

# **Gender Equality – A Cornerstone for Development: Notable Insights from the Sierra Leone Case**

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*“Gender refers to the socially learned behaviour and expectations that clearly makes the distinction between masculine from feminine roles. In other words, humans are not born “men” and “women” but become one through the processes of learning, rehearsing and the daily performance of these roles” (Schirch and Manjrika, 2005: 5)*

*“Gender Inequality refers to the obvious hidden social constructs and or disparity that results in individuals (women and men) not having the same rights, opportunities, or privileges because of their sex” (Arthur: Alex Mbayo)*

*“Gender equality does not imply that women and men are the same, but that they have equal value and should be accorded equal treatment” (International Plan Parenthood Association)*

## **Introduction**

Gender equality is considered one of the fundamental rights for all humans (United Nations Fund for Population Activities – UNFPA), and therefore a cornerstone for development. But in most countries in the world, especially patriarchal nations like Sierra Leone, men and women are not accorded equal rights and opportunities in varying spheres of life. There is some recognition among gender activists that there has

been some improvement in the status of women due to some developments in the legislative environment as the government of Sierra Leone signed up to the international Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2000. This bold step led to some major achievements including the introduction of the National Gender Mainstreaming Policy (2004), the Anti-Human Trafficking Act (2005), the Child Rights Act (2007), the three Gender Justice Laws (GJL) of 2007. However, there still remain portraits of inequality between men and women. Joe Pemagbi, the former Chair of the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights acknowledged this fact in one of the reports of his commission, which he summarised thus:

*We have seen that the authoritative nature of traditional African administration structure excludes women and young people from the mainstream of decision making. The chiefs and the “grey hairs” have the “authority” to take decisions on behalf of women and the community at large. We have also seen the franchise at the chiefdom level favours men, limiting the participation of women in decision – making, including the right to choose their leaders. To understand rights, exercise rights and promote rights, rights should be exercised by those entitled to them, not by others on their behalf.*

Women have the right to live and enjoy their individual dignities and freedom from want and fear. This also implies that empowering women, who form the bulk of the population of most countries, can be an indispensable tool for advancing and enhancing development and the reduction in poverty levels of countries, especially developing ones like Sierra Leone. As simply put by UNFPA, “empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improve prospects for the next generation” (UNFPA). The importance of gender equality can best be underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight millennium Development Goals and has been singled out as key, for the achievement of the other

seven.

But irrespective of the importance of gender equality to the development continuum as has been highlighted, yet discrimination against women and girls, which encompasses gender- based violence, the existence of discriminatory policies and practices in the economic and reproductive health spheres, coupled with the continuity of harmful practices; less access to and ownership of land and property, which in turn affects women's economic status, less involvement in decision making, and low literacy rate among women, still remain the most pervasive and persistent threat to the achievement of equality between the sexes. These inequalities in societies are often manifest themselves during conflicts or emergency situations where women face tremendous and unbearable hardships, death, poverty and disease; as it was the case in Sierra Leone during the eleven years of civil war.

## **1. Statement of the Problem**

Women in most parts of the world, especially Africa and particularly Sierra Leone have for a very long time been disadvantaged by the patriarchal cultures, traditions and practices, structures, institutions and their policies that govern their respective countries and communities; which favour men. Janet Hensell Momsen therefore reiterates the need to meet women's needs and concerns and their inclusion in peace processes in order to promote justice, fair and sustainable development by stating that because sustainable development is a process through which the potentials of an object or organism are released, until it reaches its natural, complete, full-fledged form, the skills and knowledge of the human resources including women, who are the primary sustainers of society, must be utilized.<sup>1</sup> The resultant effects of the patriarchal nature of these societies that range from poverty, sickness, death, high illiteracy, discrimination and marginalisation to mention but a few; have over the years stimulated series of debates, theories and views by scholars and practitioners alike in

an attempt to explain what is meant by gender and development, focusing mainly on the emancipation of women from the yoke of these inequalities through gender mainstreaming and affirmative action or intervention. However, none of these attempts and interventions, ranging from the Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and now Gender and Development (GAD) programmes have been able to fully deliver the desired result – gender equality and development for women. For example, in the 1980s, among the programmes developed by UN agencies that targeted women as beneficiaries, 3.5 percent of programmes (representing 0.2 percent of the budget allocations) were deemed to benefit women. But unfortunately, less than 1 percent of the Food and Agricultural Organisations programmes contained strategies to reach women.<sup>2</sup>

In the views of Marilyn Porter, the participation of women as equal partners and decision makers in development efforts is a core value for doing development. This will to promote gender equality which refers to equal opportunities and outcomes for women and men, in short, a transformed partnership based on equality between women and men, is a condition for people centered sustainable development. A sustained and long-term commitment especially by stakeholders is also essential so that women and men can work together for themselves, their children and communities in order to meet future challenges. This involves the removal of discrimination and structural inequalities in access to resources, opportunities and services, and the promotion of equal rights thereby recognising that men and women have different roles and needs, which should be taken into account in development planning and programming.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the full political will to achieve gender equality and enhance development is not there. A senior retired civil servant in Sierra Leone, speaking on condition of anonymity, commenting on the political will of the GoSL to fully incooperate women into the decision making and development processes and to

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<sup>1</sup> Momsen, Janet Henshall. *Women and Development in the Third World*. London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth, Ferris. *Women, War and Peace: Research Report*, Uppsala: Life & Peace Institute, 2004, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Porter and Ellen Judd, *Feminist Doing Development: A Practical Critique*, London: Biddles Ltd., 1998.

fully promote gender equality, had this to say:

*I commend the GoSL for granting women the 30 percent for political participation and for enacting the GJLs but the structures and willingness to practicalise or implement these laws are key, which are yet lacking and the biggest challenge at hand facing women is that of addressing the culture of patronage that infuses politics in Sierra Leone and thus acts as a barrier to women's participation. Another important issue is the accountability relationship between political institutions/ political parties and the citizens – the influence of democratic patronage within Sierra Leone's democratic politics. The only possible solution to this is for donors (who at this point have a great leverage) to hold the GoSL and these institutions to account on these policies and to directly support LWCSOs that are frantically raising the community's awareness on the roles and responsibilities of women in politics, politicians and the political institutions.<sup>4</sup>*

In Sierra Leone, the constitution in theory guarantees equality of both sexes in all spheres of life, including being signatory to various international covenants and agreements that call for the rights of women to be upheld and guaranteed. In practice, the reality is that women, though 52 percent of the population, are the poorest and highly illiterate than their men counterparts all due to the prevalent discriminatory and the marginalisation practices embedded in the socio-political, economic, cultural and traditional ethos in Sierra Leone. For example women employed in the public sector are engaged in long hours of work, yet they are paid less and worst still 70 percent of the women population are involved in traditional agricultural production but have little or no access to agricultural loans or credit facilities, training, and no support from the government. This is mainly as a result of their lesser accessibility to land, private property to use as collateral, and the lack of meaningful employment has rendered them the poorest of the poor. These gaps pose a big threat to their full political

participation and hence make them more susceptible to domestic violence. The grave gender inequality that existed in Sierra Leone before 1991 was one of the causes (direct or indirect) of the eleven rebel war. A greater number of women who took part in the fighting and whom I interviewed came from poor, illiterate, discriminated and abandoned backgrounds. Professor Memunatu Pratt, Head of Department – Peace and Conflict Studies at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone; a human right and gender activist in an interview with the author underscored this point by saying:

*Women who were involved in the war were either those from difficult (less privileged or poor) family backgrounds, such as single parents fending for themselves and were therefore easy bait for conscription and other exactions. The peacebuilding process should therefore pay keen interest in helping women in these categories to raise their children in stable families and the sensitisation of grass roots women as part of the peace process. A truly harmonious peace should be all-inclusive and must address the needs of the vast number of single mothers, widows, victims of sexual abuse, deprived and poor women some of whom are just little above the age of a child with no sense of direction or bright future.<sup>5</sup>*

In Sierra Leone, women are caretakers and maintainers of their immediate, extended families and thus their communities. Hence their marginalisation and suffering over the decades since independence eventually produced a hurting, disgruntled, and a huge unemployed youth population that was easily exploited by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) for their personal gains.

Gender equality in its simplistic sense refers to a society, community or relationship where men and women enjoy the same opportunities, rights, outcomes and obligations in all spheres relating to their lives. In other words, equality refers to both

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with a senior retired civil servant, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 10th June, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mrs. Memunatu Pratt, Head of Department, Peace and Conflict Studies – Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Freetown, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2011, 2:00 pm.

men and women having their equal share or distribution of power and influence; enjoying equal opportunities for financial independence through work and the setting up of businesses; and the granting of equal access to education and the means of fulfilling individual/ personal ambitions. The critical issue though, in the quest to promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a clear and distinct focus on correcting the existing power imbalances; which could only be remedied by giving women more freedom and right to manage their own affairs. The empowering of women is very vital to creating a sustainable growth rate and development that will also culminate in the realisation of rights for all human kind.

Generally, the non-inclusion of women in peace and development initiatives has resulted to more conflict and the non-sustainability of peace and development efforts. During the late 1970s after the International Women's Year in 1975, it was recognised that development planning had ignored the important roles played by women in their communities which largely excluded them from the design and implementation of development programs. A move to address this led to the development of several approaches at the global level to combat these inequalities between women and men, especially in developmental issues by the international community. The second UN Decade (1970-9) saw increased integration of women's issues into development planning whereby the idea of creating units responsible for women and development began to develop within government machineries. The "Women In Development" (WID) programme of the USAID was instituted to provide four percent of its funds to women aimed at planning approaches to include their empowerment, equity or equality, efficiency and effectiveness. These approaches were based on different analyses of women's situation and conventional development practice, each with a different focus for integrating women's needs and concerns. WID viewed women as the problem, the focus and therefore tried to integrate them into the existing development process as it was hoped that that will help to integrate projects to develop more efficiently and effectively for women's initiatives to be brought into full play. However, the results of this programme, even in the private sector as well, were disturbing. This led to another development strategy known as the "women and

development perspective (WAD),” which took more critical approach and focused on the relationship between women and development, rather than simply devising strategies to incorporate them. WAD also recognised women as important economic actors by emphasising the informal and unrecognised work they do in their households and outside the formal sector. However, it failed to undertake a full scale analysis of the relationship between patriarchal, differing modes of production and women’s subordinate and oppressive status which limit their participation in activities relating to peace and development.<sup>6</sup>

These shocking revelations about the failure of the WID and WAD programmes to achieve their desired goals consequently gave rise to another perspective, the “Gender and Development (GAD)” discourse, which was developed to respond to the inadequacies and flaws of the existing two approaches mentioned above. It however paid more attention to both women and men’s roles and responsibilities, and emphasised the relationship between men and women in the development process with the aim of improving the status of women through the active participation of both men and women; and also mainstreaming women’s needs and perspectives into all activities. It stresses the need for development processes to incorporate strategies and processes which empower women, challenge existing gender roles and the sexual division of labour and rewards that continually transform gender and power relations.<sup>7</sup>

Women influence the course of events and their actions are constitutive of post war societies. The reduction of women to targets and beneficiaries both fail to recognise their contributions and add to their marginalisation. In this regard, the social transformation and reintegration processes of women should not only be seen as coming home, but about defining new guiding social values and establishing corresponding relationships and institutions based on a combination of factors including Kingdom, socio-economic interest shared experiences and circumstances. However, in addressing women’s level of participation in any peace building process, a gender analysis should be done as it will help to highlight issues relating to conflict to

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<sup>6</sup> Momsen, *op. cit.*, *Gender and Development*, London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

include the differences between the impact of arm conflict between women and men and the role of gender in peace building processes. In this regard and as Reycheler puts it, in order to achieve sustainable peace and development, the situation should be characterised by the absence of physical violence: the elimination of unacceptable political, economic and cultural form of discrimination: a high level of internal and external legitimacy or support, self-sustainability and a propensity to enhance the constructive transformation of conflicts. Sustainable peace and development in post conflict societies like Sierra Leone therefore can only be effectively achieved if it is equitable, sustainable and participatory. It should be one in which active participation of all are combined with a focus on their own interest as they see them, relying primarily on their own resources and carried out under their own control.<sup>8</sup>

This paper therefore discusses certain issues of inequality women in Sierra Leone face particularly in the economic, political and social spheres of life and the negative impacts this have had on development and peace; which could be experienced by any nation, especially developing ones like ours.

Invariably, the placing of full control in the hands of women over their own lives and fertility is indeed very fundamental to their empowerment and equality. For example, if a woman is able to plan her own family freely, she is also in a better position to plan her entire life; when healthy, she can be more productive. Additionally, when her reproductive rights – right to decide the number, timing and spacing of her children, and to make decisions regarding reproduction without discrimination, violence and coercion are guaranteed and protected, then only can it be said that she has freedom to participate more fully and equally in the affairs of her society.

### **3. Women's Work and Economic Empowerment/ Discrimination from Pre-colonial to Post-colonial Sierra Leone**

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<sup>8</sup> Reycheler, Luc and Thania Paffenholz. *Peace Building: A Field Guide*, Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2001.

A clear understanding of women's work and economic empowerment in Sierra Leone could be clearly understood from the perspective of the various political controls that were instituted by the different administrations. Pre-colonial Sierra Leone was ruled by a very sophisticated hierarchical authority with all powers – political, economic and social, were vested in the King, assisted by a group of chiefs appointed by him and a council of elders. The King was in total control of all spheres of life under his jurisdiction. The only political position held by a woman was that of “Queen,” which was only titular with very little significance. She was only required to garner support for among fellow women for the King's policies as women were not meant to “participate in public life or speak in public and should always be at the back.”

Colonialism has been viewed by historians, academicians and conflict writers and commentators as a masculine project of the white men, often referred to as “colonial masters” (Waylen, 1995: 45). In other words, the British colonial administration instituted in Sierra Leone in 1896, which was based on indirect rule, was basically bureaucratic, highly hierarchical and authoritarian. Women under this political scheme had no place, even as the position of “Queen” that they formerly held; was abolished. Based on the policies, laws enacted and practices, it is clear that the policy of indirect rule reinforced the legal and coercive powers of chiefs and male elders over their historic dependents and of males over females. This inequality led to sexual assault on black women by white men with no consequences.

The export oriented economy introduced by the British contributed to a reduction in the status of women as there was a dramatic reduction in their access to resources such as land and labour power and also increased the work load on them as men, who providers for their families, left the villages and went to work in the factories and plantations or to the urban centres to seek for employment. On the contrary, it reconstituted and increased the powers of men and traditional patriarchy and chiefs as it attempted to strengthen the power of those households and chiefs that can produce what the British colonialists wanted. Agricultural extension services such as training in new technologies and credits were all directed to local men, and even though women came under immense pressure to help in the cash crop production, yet

they had no right to share in the proceeds generated. The result of all of this was the use of women as security (pawning) for loans by the male who needed capital to repay debts obtained or to buy land, porters to carry cocoa and as family labour on cocoa and food farms. Secondly, the limited access to property, especially by women led to their lost of rights to customary law. Lastly, the influx of men into urban and mine centers in search of jobs, for which women were forbidden, created more burden for women leading to forceful migration of women to the towns. These single women, often without jobs, engaged in prostitution (though illegal but was encouraged as it was seen to provide useful service and for the safeguard of white women), while some others combined selling sexual services with domestic ones.

Under the colonial system, health and educational services were provided mainly by missionaries, which had separate goals for both boys and girls. For girls, it mainly focused on the domestic, intended to make them good mothers and wives of emerging African male elites and it emphasized morality and Christian values. The education for boys was meant to offer them the necessary skills for employment and to gain more adequate instruction on technical and agricultural issues. The limitation placed on the girl education consequently had a negative repercussion on their employment on the wage labour market in the formal economy. But worst still, even where a woman had gained the required Western education and qualified for a similar position that was giving to her male counterpart, the only main occupation that was open to them was teaching, a situation that led to a fight by Nigerian women for employment in the civil service.

These instituted and imbibed in negative gender policies, which gave the men folk sweeping powers and control over women in colonial Sierra Leone, continued even after independence in 1961, whose negative impulses produced (directly or indirectly) the rebel war in 1991.

Subsistence farming in Sierra Leone, from pre-colonial to date, accounts for seventy percent (70%) of the rural population and majority of these are the women. These women spend part of their time on other related tasks such as maintaining the household. This includes duties such as fetching water and collecting firewood for

domestic use. Other engagements such as producing and selling agricultural products are an essential part of her duties for which she receives no income.

Secondly, part of women's work in the home such as preparation of food, house cleaning; and caring for children, the elderly and the sick, the husband and other extended family members are all unpaid domestic work. These multiplicities of tasks women are engaged in adversely affect her quality of life, children and every other family member. Most often, as was eminent during the ten year rebel war, the need for these unpaid labour increases with economic shocks, such as those associated with the AIDS menace and the economic restructuring. During the rebel crisis in Sierra Leone, poor women in the displaced and or refugee camps, where men had less or nothing to do, did more unpaid work and for longer hours than usual and in worst and degrading conditions just for their family members to survive. The disheartening thing however, is that even as women underwent all of these constraints for the families and communities, yet their voices and experiences either as citizen or consumer paid or unpaid workers were largely missing or unheard of in debates on finance and development throughout the different administrative systems. This condition only slightly changed from the mid 1995, when women decided to make their presence felt by conducting the historic Bintumani I and II conferences that ushered in a democratically elected government in 1996 that started positive effecting policy changes infavour of women. This trend has continued up to the ongoing post war reconstruction and peacebuilding, thus giving women some amount of political space to be engaged both in the politics and post war reconstruction processes.

The existing gap between women and men in Sierra Leone is an old and inter-generational one. Generally, the existence of separate work patterns for men and women, and the invisibility of work by mainly women (commonly referred to as domestic work) that is not included in national accounts, has over the years led to lower entitlements to men than women. The lesser accessibility to resources by women from pre-colonial to post-independent Sierra Leone and the lack of attention to gender in relation to formidable micro-economic policy to deal with the inequality, has and continues to help widen the inequality, which continued to stretch the gender gap

further apart. For example in provincial or traditional areas of Sierra Leone, culture demands that girls of adolescence age spend more time in doing/ helping their mothers in household work or activities (cooking, cleaning, caring for the young siblings etc. whilst boys are concentrate more on farming or wage work. By the time both the girl and boy become adults, the girl would have worked more hours, gained less experience in wage labour, earn less income and have less time for leisure, play or recreational activities. Over time this has had and still continue to have untold impacts on the next generation although awareness on girl child education is gradually gaining grounds through the work of women's civil society organisations and the granting of free primary education for the girl child by the then Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) government. The fastest route out of poverty for women and for the next generation that could be taken by any well-meaning and development oriented nation is to invest in educating the girl child, which is one right step the government of Sierra Leone has taken to recovery and equality.

#### **4. Key Issues of Gender Inequality and their Linkages to Development**

Below are some of the important issues, which have tight linkages with and grave impacts on development that needs to be taken seriously and addressed amicably for equality to be achieved.

- ✓ **Reproductive health** – For reasons both psychological and social, women are more vulnerable to reproductive health problems than men. Reproductive health problem such as maternal mortality and morbidity pose a big but preventable cause to death and disability in Sierra Leone. Failure to provide health related information, services and improved conditions to help alleviate the health related issues of women by most of the past administrations, amounted to discrimination and a violation of women's rights to health and life. Thanks to the move by the current All Peoples' Congress Party (APC), with financial assistance from the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), for making

maternal health available and free for all pregnant women.

- ✓ **Control of natural resources** – In Sierra Leone, women are generally in charge of securing water, food and fuel , including the overseeing the health and diet of their family members. Invariably, because of the nature of their work they are quick to practicalise whatever good things or ideas they learn about nutrition and the preservation of environment and the available natural resources.
- ✓ **Economic empowerment** - Most women in sierra Leone are poor and lack economic empowerment firstly, because of the unpaid work within their families fall squarely on the shoulders and secondly because they face discrimination in the economic sphere – e.g. they lack development loan opportunities because of collateral, lack major investment opportunities due to lack of cash, not targeted by agricultural policies as small scale subsistence farmers etc.
- ✓ **Educational empowerment** – By UNFPA estimates, about two thirds of the illiterate adults in the world are female. In Sierra Leone, higher levels of women’s education is strongly associated with both a lower level of infant mortality and fertility, coupled as well with higher levels of education and economic opportunities for their children. But because the majority of women are illiterate, coupled with the inadequacy of medical facilities, there are high levels of infant mortality and fertility and limited economic opportunities that has led to the prevalence of poverty among women.
- ✓ **Political empowerment** – Women in Sierra Leone are grappling with their empowerment politically as their involvement is yet new from decades of suppression, marginalisation and discrimination. But even with the existence of social and legal institutions in the existing democratic dispensation, they have still not been able to guarantee women’s basic equality in legal and human rights interms of access and control of land and other resources, in employment and earning and social and political participation. The law against domestic violence is weak and often times not enforced on behalf of women.

- ✓ **Empowerment through the life cycle** – Women’s reproductive health issues are too delicate an issue, that is and should be treated as a lifetime concern for both men and women, from infancy to old age.

From the available literature and research/study reports, it is clear that addressing gender equality and women’s empowerment demands specific and strategic interventions at the various levels of programming and policy-making. At the moment, the 50/50 Group, one of the vibrant women’s civil society groups in Sierra Leone with its international backers has and is still currently engaged with government at the policy level for the achievement of gender equality. In their collaborated efforts, three gender bills were passed into law by 2007 and the achievement of an initial thirty percent (30%) quota for women across all political spectrums will soon be a thing of the past.

## **5. Negative Impacts of Gender Inequality**

Gender inequality has a high tendency to produce the following: low status of women, abuse of rights, large families, early forced marriages and increased death, HIV/Aids, hardship and low family development. Gender inequality, which has been and still is prevalent in the Sierra Leone society through practices such as female genital mutilation and early forced marriages, resulting to domestic and sexual violence, discrimination in marriage and human rights, education, politics, and employment; has over the years produced just these results and have prevented families from thriving. In effect, large families have and are experiencing increased poverty and the inability of parents to feed their families, pay for medicals or let alone send their children to school. For population, development and health programmes for women to be effective, they must be designed to effectively address issues related to their educational opportunities, status and empowerment.

The tendency for poor economic growth and poor returns on capital

investment is great where inequality exists. Various research reports from different parts of the world have concluded that “ when women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have ripple effects to future generations” (UNFPA). Various “[E]conomic models of fertility find the opportunity cost of women’s time as well as the bargaining power of women to be important determinants of the fertility rate” (Becker, 1981; Schultz, 1993; Sen, 1999). In other words, a highly educated woman living in a lower gender inequality educational environment; is likely to lead to a reduced fertility/ mortality rate and a better standard of the family. In the same vein, higher education increases her knowledge on health issues which in turn improves her ability to promote the health of her children (World Bank, 1993), and possession of a greater bargaining power also increases her say over household resources which often leads to greater allocations to child health and nutrition, compared to their husbands (Klase, 1999: 6). This can help improve economic growth directly through increasing the quality of human capital can also increase the investment rate as the return on investments is higher in a country with viable human capital.

The increased rate of prostitution among women and girls, mainly in urban cities of the world is a direct consequence of the existing unequal gender relations, unequal access to resources, income opportunities, assets, and social power. For example, the increased poverty amongst women in Sierra Leone, the unavailability of sustainable livelihoods, and lack of a viable financial support base, especially for young women and girls who loss their husbands, children and relatives; have very much involved in much of the sexual risk-taking for survival. This has led to increased rate of HIV/Aids infection, redundancy, deaths and reduction of the potential middle manpower population.

## **6. Practical Attempts at reducing Gender Inequality globally and in Sierra Leone**

In a bid to addressing these issues first requires among others, the identification of women’s groups that are marginalised and live in extreme poverty and then; the

designing of specific programmes/ projects targeting their needs and concerns. These could be done using the following measures.

#### **A. Embarking on Education for Women's Empowerment**

According to the ICPD programme of Action (para. 4.2) "Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process." Education is an important mile stone for everyone, but very significant for women and girls in their liberation struggle. Invariably, education is only the entering point to other opportunities and an effective way of reducing poverty, but the education of women/ girls, especially secondary education, is widely believed to have high dividend and rippling effects within the family and across generations. For example educated women/ girls are believed to enter marriages at a later age, develop smaller and healthier families as they recognise the importance of health care and the need to manage their lives and their children. In Sierra Leone, the illiteracy rate of men is significantly higher than women. Therefore, the foundations of a greater majority of the families in Sierra Leone were resting on shaky foundations, due to all of the factors mentioned above; which was to see a total collapse leading to the ten year civil war.

#### ***Possible Effects of Educating Women***

- ✓ It is a truism that the education of parents is closely linked to educational attainment of their children. But over and above this, it is also believed that the education of the mother most often has a greater positive influence on the children than the father's.
- ✓ An educated woman's greater influence in family or household negotiations may allow her to acquire more resources for her children.
- ✓ Education gives her the opportunity to be gainfully employed/ be in the labour force and therefore contribute to sharing/ paying the costs of the children's education, with full awareness of the possible returns.
- ✓ An educated mother's averaging on a limited number of children brings about

concentration on each child.

- ✓ Education puts women in a better stead for likely mistimed or unintended births. This has a positive effect as all the children are giving the opportunity for schooling as compared to poor families with many children.
- ✓ Education of women helps to close the gender gap, which is a development priority in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as enshrined in the millennium development goals. The 1994 Cairo Consensus made education as one of its priorities among others, especially education of women, as a force for social and economic development (Global Partners in Action, 2009: 2). In this conference, the universal completion of primary education was set as a twenty year goal as a wider access to secondary and higher education among girls and women.

## **B. Embarking on Political Empowerment for Women**

Women's equality in many countries in the world, and especially in Sierra Leone, is mostly tied to and undermined by imbalances that exist in the decision making, rights, power and access to resources and entitlements for women. From the perspective of either law or tradition, most women suffer series of discriminations as a result of their lack of rights to:

- ✓ Own land and or inherit property
- ✓ Credit facilities
- ✓ Attend and stay in school
- ✓ Earn income and enjoy a normal upward mobility (promotion) in their work

Higher decision-making levels – Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and with enormous campaigns for women's equal inclusion at the decision making levels, they are still under-represented at all levels, from local to national spheres. Although there now exists some space for women to participate in the governance structures of the country at the national level and greater awareness raised on their rights, yet at the community or domestic level, inequality, political violence against and disregard for women's rights to decision making positions as stakeholders still persists. In present day Sierra Leone, though women with the help of the international community are striving to

enter the political and decision making arena where men have been the sole participants, they still face stiff resistance from their male counterparts. For example an interview with a female member F.K. (full name withheld) of a district council in southern Sierra Leone talking about the difficulty women political aspirants, especially for parliamentary and district councils face retorted thus:

*Women attempting to enter parliament and district councils face significant hostility and obstruction from local men. We face much difficulty in getting the party nomination or selection as some of us do not have the patronage networks to support us because we do not come from “big” local family or “party” family. Our supporters, who are most often women are often harassed, threatened and beaten by supporters of rival male aspirants to withdraw their support for us.<sup>9</sup>*

### **C. Involving/ engaging Men/Boys**

For gender equality to be achieved and to make attempts at improving reproductive health successful there is a greater need to involve men as well. Without the cooperation of men, it will be extremely difficult for women alone to reach the gender equality goal. Most often than not, it is men who determine number and variety of sexual relations, the timing and even the frequency, and the use of contraceptives which could be sometimes through coercion or violent means. Secondly, as community, political and religious/ faith based leaders ; judges, heads of armies and agents of force, fathers and husbands in communities and nations, men have tremendous power and control over access to information on reproductive health, finance and even transportation of resources and over women’s lives. However, research reports have indicated that the longing by men to have satisfying relationships built on trust and communication has heightened their desire to be part of the mission to achieve the above mentioned. For example ongoing research findings have proffered that men are

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with a female villager, Moyamba Town, Moyamba District, Southern Sierra Leone, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2011. 5: 00 pm.

or can be valuable allies in the addressing reproductive health issues – from maternity to domestic violence.

Historically in Sierra Leone, gender equity and women's rights have been largely associated with women's organisations. However, coming into terms with negatives of the war, it is now increasingly recognised that with unequal power relations at the core of gender inequity, it is crucial to engage with (rather than alienate) men and boys, as well as women and girls, in order to achieve lasting change. Non-governmental Organisations such as Oxfam GB, Christian Aid, Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI) and Concern Worldwide in a joint initiative, are in the process of developing a training manual for male facilitators to lead discussion and reflection among men on gender equality in a bid to reduce violence against women.

An organisation known as Men Addressing Gender Equality (MAGE) was created in 2000 to mobilise men around issues of gender equality, and more recently the Men's Solidarity and Support Group was set up alongside WSSG to mobilise men specifically on the issue of women's political representation and to bring them on board around the minimum 30% quota.

A coalition comprising of international non-governmental organisation such as Oxfam GB, Action Aid International Sierra Leone (AAISL), COOPI and CSOs (including district-level women's networks in Kailahun, Koinadugu, Kono and Western Area Rural District) has been formed to provide an advocacy platform to tackle the important issue of women's property rights; and the terms of reference for the coalition are currently being finalised.

#### **D. Giving Girls and Adolescents Special Attention**

Gender inequality, discrimination on the basis of sex, inferiority and superiority complexes starts at an earlier stage in children and it begins from the different treatments meted out to boys and girls in the homes. These form the foundations upon which many sexual and reproductive health issues emanate. Generally, boys at their adolescent age are allowed and exposed to community and public life at an earlier stage whilst girls are granted limited freedom of movement through restrictions for

domestic chores. Social construction of gender in traditional homes in Sierra Leone in the recent past; gave preference to male children over females. As a male child born and bred in southern Sierra Leone, I can bear witness to the fact that in the traditional/provincial and remote areas of Sierra Leone boys are made to believe they are better and even superior to girls and hence are giving the opportunity to choose careers, with girls having very little say in determining their own aspirations and hopes; that shape and direct their thinking towards becoming wives and mothers no matter their personal achievements (although this has now changed significantly starting from the last decade).

Unequal gender construction grants low statuses to women and also leads to domestic and sexual violence against them. Physical violence against women and children for example is commonplace in Sierra Leone as a result of the long unequal gender construction. In a survey interview on this issue of sexual and SGBV, 69 percent of the urban women admitted to have been beaten and 51 percent reported being forced at one point by men to have sexual intercourse. But irrespective of all of these, the proposed solution to all of this is through educational, social and legal processes that promotes equality between women and men and between boys and girls. But even in the course of doing this, there is need to pay particular attention to the vulnerabilities, pressures and risks faced by young women in communities.

#### **E. Putting a Stop to Wide-spread/ Gender-based Violence against Women**

According to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (para. 112) “violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms... In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture.”

It is commonly believed that one in every three women in the world have either been beaten, coerced into sex and have suffered abuse (emotional or psychological) in one way or the other. Gender based violence leads to compromise in the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims. In other words, it involves a

wide range of associated issues including human rights violations, which may include sexual abuse of children, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, trafficking of women and girls and other harmful traditional practices. The situation is even made worse where the culture of silence, for fear of been ostracised by society and the denial of the seriousness of the consequences. The truth of the matter is that all of these abuses do not only leave psychological scars, cause damage to the health of victims but sometimes are a cause of untimely death for women and children.

Sexual violence against women can be a cause or consequence of HIV/Aids, which is an epidemic in our current world. A strong link is purported to exist between sexual and other forms of abuse and their chances of contracting HIV/Aids. It is common knowledge that the need for condom use is non-existence when a woman is being beaten and raped as it the case during the Sierra Leone conflict (Mbayo, 2006: 50-52). Forceful sex or virginal penetration, it has been noted, increases the risk of HIV transmission. More importantly also, some traditional practices, coupled with the fear of violence; prevents a many woman from refusing sex, asking her male partner to use condoms, take a HIV test or to access information on HIV/Aids even when suspicion about infection is rife. In the Sierra Leone context and under the customary law, women can only refuse to have sexual intercourse with their husbands only when they are on their menses, physically ill or suckling a young child. Similarly so, they can only refuse sex during daytime in the bush or during Ramadan – the Muslim holy month (Joko-Smart, 1983). In a nut shell there is nothing like marital rape in Sierra Leone because culturally people believe that the wife has no right to refuse to have sex with her husband even if she does not feel like (Physicians for Human Rights, p.55). In a secret interview with M.A. (full name withheld), a victim of rape and sexual violence narrated her ordeal to me thus:

*....I was a virgin and had just started my periods and also just gone through the bondo secrete society when I was raped repeatedly. I continued to bleed for more than two weeks from my virgina and anus. When I was finally taken to the hospital, I was told that my virgina had been badly torn. I can*

*no longer control my bladder as a result of this. I had to be given a catheter, as the operation did not solve the problem. I am very bitter because my husband does not love me anymore because I have not been able to give him a child. He has even married another woman. I still smell bad which has prevented me from getting a husband.*<sup>10</sup>

#### **F. Collaborating to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Other Harmful Traditional Practices where they exist**

Traditional initiation into secret societies as a rite of passage for girls from adolescence to adulthood is common Sierra Leone especially in the provinces. This initiation rites take place in secret locations called the “Bondo bush” for girls) where these young girls are circumcised and taught various traditional practices such as dancing, singing, use of local herbs, how to respect elders; and being a good wife -cooking, cleaning, child care, fishing, hygiene etc. by the older folks. Interview with medical practitioners in Sierra Leone reveals that FGM has and continues to cause serious pain and health care problems (injury to the urethra tissues, hemorrhage, shock, acute urine retention, and infection) for many of the ninety percent of the Sierra Leonean women that have undergone it. Although there has been and still ongoing campaigns by local women’s civil society, human right organisations and intervention by the UN to stop this harmful tradition, its still being practiced on a large scale especially in traditional Sierra Leone; and various governments have not been able to put a stop to it by legislation as is regarded as a sensitive issue that might have negative consequences for their political career.

Another harmful practice that has had enormous negative consequences on women is early forced marriage. This practice is a common phenomenon in the provinces of Sierra Leone where a man sponsors a girl from her childhood (paying school fees, buying clothes, etc.), allowing her time enough to be of age for the traditional rite of initiation. The initiation process in general signals her maturity, which automatically qualifies her for marriage no matter the age (usually below age

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<sup>10</sup> Interview: M.A. (full name withheld), Kenema, Eastern Sierra Leone, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2011, 7:00pm.

eighteen which is the age of maturity), thus bringing her schooling to an abrupt halt. Early/forced marriages have resulted to 2,100 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (UNDP, 2010: 6), making Sierra Leone's maternal death rate one of the highest in the world.

Wife beating is another practice that is common in many cultures around the world. Customary law allows a husband to "reasonably chastise his wife by physical force" (Joko-Smart, 1983: 152) if and when it becomes necessary. It only becomes unacceptable if done persistently cruel or beats her to an extent that bodily harm is afflicted. This gives her the right to divorce the husband if she opted. The police in the recent past, have created a Family Support Unit (FSU) to deal with such issues but its effective, especially in the provincial and remote areas do not only have these facilities but are far removed from urban centers where these facilities exist. In an interview with a house wife on the respect for the rights of women and their political participation in the Northern Province, she remarked:

*Although women's civil society organisations have been able to effectively raise awareness on sexual and gender-based violence, women are still at risk of suffering immense right violation, especially wife beating and battering that is still very much evident and encouraged by the local tradition and culture; through the peace education programmes of LWCSOs, organised protest marches by the general women population and through their work with the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone police.<sup>11</sup>*

In many parts of Asia, a preference for male children results in the neglect and sometimes infanticide of girls, or their elimination by abortion in places where prenatal tests are available to determine the sex of the fetus (UNFPA). In other countries, practices that undermine the well-being of women such as like slavery, and foot-binding, honour killings, gender based violence in the mass media/ television in

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with a house wife in Kambia, Northern Province - Sierra Leone, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2011. 2:00 pm.

industrialised/ developed countries still exist.

### **G. Adopting and Implementing Key International Agreements and Instruments**

The adoption and implementation of international convention and covenants such as those mentioned below and other regional ones, can be very instrumental in achieving equality.

1. *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – CEDAW* (December, 1979). It is an international bill of rights for women that define what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to foster equality.
2. *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995) and its special session (Beijing + 5) entitled “Women: 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century” (June 2000) at United Nations Headquarters, New York. In this session, governments reaffirmed their commitment to the goals of the 1995 Beijing women’s conference and also adopted future actions and initiatives for the year 2000 and beyond.
3. *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995). It reflects a new international commitment to the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere.
4. *The Convention on the rights of the Child – CRC* (1989). It is the most widely and rapidly ratified human rights treaty in history. It deals with protection of children from early forced marriages, recognition of adulthood as 18 years, and rights to education.
5. *The United Nations Millennium Declaration*. It was unanimously adopted at the conclusion of the Millennium Summit, the first General Assembly of this century and the largest ever gathering of world leaders. It contains statements of values, principles and eight specific goals with related targets that constitute an international agenda for the twenty-first century. Goal number 3 is “to promote gender equality and empower women.” However, gender equality and women’s empowerment are widely recognised as being essential to achieving the other seven

goals as well. This is the first resolution ever that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contribution to conflict resolution and sustainable peace.

6. ***Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women - CEDAW*** (1993). It defines violence against women and calls on states to take specific measures against it.
7. ***Adopt Regional Conventions that deal with the Issue*** – E.g. for Africa, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women.

## **7. Some Major Positive Steps that have been taken by the Government of Sierra Leone and Partners to address Inequality**

According to de Tocqueville (1954) the great French writer, gender inequality is one of the causes of conflicts that are seen all over the world. In one his writings, he states:

*Remove the secondary causes that have produced the great convulsions of the world and you will almost always find the principle of inequality at the bottom. Either the poor have attempted to plunder the rich, or the rich to enslave the poor. If, then, a state of society can ever be founded in which every man shall have something to keep and little to take from others, much will have been done for the peace of the world.”* (Tocqueville, 1954).

In this regard, policies that are meant to stimulate growth either before, during or after conflict, must be designed to address existing inequalities. Addressing these inequalities may prevent, reduce, or address the root causes of major conflicts around the world.

The government of Sierra Leone and other stakeholders, in their determination to address inequality, which directly or indirectly has been the source of conflicts; have

taken positive measures such as:

The Government ratified the:

1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1988 and acceded to the optional protocol on CEDAW in 2000. Major achievements include the introduction of the National Gender Mainstreaming Policy (2004), the Anti-Human Trafficking Act (2005), the Child Rights Act (2007), the three Gender Justice Laws (GJL) of 2007, which comprise of:

- a) **The Domestic Violence Act (2007)**, which deals with three important areas. The purpose of this Act is to provide ways of dealing with violence in the home, how to prevent it and how to provide protection for the victims of this type of violence.

This act includes and deals with the following:

- 1. The offence of domestic violence
- 2. The Protection Orders
- 3. Settlement out of court

- b) **The Devolution of Estate Act (2007)**

This Act examines what happens when a man dies without writing a will (intestate), and even in the event where there is a will (testate). Before the coming in to effect of this Act women were disadvantaged more especially under the Muslim and Customary laws.

This act now abolishes some sections of the Sierra Leone constitution that were discriminatory against women. These include:

- ✓ Section 26 of the Christian Marriage Act which states that a marriage celebrated in which one of the parties is a native will not have any effect on the property of the native.
- ✓ Subsection (1) of section 9 of the Muslim Marriage Act which states that when the woman dies intestate the man takes the whole whiles the woman is not entitle to benefit if the man dies intestate.
- ✓ The Second Schedule to the Administration of Estates Act Cap.45 which states that if a woman dies intestate leaving a husband the whole of the estate shall go

to him, whereas if a man dies intestate leaving a widow only one third will go to the wife.

**c) The Registration of Customary Marriages and Divorces Act (2007)**

The purpose of this Act is for the registration of customary marriages and divorces so as to protect marriages contracted under customary law or live together as husband and wife in the name of custom; and the adoption of others like: National Policy on the Advancement of Women (2009), the National Gender Strategic Plan (2009), and the Sierra Leone National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 & 1820 (2009), and the passing of the three gender acts (Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, p.1). It is important to note here that addressing inequalities requires the willingness of governments to legislate laws and public policy that will formalize the goal of gender equality. Most countries have already implemented some legal changes, which is the stepping stone towards gender equality but not necessary sufficient in itself for creating lasting changes. The proper address of gaps between the new prescription and what actually occurs most often requires broad campaigns.

2. The government of Sierra Leone also adopted a transformative action in 2002 by offering "free education" to the girl child at the primary school level. However, this has not been effective in addressing the problem. According to reports by Siaka Koroma to determine the factors that affect women's enrolment and attendance of schools in rural communities in Sierra Leone in 1993 as cited by Khadija Bah, the national enrolment ratio (ER) is 39.7 percent for all persons aged five and over, but only 24.6 percent for rural areas. For girls, the national ER is 36.5 percent, but only 20.6 percent for girls in rural areas (Bah, p.1). There is therefore a high level of illiteracy among women, which could be explained by the needed labour of the girl child at an early age in assisting the mother in the home since the mother is required to take care of the household and children and to do farm work
3. Early in 2011, the Department for International Development (DFID) launched a new strategic vision for girls and women. DFID in Sierra Leone is committed to

putting women and girls at the heart of its development strategies, and earlier this year set up a gender unit, a pilot project for nine months initially, tasked with creating a better understanding and awareness of gender issues and effective responses in Sierra Leone. DFID's gender unit is planning to conduct a mapping of different actors tackling gender issues in Sierra Leone, because there is as yet no clear and comprehensive picture of the role civil society is playing in tackling gender issues.

## **8. Conclusion**

The roles performed by both women and men in societies are not biologically but socially determined and can change and are changeable, and although restrictions on change to some of these roles may be justified as being required by culture or religion; yet these roles vary widely from place to place and from time to time. Therefore, any attempt to address women's issues requires first and foremost, the recognition that women are a diverse group and with great diversity in their roles as well as in their characteristics such as: age, social status, urban or rural orientation and educational attainment. Although many similarities or common interests may exist among women, yet the fabrics of their lives and the choices available to them may widely be at variance. But interestingly however, research findings by the UNFPA has now revealed that "applying sensitive approaches can be key to advancing women's rights while respecting different forms of social organisation" (UNFPA).

The reality however is that eradication of all of these harmful practices mentioned can never be achieved in a short period in countries where they are prevalently practiced since they have persisted for centuries and specifically for Sierra Leone, as they are part and parcel of the culture and tradition. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, the executive director of UNFPA summarised this problem thus:

*Consensus-building around social issues is extremely difficult, because it*

*touches the identity of nations, communities and individuals. Discussion of social questions polarizes viewpoints and may seem to widen the gap between cultures. But in the end, the overriding social purpose concentrates our minds and enables us to bridge all cultural gaps-not because we want to go home with an agreed form of words, but because all of us, each in our own way, want to save people's lives.*<sup>12</sup>

However, one of the important ways to tackle gender inequality is through information sharing and advocacy that constantly keeps the awareness of the public raised, which will gradually change the way people think and thus act positively to strike the balance. Gender equality is therefore not just a means to achieving peace in a diverse society but also a necessary condition for the development of all; irrespective of race, creed, religion or sexual orientation. In Sierra Leone, one of the seemingly successful weapons in the hands of women's civil society for the preaching of gender equality all over the country is the media/radio. They have developed programmes that involve discussions, campaign jingles, and play acts followed by questions and answers with both men and women being part of the debaters, discussants and or presenters. This is having tremendous impacts on improving gender relations as at now compared to the past.

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<sup>12</sup> Thoraya, Ahmed Obaid (Executive director of UNFPA), *Gender Equality: Taking a Stand Against Practices That Harm Women*, p. 1.

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