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‘THEY CALL ME WARRIOR’: THE LEGACY OF CONFLICT AND THE STRUGGLE TO END SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SIERRA LEONE

Empowerment of Women and Girls

Elizabeth Mills, Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed, Jennifer Diggins and
Tamba David Mackieou

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Empowerment of Women and Girls theme.

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Executive summary

Overview

A relatively small country with just over 6 million people, Sierra Leone has been the focus of considerable public and policy attention because of the recent Ebola epidemic and, before that, the decade-long civil war. Given the concern with finding ways to ‘build Sierra Leone differently’ in the post-Ebola context (IDS 2015), this paper considers some of the legacies of the country’s history. It focuses on gender and the emergence of a dynamic network of actors that reveal not only the country’s history of violence but also its capacity for ‘rebuilding differently’ to foster resilience and create long-term social transformation.

During the war, from 1991 to 2002, an estimated 50,000 people were killed and more than 500,000 were forced to flee their homes to escape violence. Statistics can never sufficiently capture the horror of the war, but they can indicate the extent to which multiple forms of violence permeated people’s lives. The legacy of violence is equally difficult to quantify but, as we found in our fieldwork in Sierra Leone from 2014 to 2015, it is woven into people’s everyday lives, and particularly in their sense of trust in each other and in formal and informal institutions. This report focuses on one particularly pernicious form of violence – sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) – as it is, and was, experienced by men and women.

The impact of the war and the country’s transition to democracy surfaces in lesser known ways too; in this paper we describe how networks of actors emerged in refugee camps and coalesced around a shared struggle to transform harmful gender relations and end violence. Based on fieldwork with these actors, we outline some of the social, economic and infrastructural challenges they face in their work to collectively foster gender equality and end SGBV.

According to the activists we engaged with in Sierra Leone, the challenge of addressing SGBV has sometimes been exacerbated by a limited conception of development, which too often assumes that models for social and economic ‘progress’ can be imported and implanted into highly complex contexts. Far greater attention therefore needs to be paid to local specificity, to the effects of sexual and gender violence on all genders, and to the recommendations made by those people and organisations working to create sustained and positive change *in* these complex contexts. The findings of this study speak to this complexity and are organised, first, around the factors that underpin SGBV and, second, around the key actors working to transform harmful gender dynamics through collective action.

Methodology

Between June 2014 and January 2015, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Men’s Association for Gender Equality-Sierra Leone (MAGE-SL) undertook qualitative research with those actors working to address SGBV and achieve gender equality in Sierra Leone. The research had four aims: (1) to understand the nature and causes of SGBV as experienced by participants in Moyamba and Freetown; (2) to explore the key actors working collectively, across the country, to foster greater gender equality and to address SGBV; (3) to identify key strategies through which these actors work – collectively, and with men and boys – to effect positive change; and (4) to understand and document some of the key challenges they face in their work, developing a set of recommendations based on these local-level insights.

The research draws on a range of data collected through 25 key informant interviews, two stakeholder mapping workshops and 60 structured interviews (in Freetown and Moyamba), as well as two validation workshops and 13 follow-up interviews, also in Freetown and Moyamba.

Findings

The first section of the report traces the roots of violence in Sierra Leone and the emergence of a coalition of actors that seeks to respond to SGBV, focusing on our primary research partner, MAGE-SL. The second section outlines practical actions and limitations faced by these collective actors in their work to catalyse transformation to end SGBV and promote gender equality.

At a national level, the government's laws and policy reforms to address SGBV have provided some opportunities for progress towards gender equality. Between 2004 and 2012, the Government of Sierra Leone produced a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report, enacted three Gender Acts and a Sexual Offences Act, and set up Family Support Units (FSUs) and other mechanisms to implement these laws. In addition to these laws and enforcement mechanisms, a network of national and local SGBV-related initiatives also surfaced in the wake of the war. While there are national and international actors working to address the factors that exacerbate the incidence of SGBV in Sierra Leone, our research highlights the initiatives of local actors and the challenges they face in their work to promote gender equality.

At a local level, the study outlines how the war itself was an important catalyst of transformation, with the emergence of organisations like MAGE-SL working to promote gender justice, and the increased and sustained activism of women advocating for peace, democracy and good governance. During and after the war, women's organisations responded to the disruption of social services and community-based structures by developing networks and alternative coping strategies to deal with problems such as food scarcity, sexual violence, and shortfalls in health and education provision. However, these organisations continue to draw on very limited resources for sustaining the implementation of these projects in the long term, making donor support critical to their ongoing activities. Further, as much of this work is carried out at the community level, it is often 'invisible' to national policymakers and international donors.

This study identified some of these important community-based initiatives and organisations, particularly those that are primary sources of support for survivors of SGBV living in rural areas. The recommendations outlined below seek to highlight some of these less visible initiatives by men and women to address the legacy of conflict, in their interpersonal relationships and in their communities.

Discussion

Over the past decade, anthropologists have suggested that the extreme marginalisation experienced by poor rural men was an important factor underlying Sierra Leone's collapse into civil war (Peters 2011; Richards 1996, 2005). The fighting factions were dominated by the poorest of young farmers – frustrated youths who, according to this argument, felt they had nothing to lose by participating in brutal violence. This 'crisis of youth' (Peters 2011) stands as a stark reminder of the ways in which violence may emerge from the frustration of young men who feel socially, politically and economically excluded and powerless – ignored by the state and bypassed by the promises of 'modernity' (Richards 1996).

This discourse is also strongly reminiscent of the 'crisis of masculinity' literature (Perry 2005) in which the gendered identity of men – writ large – encounters a catalyst that prompts

reflection and reconfiguration of masculinity (Perry 2005; McDowell 2000). However, since this term was introduced in the 1990s, studies have shown the limits to conceiving of a single 'masculinity' that can be mapped onto cisgendered men (Edström, Das and Dolan 2014; Connell 1994), or even a single 'hegemonic masculinity' that applies to men in power (Morrell *et al.* 2013; Hearn and Morrell 2012).

More recently, scholars have criticised international policy responses to violence and conflict that reproduce a gendered 'victim/perpetrator' binary without exploring men's experiences of violence (Dolan 2014). Like this report, studies in Sierra Leone point to a variety of ways – beyond the narratives of the crisis of 'masculinity' or of 'youth' – in which men and women are tied into a network of structural inequalities that call on local, national and international actors to be accountable for their role in entrenching inequality. The studies indicate that the war itself was not simply a conflict between factions within the boundaries of the state but one that drew in a global network of actors that fuelled the violence (sometimes extracting resources by using conflict, or engaging in misinformed attempts to mitigate it) (Bellows and Miguel 2006; Ross 2004; Richards 1996). These studies expose the intersecting fault lines of structural inequality that run along the seams of social, economic and political exclusion.

Not only has the Sierra Leone government implemented a raft of gender policies to address SGBV, but national and international policies have increasingly recognised these inequalities and the importance of tackling exclusion by distributing economic, social and political resources. For instance, the joint European Commission/DFID Country Strategy for Sierra Leone (2007–12) worked to increase the voice and participation of youth in governance structures, and developed a set of initiatives to reduce unemployment (measured at 60 per cent in 2007) (Hilker and Fraser 2009).

The legacy of civil war for SGBV in Sierra Leone is multifaceted: as reported in post-conflict settings elsewhere, studies suggest that levels of SGBV are notably higher in Sierra Leone in the aftermath of the war than they were before it, as large numbers of fighters were reintegrated back into 'peacetime' society (Nowrojee 2005; Pruitt 2012). However, our discussions with activists suggest that the post-war context also provided a uniquely fertile space in which to begin to deconstruct models of masculinity that perpetuated violence and were destructive for men as well as women.

Our research suggests that national policy and the proliferation of workshops and training courses by civil society actors over the past 15 years have contributed to a shift in the public discourse around gender equality and SGBV in Sierra Leone. However, as Mr Mackie notes, the work to foster meaningful gender transformation needs long-term investment and support by international actors who recognise the structures underpinning inequality in post-conflict contexts.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the long term, political and economic developments at a national level will hopefully lead to greater inclusion, and improved life possibilities for individuals living in poor, remote communities. In the more immediate term, the success of MAGE's Men's Dialogue Groups reveal what a transformative experience joining such a group can be. They enable members of communities too long 'considered of no account' (Richards 1996: 149) to be engaged with respectfully and over an extended period, in discussions about their gendered identity and experiences. They can discuss their aspirations for a life defined by healthy relationships, and have the opportunity to be respected as a positive role model by other men. MAGE's 16-week programme of 'dialogues' recognises that working to shift gender norms is a long-term process. It requires patience, sensitivity and highly skilled local facilitators.

This is especially true in a post-conflict context such as Sierra Leone, where many people have been traumatised as a result of the violence they suffered, bore witness to, or participated in, during the war. Given the extent to which the country's decade-long war and people's experiences of SGBV remain present in everyday life, it follows that work to foster social transformation will also need to be conducted through careful long-term engagement. This requires collective action, not only among 'local' actors like MAGE-SL and its partners working in a sustained and contextually specific way with communities across Sierra Leone; but it requires long-term transnational collective action that is sustained and sensitive, linking international development actors with local organisations to collectively 'sow the seeds of change'.

Drawing on the views of the people and organisations we worked with in Freetown and Moyamba, as well as an analysis of the findings of the research, we present a set of recommendations for the way forward in addressing SGBV and transforming gender relations. These recommendations have been developed for international actors (including donors and multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies) and national actors (including government and non-governmental agencies and civil society organisations).

1. Support local networks of civil society organisations (CSOs) to disseminate knowledge on key legislation relating to SGBV

Our research suggests that very few people in Sierra Leone are aware of the laws around SGBV. This problem is especially acute in hard-to-reach rural communities, where levels of literacy are low, and people are less likely to speak English or Krio. Essential activities include:

- i. translating the laws into simple, reader-friendly English versions and/or local dialects;
- ii. producing posters and audio recordings in order to reach illiterate populations;
- iii. using community radio stations to broadcast discussions of SGBV in local dialects, involving community leaders like pastors, imams and *mamiqueens* (female chiefs);
- iv. support to enable organisations to travel to villages in remote parts of the country, to speak with local leaders and call community meetings to discuss the laws and their implications;
- v. continued support for the facilitation of workshop sessions on SGBV and gender equality to sensitise more communities to these issues.

2. Support the Family Support Unit (FSU/SLP) to enforce SGBV laws

While the Sierra Leonean government should be lauded for its progress in passing legislation to protect women's rights, the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police (FSU/SLP) needs much more support to be able to enforce these laws. Crucial support includes:

- i. resources to employ more trained police officers, including training to sensitise them and promote a deeper understanding of SGBV;
- ii. resources to provide counselling and safe accommodation for victims and witnesses in SGBV cases;
- iii. motorbikes to enable officers to travel to remote communities to investigate reported crimes;
- iv. increased support for communities to access FSU/SLP services in remote areas.

3. Disseminate Men's Dialogue Groups as an example of best practice

There is growing awareness of the need to involve men and boys in CSO activities to address SGBV and, as revealed in this study, one way of achieving major strides in this area is through dialogues with men. Fundamental support to ensure this includes:

- i. resources to provide ongoing training of facilitators
- ii. maintaining and sustaining men's motivation and active engagement by finding and fostering local male activists who not only understand the issues, but are also passionate about spreading the value of gender equality among other men and boys.

4. Foster a more holistic understanding of SGBV

Our research revealed that while certain forms of sexual violence, such as rape, were addressed by the legislation, other forms of SGBV (such as abuse on public transport, in market places, or at other centres of public service delivery) remained invisible. There is also the need to acknowledge the impact of SGBV on different members of the community by:

- i. sensitising communities to understand the many different forms that SGBV takes, including rape, forced marriage, marital rape (which remains a very controversial issue), and sexual harassment;
- ii. taking an intersectional approach to ensure that SGBV is addressed comprehensively, and that the most vulnerable groups (e.g. people with disabilities, people with HIV, or those who have survived Ebola) are not left behind.

5. Work collectively to transform the structures and institutions that enable inequality to persist

Our study found that social transformation for gender equality truly takes place when different groups work together. However, the study also indicated that working with allies to address SGBV is not straightforward. Activities to sustain collective action include:

- i. engaging community leaders to establish a strong foundation for men's involvement;
- ii. engaging with religious leaders who have a large outreach and strategic platform via churches and mosques;
- iii. encouraging different stakeholders to come together in the process;
- iv. activists allowing community leaders to take ownership and lead the process. When initiatives are community-owned, community-led and community-driven, they are more durable and sustainable;
- v. further in-depth research is required to understand why and how Sierra Leone's south-east region was able to involve women in community leadership as paramount chiefs, town chiefs, etc., at a time when there was no evidence of inputs such as training or sensitisation on gender equality.