of a National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR), which addressed the immediate problem of de-mobilizing the combatants. Eighty percent of the beneficiaries of that program, Memunata said, were boys aged between 10 and 18. From its conception the National Commission had been blind to gender. While it was true that few girls had carried arms, very large numbers (as mentioned above) had been abducted into the various fighting groups for other purposes. The NCDDR had not recognized that such girls too would need rehabilitation.

Memunata said, 'It was only after a year that some of us started asking 'What about the girls?'' Eventually the NCDDR was renamed the National Commission for Social Action, which has a more particular concern with the rehabilitation and reintegration of women, children, displaced people and amputees - the ones who had not carried arms.

6. Democratization and the inclusion of women in the political system

It was clear to most of Sierra Leonean civil society that democratization was the key to any transition the country might make from war to peace. That perception was already visible in the demands they were making, back in 1965, for 'elections now', while the government, army and the rebel forces were still saying 'a military victory first'. When national elections marked the end of the war in 2002, women were stressing that democratization must mean the full inclusion, for the first time, of women in equal numbers and with equal authority to that of men in the national and local structures of policy-making and administration and in the judiciary.

A movement developed with the title 'Fifty-Fifty', calling for equal representation of women in political parties and elections. It was partly modelled on the UK '300 group' – Lesley Abdela had been in Sierra Leone. The women called on the government to institute a mandatory 30% so as to create access for women to Parliament and local councils. The state responded with certain programmes during the state elections, and political parties paid lip service, at least, to the idea of a 30% quota among their electoral candidates.

Agnes Taylor-Lewis, who I had the opportunity to interview, is an active member of Fifty-Fifty. She had been elected to Parliament for a period in 1991 and was Minister of Health. Much later, during 2002, she served again in this position for a while, though as an unelected appointee. She is thus one of the the rather select band of Sierra Leonean women who now, or in the past, have been elected to Parliament. They are linked in NEWOP, the Network of Women Parliamentarians. Agnes showed me the poster that had been produced during the elections of 2002, with photographs of all the women candidates. Women won 8% of the parliamentary seats, and were rewarded with two or three ministerial posts. It was a small enough gain – but a first step forward.

Again the women campaigned energetically around the local elections of 2004. The presence of women in politics at local level could make a huge difference to the standing of women in the communities. Memunata Pratt explained to me that they had found even proportional representation insufficient to deliver political equality to women. In the 'list' system introduced in the 2002 elections, women candidates had seldom scored high enough to actually win seats. Now, prior to the 2004 local elections, the campaigners called for, and achieved, a 'zipper system' where a man and a woman appear alternately from top to bottom of the list. In this way, there were 109 women candidates, of whom 58 won a seat.

THE MANO RIVER WOMEN'S PEACE NETWORK

The Women's Forum in the mid '90s brought together women from Sierra Leonean non-governmental and civil society organizations with a wide range of preoccupations and varied forms of action. Of course everyone was fed up with the war - but some women felt compelled to do something *as women* to bring an end to the fighting. Some of these women are still active on the issue of war and peace today, in the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), the main focus of my study in Sierra Leone. I had a chance to interview quite a few of them. Nana Pratt, for instance, and Agnes Taylor-Lewis and Rosaline M'Carthy told me, 'we've been involved in this for years', 'we are the ones who felt strongly about the war, and now we feel strongly about the peace', 'we are the committed women, the concerned women, very motivated by the issue of peace and war'.

MARWOPNET had a forerunner in the Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace (SLWMP). It was formed in 1994 following a West African regional meeting of women at Dakar, in preparation for the Beijing conference of 1995. SLWMP were very active for three years. They made helicopter drops of leaflets over the rebel areas. They went to meet the RUF commanders in the bush. In one disastrous incident in Kenema, in the southeast, some women lost their lives. But in 1997 some of the key actors in the SLWMP took refuge abroad and after that the movement lost momentum.

In November 1999 the 6th African regional conference of women was held in Addis Ababa. It was organized by the Africa Women's Committee for Peace and Development (AWCPD - a committee of the Organization of African Unity), the West African Association of Women (WAWA) and Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS). [8] Among other things, they discussed follow-up to the Declaration and Platform for Action formulated at the Beijing conference four years earlier. FAS facilitated a 'fringe' meeting of women from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – neighbouring countries related through war. This is where the idea of MARWOPNET was first floated. FAS undertook to organize a meeting to take the proposal further.

The promised meeting was held May 1-3, 2000, in Abuja, Nigeria. It was titled 'Engendering the Peace Process in West Africa' and was organized jointly by FAS and AWPCD. The meeting was chaired by Mrs. Ruth Sando Perry, a former Head of State of Liberia. Each country's team included a government minister, two parliamentarians, a journalist, a representative of the private sector and five representatives of women's NGOs/CSOs. Delegates from various UN and OAU agencies also attended. The aim was to review women's experiences of the conflict and peace processes in the sub-region, with a view to launching a strategic alliance between women's organizations in the three countries to strengthen their involvement in peace building.

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[8] Femmes Africa Solidarité was founded in June 1996 by Synergie Africa, UNIFEM and other US agencies, with funding from ECOWAS. The activists were African women leaders representing different nationalities and professions, motivated by the explosion of violent conflicts tearing apart the fabric of society in Africa. It is based in Geneva and has a branch in Dakar.

Women of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia had for some time been talking to each other about the need for such an initiative. They were alert to the fact that women were bearing the brunt of the conflict. They could see that responsible opinion, locally and internationally, focused on *men* as the principal perpetrators of war and consequently failed to see that *women* could have importance as part of the solution. Women had a stake in peace, these women felt, and should organize and make their voices heard.

At the Abuja meeting the women chose to name their network for the Mano River that forms a border between parts of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. There already existed, from way back in 1973, a Mano River Union in which the three states were supposed (in principle) to cooperate for political and economic purposes. Now the women, in calling themselves the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) were (as Rosaline M'Carthy put it) 'sending a message to the men that we belonged in the entire process – including security'. The Network is however only rhetorically, not structurally, related to the MRU.

Rosaline went on to say, 'The really distinctive thing about MARWOPNET is its regional flavour. It's not that there were not peace groups locally, there were. But we felt we would have more influence with the politicians if we acted together'. By then Liberia had experienced seven years of war, Sierra Leone ten years, and the fighting was not yet over. Scores of thousands of lives had been lost, hundreds of thousands had been displaced, had fled to local IDP camps or abroad. Guinea had taken in three hundred thousand refugees from its two neighbours – women and children 80% of them. The cross-border trade in drugs, diamonds and arms affected all three countries.

So MARWOPNET was a bid to empower women to bring social change of a kind that could stop war and sustain a democratic peace. It would be 'demand-side approach to improving governance'. They wrote in their basic leaflet:

> MARWOPNET's vision is of a sub-region that is peaceful and prosperous, inhabited by citizens who are healthy, educated, live in unity and enjoy all their human rights including equity and equality, with women playing an effective role in peace and sustainable development processes within the sub-region, Africa and the world.

In some ways the network was prefigurative. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'women, peace and security'*,* was not passed until the following October. From then onward the world would pay a little more attention to the gender-specific impact of armed conflict, the under-valued capabilities of women for conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building, and their potential for being active agents in peace and security. But the thinking that led to Resolution 1325 was already in the air. The Mano River initiative was a sign of it.

Structure and process in MARWOPNET

Soon after Abuja, at a workshop in Monrovia, the women of MARWOPNET drew up a constitution, framing the Network as 'a West African non-political, non-sectarian, non-discriminatory, non-profit-making organization'. There would be a president and two vice presidents, with the presidential role rotating between the three 'chapters', as they call their national branches.

The General Assembly, which would meet biennially, would be the highest policy and decision-making body. A Governing Board, comprised of the president and vice presidents, together with the convenors of five technical committees and the three women elected as 'focal points' of the national chapters, would be responsible for implementing the Assembly's decisions. It would meet every six months, the venue rotating between Monrovia, Conakry and Freetown. The technical committees would be concerned respectively with programmes; resource mobilisation; resource management; advocacy; and media and communications.

The 'founding members' of the Network are those organizations that were present at the Abuja conference. Subsequently, membership has been open to any organization or individual that shares the Network's objectives. In addition, those providing moral and material support may be 'honorary members'. The initial activists of MARWOPNET are characteristically well-known, well-respected and highly-educated women. It was significant that they were of a social status to be able to obtain audience with senior figures, up to and including the head of state. On the other hand, the women felt, 'we need the Presidents to see that we are representing *ordinary* women'. This was partly achieved by being able to show that the member organizations themselves had mass memberships. But it is also the case that the Network have increasingly sought members among more typical women -- and not only in Freetown but also in the regions.They are building up branches nationwide.

MARWOPNET have secretariats, each with a modest office, in each of the three countries. The overall headquarters and an executive secretary are based in Sierra Leone, in a single, rather bare, room in the Mano River Union building in Freetown. From her desk here Nana Pratt, the executive secretary, maintains contact with members in Sierra Leone and the two other chapters by telephone and e-mail. They would very much like to be able to fully operationalize the secretariat, obtain equipment and employ a full-time staff member. Although it has received modest funding from FAS, UNDP, Urgent Action, International Alert and other sources, the Network is not securely or adequately funded. It has to continually seek one-off funding for Board Meetings, for workshops and for international travel - because it is important to be connected with similar organizations in Africa and worldwide. In addition to travel costs, language interpretation is a drain on funds (English is spoken in Liberia and Sierra Leone, but Guinea is Francophone.)

I asked whether they were not difficulties of understanding and relationship between and among women of the three different countries. Although they

clearly share some problems, 'transversal politics' across national or ethnic borders always calls for considerable sensitivity and skill (Cockburn and Hunter ref). Issues arise in which the countries have divergent interests. Agnes Taylor-Lewis told me they were greatly helped by the similarity of culture in the three countries, 'we're very alike in the clothes we wear and the food we eat'. Mabel M'Bayo added that being women was a help. 'We are *women* after all -- we can argue about things, but then we can work out agreement point by point.' They have received valuable training in conflict mediation and resolution from various helpful organizations.

Establishing a pattern of activity

At the start of its work, MARWOPNET identified five critical areas of concern: 1) the peace process; 2) peace mechanisms; 3) security; 4) reconstruction; and 4) the economic empowerment of women.They know, of course, that this agenda is too ambitious to be addressed in full in the short run. For some of the practical activities, especially in areas 4) and 5), they rely on the programmes of their member organizations, and other 'sister' NGOs and CSOs, and as a Network they foster these. Several examples were given above: FAWE and its educational work, the arms-control activity of SLANSA, the CSRR's rehabilitation work with commercial sex-workers, the self-organizing of security sector women of Uniform Solutions, the drive for gender-democratisation by Fifty-Fifty and other groups.

MARWOPNET itself acts at two levels:

- advocacy and intervention at the very highest level of the government

  and its opponents;

- and work on the ground in the regions and especially at the borders.

Because I visited only Sierra Leone and did not have the advantage of going to Guinea and Liberia to interview MARWOPNET women there, I undoubtably have a disproportionately clear and detailed picture of the activities of the Sierra Leone chapter.

The women from Freetown did not have much time to sit and think when they flew back from Abuja on May 4, 2000. Two days later, on May 6, the Women's Forum, of which at that moment WILPF was chair, mobilized the women's march to Foday Sankoh's house (described above), demanding an end to the hostilities and release of the UN personnel the RUF were holding hostage. The women of MARWOPNET were of course involved in that march and in the mass demonstration of men and women two days later. MARWOPNET also sent a delegation to the Liberian leader Charles Taylor calling on him to influence the RUF.

The Lomé peace agreement had been signed the previous year. As we saw, this did not end the hostilities and large areas of the country remained under rebel control. MARWOPNET's Sierra Leone chapter now began to monitor

developments. They protested when they saw the provisions of the agreement violated. In November they decided to visit the RUF in one of their strongholds, Makeni. A senior woman in the RUF, Susan Lahai, had been present at the MARWOPNET founding meeting in Abuja. Since the peace agreement, after all, the RUF were a recognized political party. Despite some scepticism, the other women felt, in the spirit of the Lomé agreement, it was important to include her: 'we needed peace'.

Now a group of Sierra Leonean members set off by helicopter to Makeni to have a meeting with women of the Women's Wing of the RUF. They were facilitated in this by the Nigerian 7th Battallion of UNAMSIL, the force responsible for disarming combatants in the district. They met around fifty women, who told them of their anxiety about returning to civilian society. They feared they would be marginalized and branded as former rebels. MARWOPNET women reassured them that they had 'come to talk peace with their sisters and children -- everyone is committed to forgiveness, peace and reconciliation'.

High-level lobbying and advocacy

Soon after their return from Abuja, the Sierra Leone chapter of MARWOPNET had gone to introduce the new Network to President Tejan Kabbah. 'We decided to start at the top,' Agnes told me. 'We wanted to be sure they could not ignore us!' And they have continued as they began. Before long delegations of women from all three countries had made courtesy calls to the all three heads of state. Whenever and wherever they hold a Board meeting, they make a point of calling on the President and the MR ambassadors.

This strategy of high-level advocacy and lobbying is an example of what Louise Diamond, conciliation trainer in the USA, has dubbed 'multitrack diplomacy'. More precisely, although the MARWOPNET women themselves do not use this terminology, I see their dealings with presidents, ministers, military commanders and rebel leaders, from their footing in civil society, as being 'track-2 diplomacy', i.e. supplementing the standard diplomatic moves of political leaders, foreign secretaries and ambassadors by involving the interventions of neutral non-state actors, including NGOs (Diamond and McDonald 1996:4). Justifying their high-level approach, Rosaline M'Carthy observed 'In the last analysis the men at the top who run the show'.

A classic case of 'track-2 diplomacy' occurred in 2001. In early summer that year relations between Liberia and Guinea deteriorated badly. Serious tensions arose in Guinea due to the influx of people fleeing from the terror in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Local Guineans resented the incoming refugees, particularly because the latter received international aid, while the host population, also desperately poor, did not. There was much animosity between President Lansana Conté of Guinea and President Charles Taylor of Liberia, whom he blamed for sponsoring the rebel insurrection in Sierra Leone as well as unleashing terror in his own country. Conté refused to have any further dealings with Taylor, while Taylor expelled the Guinean and Sierra Leonean ambassadors from Monrovia.

On June 7, 2001, the Liberian members of MARWOPNET, supported by women who had flown to Monrovia from the other two chapters, had an audience with Taylor. Nana Pratt said, 'It was being collective that was our strength'. They urged him to meet the other two heads of state to discuss the deteriorating security position in the sub-region. Under pressure from the delegation of women, Taylor agreed to such a meeting and also to re-establishing diplomatic relations by recalling the ambassadors.

On return to Freetown women of the Sierra Leone chapter then visited Tejan Kabbah to inform him of the agreement they had won from Charles Taylor and tell him of their intention to visit the Guinean head of state. They asked him for his advice and moral support. He agreed to ask the foreign minister to meet with his two counterparts as a preliminary to getting the three heads of state to a Mano River regional summit. He endorsed the women's mission to Lansana Conté, but was sceptical about its prospects. Nonetheless in late July a three-country delegation from MARWOPNET obtained an audience with President Conté in Conakry. He is a democratically elected president and was known to feel concern about 'women and war'.

For an account of this visit I shall draw on an article in *Africa Recovery*, based on an interviews with one of the participants, Ms. Mary Brownell, described as 'a veteran Liberian peace activist' (*Africa Recovery* 2003). Mary Brownell told the journalist that the MARWOPNET delegation had begun by stressing the human suffering caused by war and the overriding need for a new peace initiative. At first Conté had been intransigent. No way would he attend a summit that would involve meeting Charles Taylor!

Then Mary Brownell told the President, 'You and President Taylor have to meet as men and iron out your differences, and we women want to be present. We will lock you in this room until you come to your senses, and I will sit on the key'. The report continues:

> When her comments were translated into French for Mr. Conté, there was a long silence. 'Then he started laughing,' she recalled. 'He couldn't believe it! Finally he stopped laughing and said, 'What man do you think would say that to me? Only a woman could do such a thing and get by with it.' ' In the end Mr. Conté agreed to attend the summit and he credited the women for changing his mind (Africa Recovery 2003:18).

Some months later a joint secretariat committee of foreign ministry officials of the Mano River countries started meeting. Then, in March the following year the three presidents, it happened, were attending an African heads of state meeting in Rabat, Morocco. The King of Morocco took the opportunity to bring the three men together in the anticipated summit. Relations were normalized. MARWOPNET's initiative had worked.

Down at the grassroots and in the border regions

As mentioned above, so long as the war remained in the countryside it remained only a distant threat to many urban citizens. Agnes said, 'We would say 'Oh, they're fighting up there'. But when the rebels walked into Freetown, we all became one.' Now MARWOPNET were clear that their work for peace must reach out to the remotest areas and border regions, especially to the Mano River shared by Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Despite the terrible roads, the lack of adequate vehicles and the petrol shortage, they would prioretize outreach.

The Sierra Leone members told me how, already in 2000 and 2001, they started visiting refugee camps, IDP camps, transit and demobilization camps and amputees camps, and have continued to date. Some of the camps are for locally displaced people, others shelter refugees who have crossed from Liberia.[9] They take sacks of maniok, fresh water supplies and other kinds of relief. They listen carefully to what the women have experienced, what they are feeling, what they need and hope for.

Each year MARWOPNET hold their International Women's Day celebration in a different part of the country. They are trying to extend their membership in the regions. On one visit to Kenema they were surprised and delighted to be met by women already wearing 'our uniform' (they have a specially printed cloth the women make into dresses). They are trying to develop a branch structure.

'Above all', Mabel M'Bayo said, 'the borders are the crucial thing for us.' Currently the Network are trying to establish what they call an 'early warning system', and integrate it into the structure of the Mano River Union itself. 'We want to train women to be watchful,' Nana Pratt said, 'to know what the indicators of war are. For example, to be alert to the smuggling of drugs, the movement of small arms and light weapons, strangers appearing in their district.' Women traders do a lot of the commerce across the border between Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. They see what goes on.[10] Ideally the Network would like women to engage with local authorities, on the basis of their early warning mechanisms. But they understand that sometimes women don't feel confident in the neutrality and honesty of local politicians - in which case they can report to MARWOPNET, who can pass information to the security services.

One particular incident can demonstrate MARWOPNET's 'border work'. At the village of Yenga, near the border between Sierra Leone and Guinea, a number of Guinean soldiers and their families had entered Sierra Leone and

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[9] In Liberia the situation is reversed, while Guinea has been a host country to refugees from both its MR neighbours.

[10] Women traders often get sexually harassed by Customs officers, and this is something MARWOPNET are trying to stop.

occupied the village. At first they claimed it was part of Guinea, citing the boundaries marked on some old colonial map. MARWOPNET saw the potential for conflict at Yenga. They went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and eventually accompanied the President on a trip to Yenga where he met the other two Mano River heads of state. Lansana Conté conceded that Yenga was indeed Sierra Leonean territory. In response to the soldiers' protests, it was agreed that they might stay for some more months until they had harvested the crops they had planted.

Some months later, while I was in Sierra Leone, Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff went down to Yenga to check that the Guineans had kept their word and crossed back over the border. She found them still there.They had cleared even more land, they had a stock of pan sheeting for roofs. Clearly they intended to stay. What is more, they were behaving badly, harassing local people, preventing women from trading freely - it was in effect occupied territory. Yasmin told me, on her return, 'There's no actual checkpoint there, it's not a border post. It's a *settlement*.' Her group had been treated aggressively by the Guinean soldiers. She tried to take photographs. The men had objected and demanded the film. They gestured that they intended to cut throats. The visitors' car was blocked by the soldiers, who for some hours allowed them to go neither forward nor back. 'Effectively we were under arrest,' Yasmin said. Eventually they made their escape and came back to report the situation to the government in Freetown.

Recognition for women's role in peace building

For their work at both levels, among political leaders and down at the grassroots, MARWOPNET have received wide recognition. Already in December 2000 they were given delegate status at the 24th ECOWAS summit. They have observer status on the Joint Security Committee of the Mano River Union. They have been present at meetings of MRU foreign ministers. The network was asked by the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations for advice on 'best practices'. Their work has been documented on video by the women's international NGO ISIS-WICCE. Recognition culminated in the United Nations Prize for Human Rights in 2003, presented ceremonially in New York by Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General.

I asked the women I interviewed to tell me what motivated them and why they believe women have an important role to play in peacemaking and war prevention. The first answer was often 'because of what women suffer in war'. Women and children bear the brunt of the conflict because they are the vulnerable ones. And war compounds women's disadvantage, their lack of rights, their subjection to violence, prostitution, forced marriage and sexually transmitted diseases. Rosaline Macarthy said, 'The politicians know that in all wars women and children suffer most. This gives us a certain moral authority as women.'

Some of the answers referred to the qualities of women, others to the role of men in war. Christiana Thorpe cited women's shared experience as women.

She said 'It takes a woman to understand the dynamics affecting women, to understand why we're backwards. You may see that I'm hungry, but you can't necessarily feel the hunger unless you're hungry yourself.' Mabell Cox referred to women's experience and capabilities. 'Listen, we have the skills! We are mothers, we are carers, we are nurturers, we have love and compassion. Women have insight. We can persuade, we can influence people.' Nana Pratt emphasized women's courage. 'When push comes to shove, women are less afraid. We went to the bush to meet the RUF, it's simply we were not afraid.'

Memunata Pratt, whom you may remember as the lecturer in gender and conflict, said

> People will say "men in Sierra Leone have let us down". In other words, they have been the ones in the position of power, and look what a mess the country has got into. Patriarchy has negated processes of development. Masculinity in men has led us into trouble, so there is a crisis of confidence in masculinity.

Agnes Taylor-Lewis also thought in terms of patriarchy. She spoke of women's victimhood, men's brutality towards women. Thinking of the statistic I had heard, that 80% of families are dependent on women's earnings, I asked her is it that men are angry with women, that they resent or fear women in some way? 'No,' she answered simply, 'they just feel superior to women.'

Healing divisions in Sierra Leonean society

For some time after peace was declared in Sierra Leone, war continued in Liberia. Women's organizations, including MARWOPNET, were influential in getting a peace agreement signed there. At the time of writing, there is no 'hot' conflict in the Mano River region. But there are many stresses and strains in these societies that could lead to war breaking out again. In Sierra Leone the mechanisms set up after the Lomé peace accord, including a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a Special Court to try crimes against humanity under international law, have met with many impediments and satisfied few people – least of all women. Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff worked for a while for the TRC. She was frustrated by the way lack of transport prevented rural-based women and girls from participating in the truth and reconciliation process. Only with great difficulty did the Special Court establish that the SL government had no power to give amnesty in the case of crimes falling under international jurisdiction.

The national judiciary was also weak and the courts overloaded. Besides, Yasmin reported, 'court officials do not consider violence against women and girls to be important and hence have limited interest in prosecuting such cases' (Barry 2005:89 and 101). There is as yet no full separation of powers to render the judiciary independent of the political system. The media are still unfree. Recently the state security forces brutally attacked a legitimate student protest, showing that the state's repressive reflexes have scarcely diminished.

There may be less open violence, but as Rosalind M'Carthy said, 'there are other kinds of violence that all need addressing: domestic violence, the structural violence of poverty and institutional violence' Society is divided on many dimensions. There is rivalry between North and South, between Mende and Tembe. Freetown is privileged and rural areas neglected. There is a cruel juxtaposition of great wealth and extreme poverty. As Joe A.D.Alie writes, 'over the last three decades, a small minority of Sierra Leoneans became fabulously rich at the expense of the masses... successive regimes tolerated a high degree of corruption' (Alie 1999:75).

Agnes Taylor-Lewis stressed something else: injustice. Not only big injustices but little, personal ones. For instance, illiteracy is a problem. Someone who is illiterate can be easily fooled, and then there is resentment. A child who went to school can despise and disobey ill-educated parents who never had that chance. Ex-combatants remain unreconciled with the wider society. Rape survivors and their known rapists are still unreconciled. 'There's a lot of bitterness,' said Rosaline. 'They can recognize the perpetrators. And for those who were raped - in this stigmatising society, families don't always support them.'

In a sense, war begins and ends in the family. Mabel M'Bayo said 'In the provinces women told me "peace begins at home". We are the ones who can reconcile society. It was our young people who went to war.' But the most terrible thought with which I came back from Sierra Leone was this: that in a country beset by fear, where one aspect of that fear is the fear parents feel *for* their children, another is the fear they feel *of* their children.

But also, flying back to London, I was reading. I read a book by a Sierra Leonean woman who imagines herself called to return to her country after the war to help reconcile her uncle with his only surviving relative, a grandchild who had been abducted into the war after being forced to kill his grandmother. You can hear the compassion in her understanding of this child. She wrote, 'He feels a gun being pressed into this hands, another gun pressed to his head. He cannot respond: his hands are small. He cannot speak: this is not what he wants. He wants to play the instrument, to sing again and feel the sun on his face and limbs' (Jarrett-Macauley 2005:208).

I was also reading an article which quoted from a Human Rights Watch report on Sierra Leone, where I found the following account by Zainab, a 24-year old market vendor. She said

> Late one evening, a 10-year-old with a pistol came, alone, into our house. He told my husband his commander was hungry and wanted one of our chickens. While my husband was catching the hen, that boy sat down to wait. He was thin and exhausted. I brought him a biscuit and water. He said he was tired and weak and as he left with the chicken he turned to me and said, 'thank you, mam'. Later my neighbours criticized me for giving him the biscuit. I said I didn't care if he was a rebel or not. He still somebody's child. Maybe he was

abducted. God knows what they've done to him. I wanted to hide that boy and take him with us as we fled and just knew he would've come with us if he'd had the chance (Abdullah and Rashid 2004:238).

MARWOPNET are surely right. Women such as these are a major resource for peace in Sierra Leone. Women, at worst, joined the vilence. Women, at best, can bring to bear on a society riven by hate and fear a compassion and kindliness they have learned and practised in everyday domestic and emotional life.

CONTACTS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first heard of the Mano River Women's Peace Network when I met Rosaline M'Carthy by chance in Bogota, Colombia. It was she who welcomed me to Freetown on behalf of the Network and introduced me to some of its members and other activist women. While there I had the privilege of interviewing Agnes Taylor-Lewis, Christiana Thorpe, Gladys Hastings-Speine, Mabel M'Bayo, Mabell Cox, Maureen Poole, Memunata Pratt, Nana Pratt, Princess Kawa, Rosaline M'Carthy and Zainab Bangura. I also had helpful meetings with Yasmin Yusu-Sheriff, and Rajiv Bendre, director of the British Council in Freetown. Florie Davies accompanied me to FAWE's school at Grafton. I would like to thank them all very much indeed for their friendship and cooperation.

In June 2005 I sent this profile in draft to them all, inviting comment and correction. I sent it again, with a reminder in September. The members of MARWOPNET have now given me the 'go-ahead' to the paper as originally drafted, despite minor reservations. My thanks to them, and also to Maureen Poole, who sent me detailed suggestions for improvement, the essence of which I have glady incorporated. My requests and reminders to the remaining contributors to this case study have not so far elicited a response. So I am putting this Profile on my website now, fairly but not wholly confident in its accuracy. Please read it with this hesitation in mind. I am open to making any alterations that may subsequently be requested.

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