

Women and Civil Conflict: Liberia and Sierra Leone¹

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Résumé

Le présent article est consacré à une analyse du caractère et de la nature des tâches exécutées par les femmes dans les crises libérienne et sierra léonienne. Ce faisant, il se démarque des perspectives essentialistes qui prévalent dans les études de relations de genre en Afrique. Il insiste plutôt sur la « militarisation » des activités des femmes en temps de guerre ainsi que le fait ressortir leur rôle dans les processus de recrutement, la mobilisation de l'appui financier au profit des différentes factions armées, et leur implication dans les processus de paix et de reconstruction après les conflits. Par cet essai, on espère également donner la parole et plus de visibilité aux femmes ordinaires prises dans les zones de conflit, mais aussi encourager davantage la recherche empirique sur le rôle et les activités des femmes dans les conflits armés contemporains de l'Afrique.

Introduction

Although the Liberian civil war and its offshoot in Sierra Leone, led by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Foday Sankoh, have been extensively analyzed, one critical aspect of both conflicts that has remained virtually untouched in the literature is the involvement of women in the crises and the 'feminisation' of the 'militarization' processes associated with it. The term militarization has been chosen because of its wider empirical value. Militarization as an operation in the mobilization of assets for war entails a much wider and encompassing process, and does not only presup-

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pose explicit dominance. It also involves mobilizing and equipping civil society for the display of violence. This paper will, therefore, challenge some of the essentialist discourses which see women as inherently peaceful, and, thus, as solely victims of the atrocities of war. In doing so, we will focus mainly on the Liberian experience, although we will also refer to Sierra Leone.

Until recently, in the few cases where women and their functions during the Liberian and Sierra Leone civil wars have been illustrated, they have generally been presented as hapless victims of senseless male brutality. Instances of atrocities committed by women and their active involvement in violent conflicts have tended to create analytical difficulties for observers who, more often than not, have found it perplexing to reconcile such evidence with popular perceptions. The essence of this essay is to investigate as many aspects as possible of the diverse roles played by women in the two civil wars mentioned above. The essay also attempts to confront the critical issues of the character and nature of female involvement in two of West Africa's most brutal civil wars. This is crucial because, in both instances, we are dealing with very conservative and patriarchal societies where women have traditionally taken a second position to men in society. Yet, in spite of patriarchy, there have been instances in the contemporary politics of both societies where individual women, by dint of hard work, have managed to compete and rise to positions of influence.

First, we start with a framework which seeks to move away from the perspective of women as unlucky, innocent, second victims. Through the various subsections of the essay, we will, as much as possible, attempt to present a diversified version of the character of female participation in war; our analysis seeks to encompass all aspects of their contribution to the processes of militarization, ranging from the recruitment of fighters to active participation in the prosecution of war and to finding solutions aimed at ending the fighting as well as promoting post-conflict reconstruction. Finally, we aim through this article to give women a voice. Where possible, they are provided with an opportunity to present their own perspectives and experiences of the wars.

Women, War, and Sexual Violence

In the formative stages of the Charles Taylor-led the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), women played diverse roles in the process and provided what can be termed the primary infrastructure of resistance. Despite the recent downplaying of their role in the latter stages of the conflict, women provided crucial political support, access to centrally placed regional political actors, courier services, and, in certain cases, intelligence to assist the NPFL's early efforts. In Ghana, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, they provided sanctuary for those in need of it, especially officials of the NPFL.

With respect to the sources of financing for the NPFL and the role of women in this activity, information is scattered and hard to verify. Nevertheless, during Charles Taylor's fund-raising drive along the West Africa coast, women seemed to have played a critical function in either introducing him to individuals who could help him, or were active in managing the resources that came out of his transportation business in Ghana. For instance, the then Burkinabé ambassador in Ghana, Madam Moumouna Capture, a close associate of Blaise Compaore, is believed to have been the person into whose hands Charles Taylor was released after he had finished serving time at the detention chambers of the Bureau of National Investigation at Accra. Capture subsequently introduced Charles Taylor to her boss and the rest is virtually history now. Subsequently, during Charles Taylor's fund-raising activities in the US, renowned Americo-Liberian women were actively engaged in planning his speaking engagements and travel schedules which netted an estimated USD 1 million. Some of these activists were, however, to forsake the NPFL after the death of Samuel Doe when it was felt that the *modus operandi* or locus of the struggle should shift from an armed struggle to a negotiated settlement. Prominent among these women was Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a presidential candidate in the 1997 elections.²

Women members of the different armed factions fell into two groups: volunteers and conscripts. Irrespective of how these women were recruited into the different factions, the functions they

served, and the positions they attained, we can discern instances when the women felt compelled to defect. In most of the known cases, such defections took place especially when the women were forced to bear weaponry and/or act as sexual partners or nurses to wounded faction group members. Those women who successfully escaped gave disturbing accounts of the conditions under which they had been kept virtually captive. Even when these alternative perspectives have been brought forward and generally documented, such statements have not been included in the disparate interpretations which have been presented on the war. Among the women who joined the factional groups voluntarily, defections occurred only or primarily when their political beliefs became diametrically opposed to those of their leaders. One of the most prominent defectors in this category was Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf who declared that she initially supported Taylor because the struggle he was leading was a popular people's movement. However, when Taylor began to pursue his personal agenda by turning the struggle into a 'commercial war', and seeking power for himself, the split ensued.³ Johnson-Sirleaf later became presidential candidate in 1997 elections. Another well-known defection from the NPFL was that of its top female political operative, Grace Minor. As a leading NPFL personality, Minor became increasingly suspicious of the trenchant 'anti-demobilization', 'no-negotiations' approach to peace talks pursued by a core group around Taylor. This was after she had in fact been accused of being one of the leading figures behind the increasing re-emergence of the repatriate-indigene dichotomy in the NPFL and had been a proponent and active advocate of the selective elimination of indigenous leaders like Jackson Doe, Cooper Teah, Alfred Flomo, Stephen Daniel and David Toweh, among others. By 1992, the extent of these selective ousters had attained such magnitude that the Executive Secretary of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at the time, Abbas Bundu, in his Interim Report to the Council of Ministers, stated inter alia that: 'it was becoming evident that (the) NPFL was guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity'.⁴

The resignation of Grace Minor, one of the few competent high-ranking NPFL officials, not only jolted the organization but

also made it clear to some of her senior male colleagues in the NPFL that their position during peace negotiations⁵ had become essentially untenable. The NPFL had, as early as 1990, devised the tactic of dispatching delegates to peace conferences without any authority and mandate to sign peace agreements or accords on behalf of the organization. A constant response from NPFL negotiators was a 'no-mandate' plea to make binding agreements. This way, they scuttled almost fourteen such conferences. Minor's departure eventually compelled several of her male colleagues, including Tom Woewiyu, Lavelli Supuwood, Sam Dokie and Moses Dupuo, to also defect from the parent organization and form the NPFL-Central Revolutionary Council (NPFL-CRC).

There are many issues on which the NPFL can be severely criticized but we must also acknowledge the dexterity with which the organization's leadership appointed women to top positions. One example of such an appointment, which became a 'success story', was the elevation of Victoria Reffel, a close and trusted confidante of Taylor, to high office. By the end of 1993, the increasing series of defections among top ranking members, field commanders and ordinary citizens had convinced Reffel of the need for a change in the NPFL strategy of seeing the Nigerian-led ECOMOG intervention as an impediment to the NPFL's battlefield success and the control of the presidential palace, known as the Executive Mansion, in Monrovia. Added to this was her aspiration to stem the spiraling tide of popular perception of the NPFL as an Americo-Liberian scheme to revenge the post-1980 indigene coup during which thirteen top leaders of the political and economic class who came from the settler minority group were executed.⁶

Consequently, as the representative of the NPFL in the 1995 extraordinary summit of ECOWAS leaders on Liberia in Abuja, Reffel was entrusted with the complicated diplomatic assignment of lobbying Ghanaian and Nigerian diplomats of Taylor's new willingness to negotiate with Nigerian leaders. The centrality and importance of this assignment should be seen in the light of Taylor's intransigence in the previous five years⁷. The importance of Reffel's accomplishment upon the successful completion of this intricate diplomatic stint, was clearly expressed by Taylor:

...coming here is an indication of our recognition... and the importance in breaking this particular impasse ...There is no longer an intransigent party ...all those lies and deceptions to keep this atmosphere of hostility is over.⁸

Reffel's diplomatic lobbying was obviously so successful that in a pre-departure statement, Taylor could confidently inform the assembled journalists that 'this is a time for peace; let us be thankful that we are moving in that direction'.⁹

On the basis of Reffel's demonstration of her communication and negotiation skills, she had, by August 1996, been promoted to be the NPFL's representative member and Minister of Information on the second Liberian National Transitional Government (LNTG-2). In this position, her diplomatic skills were brought to bear on the deliberations of the 19th Ordinary Summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government meeting in Abuja, Nigeria. Heading a four-person delegation to the summit, she canvassed for the implementation of the treaty provisions under the revised Abuja Accord, lobbying major sub-regional actors to see this Accord as offering the greatest means of accomplishing peace in Liberia.¹⁰

The persecution of women by the belligerents in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts has not been adequately discussed in the published literature. Yet, there is abundant evidence that in both wars, women were systematically exploited and their rights violated. In the case of the NPFL, rape was specifically elevated to a central position in its intimidation tactics and exercised as a tool of coercion and terrorism. In an intercepted radio message later printed in newspapers, the statements of some of our respondents to the formalized use of rape as a weapon of control and abuse by the NPFL was confirmed. In mid-1993, an excerpt from an intercepted radio conversation between Taylor and his field commander, John T. Richardson, was clear as to its purpose. Taylor is heard giving orders to Richardson who had surrounded a displaced persons centre in Harbel and Kakata, to shoot 'at anything that moves'. Questioned for clarification as to what to do with the civilian populace, Taylor retorts, '...if you have men among them, chop them, and for the women, rape them. To hell

with them'.¹¹ For most of these victims, returning to their communities with the burden of these experiences hanging over them will make the task of reintegration and reconciliation into civil society much more difficult.

In the case of the Sierra Leonean RUF, women have had their own section and have performed important roles at all levels of the organization. They were actively engaged in arms procurement and in the diplomatic negotiations for bringing peace to Sierra Leone. One woman, Isatu Kallon, had the singular chance of exploiting her knowledge of the Liberian countryside because of her previous position as an experienced trader resident in Liberia. She employed her networks of alternate routes for fulfilling both roles for the RUF. She was later to be arrested, tortured and imprisoned without recourse to the law by the Sierra Leonean intelligence agencies. Agnes Jalloh, leader of the RUF negotiating team to Côte d'Ivoire, is believed to head the women's section of the organization. Young women were prominent as combatants in both the RUF and NPFL. Some were even field commanders.¹²

Survival Methods

Personal histories of survival methods cut across all layers of society. These were graphically captured by the statement of a respondent: 'war is no respecter of persons', demonstrating the generalized effects of war on all sorts of people. Narrating her ordeal to survive and feed her six children, a respondent, well educated and employed by a private company in the pre-war days, described how she had to resort to selling grated cassava in the market at New Kru town a borough of Monrovia, to earn a subsistence living until her departure for another equally tenuous subsistence in Nigeria.

Critical to the efforts by local women to engage in self-help and offer support to displaced women and refugees are the activities of several women's NGOs. Most notable is Our Sister's Place under whose auspices a group of courageous women, despite organized and unorganized acts of intimidation, opened and maintained a home in Monrovia for the provision of assistance and

guardianship to orphaned and prostitute teenagers. Similarly, they reached out to women who were incapable of going home because of their traumatic experiences, haunted by the rape and other forms of ill-treatment which were inflicted upon them. Shelter and the rudimentary means to achieve sustainable livelihoods were usually provided to such women by Liberian NGOs supported by some Nigerian organizations. There have been organizational problems however, especially as the level of networking among the diverse groups is low. This can be explained by the fact that for most of these organizations, several of their principal officers are also engaged in other activities, added to the fact that they are locally based with a specific issue-area as their major interest. Most have, however, expressed their interest to improve their communication and networking skills so as to effectively pool resources and experiences as well as livelihood and assistance in times of need.

At the height of the Liberian war, food shortages became a common denominator in the daily struggles of women. Some ordinary women¹³ who were desperate to feed their families participated in atrocities themselves by joining factional groups. It must be stated, however, that some of these women were either forced or enticed into such groups through the provision of food. Parents sometimes grudgingly sent their children to join some of these groups as a means of acquiring food.

Commerce was also employed by women during the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars to outwit rebels. The process of either engaging in trade behind enemy lines or using contacts with rebels to trade along border areas is generally known as attack trade. There are several strategies of engaging in *attack trade*.¹⁴ During both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian wars, women have engaged in this sort of activity in an effort to re-create forms of civil activity in war-destroyed areas as a means, at least, of ensuring the supply of basic commodities. This strategy has been a contributory factor to the generation of a momentum for peace from within since it provided the possibility for the sharing of information on the war among ordinary people who, in most cases, were non-aligned civilians. Encounters with people behind en-

emy lines also helped to reduce the fanciful imagery of the other that violent separation and propaganda messages targeted at a specific group can engender.

Depending on the theatres of conflict where women were engaged in attack trade and the whims of the rebel leader in that area, women were sometimes persecuted for such activities. The dynamics of the performance of such commercial activities, especially those behind enemy lines, were particularly intricate, complicated, and risky. Some of the most prosperous traders were either relations of, or had an emotional attachment to a particular rebel leader and, thus, could operate in relative security. There were a few other hazardous aspects of this trade which involved trading across borders. In the case of Sierra Leone, Richards has pointed to the example of the murder of 15 women attack traders by RUF conscripts. The resultant effect of these murders was the halting of the harvesting of rice.¹⁵

Moreover, an aspect of the survival strategies in the diaspora which we have so far not dealt with is the enhancement of women's entrepreneurial talents under less than satisfactory conditions. At the Oru camp for Liberian refugees in Nigeria, women have taken the lead in devising new methods and means of raising capital for opening small retail shops, cafeterias and even paying the fees for their children to schools situated outside the camp. As a first step, these women have farmed the abundant land around the camp by producing different local root crops, the main one being cassava, which is the main ingredient for the manufacture of the basic staple diet, gari. Here, individual refugee women have established bases for grating, pressing and frying the cassava for a fee. In the specific examples of Shirley Dahn and Ophelia Vincent, the incomes accruing from these ventures have enabled them to branch into other activities like soap making, baking and dress-making.¹⁶

Roles in Peace Processes

Early on, we discussed some of the functions of women central to the RUF and NPFL war machine and their diverse roles in

the political decision-making processes. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, women have taken a leading role in the efforts to find lasting solutions to the conflicts engulfing their countries. In Sierra Leone, the leader of the RUF negotiating team was the sister of the head of the military government headed by Brigadier Maada Bio which returned Sierra Leone to civilian rule under sustained popular pressure between February and March 1996. What is particularly instructive about this unique case is the singularity of purpose with which Madam Kallon stuck to her position as the leader of the RUF women section and argued with her brother's delegation on the rationale for the RUF's armed struggle based on her belief in the political correctness of the position of the RUF. This fits in perfectly with the increasingly positive role of women in conflict resolution, a function captured by the Kigali Declaration, which:

recognize[s] women's traditional peace-making roles and their right to equal involvement in all peace initiatives, including early warning mechanisms and swift responses at national, regional and international levels.¹⁷

In Liberia, since 1993 the Women's Peace Initiative (WPI)¹⁸ has been actively engaged in activities aimed at resolving the country's civil conflict and promoting peace. The WPI was strongly supportive of the policies enforced by ECOMOG, the ECOWAS's cease-fire monitoring group, in the demobilization of armed factions which started in late 1995.¹⁹ As part of the Abuja Treaty II, demobilization and the encampment of the armed factions were perhaps the two central elements of the agreement that paved the way for the election of July 19, 1997. As part of the demobilization scheme, 10 centres were established in all the regions of Liberia. WPI members were actively involved in these centers as they have been in all aspects and phases of the demobilization programme. Apart from providing practical help, such as water supply and sanitation improvements at these sites, members of WPI accompanied Ruth Perry²⁰, the transitional President of Liberia between August 1996 and July 1997, on her rounds to these centres. Much more important, however, were the lines of communication opened between WPI members and ECOMOG

officials in Liberia. Through WPI's lobbying activity, ECOMOG agreed to extend the deadline for the demobilization process for fighters in the rural areas to hand in their weapons.^{21, 22}

During both conflict and post-conflict situations, one of the first women groups to announce its existence and to initiate policies towards alleviating the sufferings of war victims through a food aid and conscientization programme was the Women in Liberian Liberty (WILL) group led jointly by Myrtle Gibson and Mona Wureh. Apart from the above aims, they had, by February 1991, built an international outreach programme into their activities by visiting Liberian refugees spread around diverse camps in the Gambia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria.²³

The Sierra Leonean situation is not particularly different from the Liberian case. Here, the Women Initiative League for Peace in Sierra Leone tried to build sustainable peace, social justice, and economic empowerment for women in war-affected areas. Its major activities centred around the establishment of minor credit schemes to support women's commercial activities, the introduction of educational schemes, demobilization, and the provision of basic equipments for youths to engage in farming. Related to such activities has been the support given to displaced women to participate in making decisions at camps. Also noteworthy is the League's advocacy drive; for instance, it organised groups of women to march for peace. Women's determination to press for the realization of their objectives have evolved and strengthened against all the odds, including when they were fired upon by armed fighters. In Sierra Leone, despite concerted efforts at intimidating women, they were the driving force behind the military government's decision to hold elections.²⁴

Concluding Notes

As early as 1985, there was a realization of the need for a gendered appreciation of African conflicts, with emphasis on the role of women in the search for peace and stability. There is now no disputing the importance of a deeper understanding of the role which women can play in development and implementation

of strategies for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict. Under the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategy for the Advancement of Women, it was stated that peace is not just the absence of war, violence and hostilities but also the promotion of social justice and equity. Women have a central part to play in the building and consolidation of peace, a process which, by definition, should include the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against them.

Notes

1. This article is basically based on perspectives gained from interviewing Liberians along West Africa's coast and through voluntary work among Liberian asylum applicants in Denmark.
2. Field notes and interview, Lagos, 9 July 1997.
3. *Daily Times* (Nigeria), 1 August 1997. Interview in Lagos, July 1997.
4. ECOWAS: Interim Report of the Executive Secretary to the Thirty-Second Session of the Council of Ministers, ECW/CM.XXXII/2, Abuja, 3-5 December 1992, Lagos, November 1992, p.29.
5. Even though this article is not theoretically based, it is necessary to emphasize that we are aware of some of the essentialist notions of gender which can be found in the literature. Our interest is basically to move beyond this point. James Butty, 'Is The Game Really Over?', *West Africa*, 8-14 March, 1993, p. 369. Eventually, some of Taylor's senior acolytes, namely, Tom Woewiyu, Sam Dokie and Lavelli Supuwood, resigned accusing the NPFL of turning their struggle into 'a revenge adventure'. For a further discussion of these issues, see 'Liberia: Turning the Tables', *West Africa*, 1-7 August, 1994. p. 1342.
6. Field notes, 1 July 1997, Lagos, Nigeria.
7. For a more detailed discussion of the diplomacy surrounding Taylor's eventual decision to visit Nigeria, see Emmanuel Kwesi Aning, 'Ghana, ECOWAS and the Liberian Crisis: An Analysis of Ghana's Role in Liberia', *Liberian Studies Journal*, XXI, 2, (1996), pp.283-284.
8. *Nigerian Tribune*, 6 June 1995.
9. *Daily Times*, 9 June 1995, p.9.
10. Reffel's hope and trust in the Abuja Accord seems to have been repaid. It formed the basis of the elections to be held on 30 May 1997. See also, Lindsay Barrett, 'Breaking the Ice', *West Africa*, 12-18 June 1995, p. 920. Sam Oguia, 'Sick 'Man' Of West Africa', *West Africa*, 18-5 August 1996.
11. Interview with Amos Sawyer, Copenhagen 12 May 1997. Field notes, 27 June 1997. see also *Daily Times*, 'Taylor Takes to Terrorism', 21 May 1993, p.7.
12. Interview in Lagos, Nigeria with the Leader of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia, Prince Y. Johnson, 11-13 July 1997.
13. This word needs explanation. I was consistently struck by the constant use of the words 'ordinary' and 'class' women. Most of my interviewees indicated that with the end of the war, the disparities in the social positions of women are resurfacing. Class women, according the respondents have no time for less privileged women.

14. I have borrowed this terms from Paul Richards, *ibid.*, p. xxviii. According to him, this originates from the Biafran war. This normally took place in the night when a local resident, conversant with bush paths took traders to their destination.
15. *ibid.*, p. 17. For a general discussion of some of the dynamics of the political economy of civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, see the captivating article by Ebo, Adedeji F. 1996. 'The Sierra Leonean Civil War: Implications for Civil Society', *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, July. pp.68-73.
16. Field notes, Interviews at Oru Camp, 10 July 1997. Calculating the payment for the use of frying bowls is a complicated process of being paid 1 Congo can for every 20 litres of fried gari. Based on the examples of 1 Congo shown us, we calculated that it would amount to 1.5 litres in volume. According to our calculations, this particular woman, during the high season for gari making, could make between USD 10-15 per week.
17. Kigali Declaration: Final Document of The Pan-African Conference on Peace, Gender and Development, Kigali, Rwanda, 1-3 March 1997.
18. The efforts of WPI became first known after the official signing of the Cotonou Accord where they were critical of some of the provisions made for the demobilization of combatants.
19. See Jean Baptiste Kayigamba, 1997. 'African Human Rights: Women Aim to Lead the Way to Peace', InterPress Service, 15 March 1997.
20. Modern Africa's first woman Head of State, Ruth Perry, was chosen as President after the signing of Abuja II in August 1996. Former senator from Grand Cape Mount county, she is regarded by factional leaders as their 'mother'. In an article titled 'Liberia's Woman Head of State Optimistic About Peace', Nernlor Gruduah, states that '...if she fails...cynics would consider it foolhardy on her part to dare tread on where men have failed'. It is surprising the extent to which even sympathetic writings tend to slip into essentialist viewpoints.
21. The original deadline for the disarmament and demobilization of an estimated 60,000 fighters ought to have ended on 31 January 1997. Whether this extension was due solely to the lobbying actions of WPI is however not known.
22. CNN News footage, 15 August 1996. Field notes, Abuja, Nigeria. 20 June, 1997. See also *The Guardian*, 'Ruth Perry - How I Intend to Lead Liberia', 19 August 1996, p.40.
23. Field notes, Nigeria, 16 July 1997.
24. Rosario Green, 'Preventive Diplomacy: Women and Men in Partnership for a Healthier Society' in p. 96.