

Women's empowerment in Sierra Leone



*“We pray that no harm on thy children may fall, That blessing and peace may descend on us all;
So may we serve thee ever alone, Land that we love, our Sierra Leone.”*

These lines of the Sierra Leonean national anthem, which was adopted in 1961, seemed to no longer have any validity during the turmoil of the 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone. Triggered by Charles Taylor's support of *Foday Sonkah* and his RUF (*Revolutionary United Front*) and fostered by its crisis-ridden neighbour, Liberia, the conflict not only further set back the country significantly in its already low stage of development but also affected the population by its incredibly cruel way of warfare. The degree of barbarity is also evident in the fact that pictures of mutilated victims and drugged child soldiers were very present in Western media (unlike pictures of other less violent yet as dramatic conflicts). Also, just recently, „Blood Diamond“, a movie which tried to depict the reality of the civil war in Sierra Leone, guaranteed full cinema halls and can be considered to be one of the most successful Africa-related movies in recent years. Particularly disturbing is the fact that this whole war was mainly triggered by economic reasons, or, more precisely, by the greed of the national elites to get hold of the country's large diamond riches. It should also be highlighted that the civil war, above all, has been inflicted on the weakest sections of society: children, elderly people and women.

This article will mainly focus on the situation of women in Sierra Leone (for further information on child soldiers take a look at the article by Katuska Laurenco Da Silva and Roswitha Kern which can be found on the website of unlimited partnership e.V./Resources).

During the civil war women participated in all parties involved in the conflict. In most cases young girls were abducted and served as spies, fighters, commanders, cooks or spiritual healers. It can therefore be said that women were not only victims but sometimes also involved in the planning and commitment of war crimes. At the same time, acts of violence against women were everyday occurrences and even encouraged by RUF leaders. However, it were women who played a crucial role in the ending of the war in 2002: their firm rejection of the extremely serious war crimes sparked mass protest demonstrations and significantly contributed to the long-awaited laying down of arms. In spite of this, women were grossly underrepresented in the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program (mainly because the government considered it falsely to be a 'male conflict') and therefore had no access to the microcredits that were granted within the program.

It is essential to comprehend the role women play in the Sierra Leonean society. It should be underlined that this article attempts to present the situation of the majority of the women in Sierra Leone – of course, there are always exceptions to the rule! Overall, it can be stated that women are facing more social hurdles than men. Sadly, this inequality is largely accepted as the norm. The illiteracy rate among women is notably higher, they have a smaller or no influence at all on family planning, they are often subjected to female genital mutilation and forced marriages. Also, the law is providing only inadequate protection from domestic or gender-based violence and the possibility for women's participation in politics on a local or national level is almost non-existent due to a combination of the named factors.

This is based mainly on the existence of a patriarchal culture and, in some parts, religious values forbid women to participate in public life or speak in public. In short, a woman needs a husband to be accepted by society.

However, the status quo had been shaken to its very foundations in the course of the civil war. As the violence was inflicted on women in the most brutal way, their demand for greater rights was certainly influenced. They were forced to assume roles that were once prerogative of men. Due to the absence of men, women had to take the positions as heads of households or got involved in local governance. In addition, displaced women who hailed from rural areas often got exposed to the more autonomous lifestyles women living in urban areas were living. Also, women who had taken part in the abovementioned mass demonstrations quickly learned that there was a possibility of political participation – even if you were female.

Thus, in an irony of history, the recent violent upheavals in Sierra Leone's society could be put to good use that could contribute to correcting gender biases and warrant the promotion of women empowerment. However, taking a closer look at the above outlined challenges women are facing in Sierra Leone today, it is obvious that much remains to be done in terms of women's empowerment and that the process is still in its infancy.

With regard to legal frameworks, some important measures have been taken. A particularly noteworthy step in the right direction is the Family Support Unit which was established in 2001 within the Sierra Leonean police, serving as a contact point for women to report cases of domestic violence. In 2009, it succeeded to refer 313 cases to court and to have another 460 cases under investigation. Also, the Domestic Violence Act (in power since 2007) tackles this subject and provides protection for the victims. A UN-backed Special Court makes every effort within its means to penalise all those who committed rape or other acts of sexual violence against women.

However, domestic and international experts disapprove of the insufficient implementation of UN Security Resolution 1325 “on Women, Peace and Security“ which, in their opinion, lacks specific action plans. Recently, the government has been sharply criticised for

Women's empowerment

Women's empowerment is the process where women gain the ability to decide and act freely and the control over her resources or, as Kabeer (2001) puts it: *“The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”*.

It requires changes in people's mindsets, as well as in legal frameworks and existing structures. According to the common understanding it comprises e.g. equality in education, property rights and families/communities, access to sustainable employment, representation in governmental institutions, elimination of all forms of violence against women (as well as harmful traditional practices).

Women empowerment is one of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and is considered to be closely linked to all the other MDGs, such as the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, universal primary education, maternal health, a reduction in child mortality, etc.

its unwillingness to investigate cases of rape that had occurred during political clashes in Freetown in 2009.

A means that is deemed effective to counter women's disempowerment at grassroots level is considered to be microfinance.

The background of this instrument lies in the fact that women are generally over-represented among those affected by poverty. The vicious circle often begins very early in life. As school fees are typically too high for poor families to educate all their children, the family budget-holding men often decide to invest in their son's education rather than 'wasting money' on girls who are expected to marry and give birth as early as possible. Also, even if girls are sent to schools, it is statistically significant that most girls in rural areas achieve only a primary school education and in many cases drop out of school as soon as they reach puberty and/or they get married.

This causes a high illiteracy among women, which in turn causes a situation of dependency on their husbands or male members of the family. Further, the lack of education and low professional skill levels obstructs women's vocational choices, which is why they are often limited to choose a low-pay and low-status occupation in the informal or the agricultural sector. Their choices are further limited by cultural stereotypes which prohibit women to exercise certain activities. Also, their low income situation typically means that women lack the collateral to borrow money to purchase land. This is further impeded by property rights (particularly in the customary law) that restrict women's abilities to own and inherit land. For example, the Devolution of Estates Act (in power since 2007) which criminalizes the act of depriving a woman from inheriting her husband's property, is often still little known among local judicial institutions.

All of these adverse effects disempower women. It is this vicious circle of male dependency, poverty, poor education and lack of funds that microfinance tries to tackle. In the following, the positive effects of microfinancing – as well as some possible risks – will be highlighted.



Women's access to financial resources entails a lot of positive side effects. The right to decide freely about granted loans may be an initially unfamiliar experience but it is the first step in the direction towards greater independence. As the granting of credit is usually accompanied by the obligatory attendance of courses (e.g. on marketing skills or customer care), women are given the chance to learn how to speak out in public, as well as to develop and argue for own strategic choices. They share their experiences within the courses and possibly later in the entire community. You can only guess what influence this new role of women as advisors has on their self-esteem. Also, it most probably makes their husbands and other members of the community respect them more. This might result in a greater willingness to tackle discrimination and injustices, to engage in local governance, to put an end to abusive relationships and to pursue nontraditional activities.

Besides, recent researches have shown that women are more likely to invest into the welfare of the entire household, e.g. in health, nutrition, clothing and their children's education (including daughters' education) – whereas men tend to spend a greater proportion on their own well-being. Further, there is probably no dissent that financial security can strengthen family relationships because it lifts some burden from the shoulders of the breadwinners and makes home a more secure and safe place. Women who succeed to redistribute homework between their family members – because, due to their business, they can spend less time on domestic chores - can alter traditional gender roles and lay the foundation for more equal future generations (e.g. the son/husband agrees to do the laundry from now on).

The traditional model of role division may also decline if women financially participate in expenditures that were once the prerogative of men and hence also demand their say in terms of family planning, acquisition of property, etc.

The possible improvement of the family climate I mentioned above is a very fragile process and will certainly not simply happen overnight. It is rather likely to be connected with long periods of marital struggles, potentially also followed by violence or divorce. Even when this process has worked well and women can be integrated in the working process, in many cases, gender stereotypes often remain effectively unaltered. Women are still expected to follow gender norms, even if they are allowed to exercise non-traditional activities. This means that woman can face double workloads, i.e. a full-time profession as well as the entire housework, taking care of children and the elderly, etc. This burdens can quickly lead to exhaustion and abandonment of their work (or family) duties and often force women to return to their formerly purely domestic position after a while.

Besides, microfinance institutions often fail to cause major changes in the broader socio-economic context: in many developing or least developed countries, the situation on the labour market is extremely tense, and there are not many jobs available – thus, women entering the national work force on a wider scale force problems for the traditional ways work has been organized beforehand, might change work patterns, wages, unemployment rates etc. in a major way. Those macro-economic elements need to be carefully analyzed by decisionmakers before launching major microfinancing schemes that first and foremost argue with microeconomic benefits on the household level, as well as with certain values about gender equity and justice.

In order to prevent the spectre of women being disempowered by microfinance or negatively affected by adverse long-term effects, it is key to take to heart that microfinance and women empowerment are intrinsically linked: it will never be sufficient to just give out money – her share of household income does not indicate a women's well-being.

To ensure a sustainable empowerment changes have to be made on the grassroots as well as on the macro level: men have to be involved in negotiating to accept newly defined gender roles, measures have to be taken to guarantee the actual exercise of the de jure rights, gender equality has to be seen not as a nice 'extra' but as a necessity in all microfinance programs – the list goes on.

At any rate, it is clear that we can look positively in the future and, hopefully, women's empowerment will not have to be on the agenda of future generations. Microfinance can contribute to the fulfillment of this vision.

Editor: Marvin Kumetat