

Returning The Girls Home: Reintegration And Resocialisation Of Abducted And Ex-Girl Soldiers. A Case Study from Sierra Leone, West Africa.

I would not like to recall the bad and ugly days with the RUF. I have been psychologically traumatised due to my own experience of the war. I have been a victim, eyewitness in the event of unimaginable brutality, amputation, rape, and other physical assaults on women and other victims. (A quote from Frances, who was abducted by the RUF during a raid on her village at the age of 11 years)

Sierra Leone is emerging from what is generally acknowledged as the most inhuman and cruel conflict in recent times. The amount of damage, mayhem, rape, arson, torture, and other horrific acts that characterised Sierra Leone's 11-year conflict are unparalleled anywhere in the world. The girl child unfortunately became easy prey to the cruelty and barbarity of the combatants and even, sadly, to some of the peacekeepers that were sent to protect her. Like many other poor countries around the world, women and girls in Sierra Leone continue to be the primary victims of discrimination, exclusion, poverty, illiteracy, family violence, and armed conflict. Women and children are not considered in the planning stages of wars and conflicts, nor do they usually feature much in development planning during times of peace. Yet they end up bearing the brunt of violence, war, poverty, and the effects of poor social and political planning.

This paper, which is a summary of a study I conducted for my course work at the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at the Eastern Mennonite University, intends to raise the special issue of girl soldiers and abducted girls in Sierra Leone, their rehabilitation challenges, health concerns, the possibilities and challenges to reintegrate them in communities, and emerging social problems emanating from their traumatic past. The paper focuses on the capacity of families, peer groups, communities, institutions, and available socio-cultural resources to expedite recovery processes of the girl soldier/abductees, without which the reintegration process would not be complete. A number of case studies are documented to demonstrate some of the horrible experiences girls went through at different times and under different circumstances during the conflict in Sierra Leone. These episodes underscore the need for interventions that would restore the dignity of the girl child and help reintegrate her into society.

I have intentionally chosen not to dwell on the history and evil nature of Sierra Leone's war because a number of well learned people have already written much on the subject, documenting the causes, effects, actors, and peace processes of the twelve-year war. What is not common knowledge are the stories of the girls whose lives and innocence have been snatched away by evil men. As Sierra Leoneans breathe the air of freedom and stability, I have elected to write this paper on behalf of the silent victims - our girls. I want the revalidation process of our post-war society to remember that the girl child was callously humiliated and society owes it to her to do what it can to restore her lost dignity. The names of the girls interviewed for this paper are withheld to prevent another abuse or violation but their stories are told as nakedly as possible so that our society will re-experience the shock of the inhumanity that pervaded it in the recent past. Those who remember their history may live to see a brighter future while those who turn their backs on it are condemned to repeat their wrongs.

The Plight of The Girl In Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leonean girl child, like her peers in the rest of the West African sub-region, is the second child in order of priority, even if she is the first-born. Investment in her future has to be the fall off from the ever-dwindling resources proffered for the education of the male child. Boys are given priority access to education while girls are kept at home to do household chores in preparation for early marriage. Despite efforts to remedy this situation by NGOs, free education

for all by government, and support from the international community, including UN Agencies such as UNICEF, progress has been very slow in Sierra Leone.

Latest figures reveal that 87% of women in Sierra Leone are illiterate as compared to 69% of men who are literate. While this trend has been sustained by cultural and social factors, it was greatly worsened by the abduction of girls for use as combatants as well as sexual and domestic slaves during Sierra Leone's twelve-year war. Not surprisingly, abducted and ex-girl soldiers again come second in attracting the attention and sympathy of projects aimed at the reintegration of ex-child combatants and others abducted during the war.

It has been estimated that at any time during the conflict, at least 5,000 children under the age of 18 and as young as seven fought alongside adult combatants. The majority were with the RUF who created "Small Boy Units" and the corresponding "Small Girl Units" and sent them into combat. A rough estimate of the total number of girls that were abducted is given as over 6,000 with over 4,000 being rape victims. It is estimated that about 2,000 of the 6,000 girls became child soldiers with a large number of them having been returned after an agreement reached by the warring parties with the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and UNICEF. Many of those abducted had "RUF" permanently engraved on their skin with a knife or bayonet, often in places where it is difficult to cover up the markings.

It must be mentioned that even though the issue of child soldiers is recorded, the particular plight of girls is seldom featured. This may be because little attention was paid to their situation before being abducted, both from the international community and locally. There was very little research overall on the scale of abductions, human rights violations, factors that provoked it, or how to deal with the problem. Socio-cultural norms have made it difficult (and still do) for victims to talk about heinous atrocities committed against them. Inadequate support systems and collateral trauma also contribute to discouraging disclosure.

Persistent efforts to document sexual violence against women and girls have helped in forcing this issue to light, but there is a lot more that still needs to be done. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): "Rape, forced prostitution, sexual slavery and forced impregnation are all criminal means and methods of warfare that have attracted more attention in the recent years because of the widespread reporting of such acts in recent conflicts".

Conscription of The Girl Child As Soldier

Girls were abducted for various reasons and in various ways including:

1. Involvement of a close relative such as a parent with the RUF leading to the girl child willingly or unwillingly joining as well
2. Giving up a daughter to the RUF to save the family/child from being killed during raids on villages and towns
3. Some had no option but to join after the rebels had brutally killed their parents
4. Some went willingly in search of material gains and adventure and due to peer pressure but these were few in number
5. Given by parents/foster parents to save themselves from the wrath of the rebels. These again were small in number.

Officially, all abducted girls have been released, but it is a known fact that there are still some abducted girls with remnants of the RUF. Some are prevented from leaving by their "husbands" whilst others are afraid of retribution because of the atrocities they were forced to commit and ashamed because of the stigmatisation of being captured and violated by the rebels. Some girls have lost all contact with their families and know no other life than one with their captors whilst

others find married life unsatisfying and prefer to live independently away from their parents. Others are handicapped as a result of the war and/or see no future for themselves outside the lives of captivity and horror that they have gotten used to.

Stories Of Girls In Captivity

Children who have been released, disarmed, and demobilized tell horrifying stories of their experiences in captivity and of living in constant fear of being raped, beaten, and/or killed. They tell stories of seeing their loved ones and friends killed and of atrocities they committed under the influence of drugs and while obeying the orders of their captors. The girls tell worse stories of the inhuman acts committed against them by their captors. Once abducted, they were taken to the rebel bases in the bush where most were raped on a daily basis. The lucky ones were selected to be the wives of Commandos. This status provided relative protection from frequent assaults.

A rough estimate of the total number of girls that were abducted is given as over 6,000 with over 4,000 being rape victims. It is estimated that about 2,000 of the 6,000 girls became child soldiers with a large number of them having been returned after an agreement reached by the warring parties with the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and UNICEF. Others were commandeered by the lower ranks and suffered much worse treatment. Some became cooks or housemaids to the wives of commandos, load carriers, and of course fighters. They walked long journeys, most of the time on empty stomachs, transporting the spoils of war for their captors. As in most cases, the stronger ones survived and the weaker ones were killed either by their captors or by other children who were forced to commit such acts. Reports from released girls also tell the sinister story of virgins who were offered as human sacrifices by the fighting forces in their quest for power at all costs. Stories of a selected number of girls are recounted in this section:

Case Study 1:

17-year-old Maseray from Kabala was abducted when she went to buy palm oil for her elder sister. She was a virgin from a typical Mandingo family and a Muslim. She was repeatedly raped by her captors and forced to become the wife to one of them. Maseray explained that the initials "RUF" were engraved on her chest with a razor blade after which she was told that if she ever tried to escape, she would be killed by any of the other warring parties who would mistake her for an RUF rebel. She stayed with the rebels for almost a year, and later released in Foredugu. She was treated at Planned Parenthood Association of Sierra Leone (PPA-SL) for a sexually transmitted infection, received psychosocial counselling from one of the NGOs, and later had plastic surgery to remove the initials carved into her chest. Maseray considers herself very lucky not to have gone through worse acts experienced by other girls. She is presently enrolled in a vocational school.

Case Study 2:

Bondu, currently 18 years old, was captured in 1994 by the RUF in Kono at the age of ten. She was forced to carry heavy loads on her head from Koidu to Kabala. Two particular rebels assaulted her constantly. She was conscripted into the fighting force at the age of ten. She still has the effect of the drugs. According to Bondu, *"In December 1994, when the RUF attacked Koidu, it was still dark in the morning. They raided our compound and put everybody in the house at gunpoint. I was taken away together with my two brothers who were the same age as me. Mohamed, Alusine, and myself were forced to carry ammunition and looted property on our heads to Kabala. It was so heavy; whenever we slowed our pace we were beaten with gun butts. On reaching Kabala one rebel deflowered me that very night. He was rough. He hurt me, and when I tried to fight he slapped me on my face and tied my mouth, so that I couldn't shout. There*

were two of them who persistently assaulted me. At Kabala myself and my brothers were drugged every morning. We used to take it as our breakfast. We were also trained to use a gun. We used to go on raids twice every month.” (From PPA-SL independent investigation in collaboration with UNFPA (United Nations Fund for Population))

Case Study 3:

MAMAKOH: Forced to flee from her village at the age of 10 with her 14-year-old cousin, Mamakoh survived in the bush on a diet of scraps, roots, and occasionally fruit. She and her cousin were with a group of people fleeing towards the government troops in Pendembu when they were captured by RUF soldiers.

“They claimed to have been watching our group for a long time and believed that we would tell lies about them upon reaching our destination. This could not be allowed to happen. The men, women, and older boys were singled out and had their hands bound behind their backs. I saw my cousin Jonathan in this group. Fourteen years was old enough for Jonathan to be considered a threat in the eyes of the rebels – old enough to take a gun and use it. After binding their hands, the rebels took a break for lunch. When they finished, then the killing began.

After seeing her cousin killed, Mamakoh fled into the high grass to escape the rebels. She watched as the rebels began to rape the woman, killing any who resisted. *“A lady who grew fond of me whilst we were travelling refused to be undressed and was killed. A rebel using his rifle butt clubbed Jeneba’s baby to death while it was still tied to its mother’s back in our traditional way with a bright coloured cloth. Mamakoh ran, as did some other people, but was recaptured by the rebels. “The rebels ordered them to stop, threatening to shoot. One grabbed a woman and jammed his bayonet into her stomach. Operation ‘manhunt’ now started and this was when my luck ran out. A rebel spotted me and ordered me to come out of my hiding place or be killed. I reluctantly got up and walked towards him shivering with panic and fear. I was alone with just them and GOD.*

At sunset we were assembled and special security arrangements were made to prevent our escape. At night the women and older girls were raped with those as young as 11 years losing their virginity that very night. I later realised this was the order of the day. I was in the special care of Commando Chinese Pepper who provided everything for me although I had to work for his wife ‘Old Ma’ as she was commonly known. During the various stages of the rebel war, we attacked many villages and towns in the north, south, and east of the country using the same pattern of abduction, killing, raping and load carrying. As many as 2000 girls were with the RUF. Some of them were killed during the war. I cannot really tell how many have been liberated as the CDF/EC OMOG freed me in 1999 at the age of 16 years. I lost my virginity when I was 13 years to Colonel LION.

After WAGA came to my aid, I stopped prostitution and I am now registered as a student on their skills training program as a means of reintegrating into the community. WAGA made efforts to reunite me with my family but I have been shunned. I rely on WAGA and other agencies to assist me to live in dignity with a sense of belonging. I hope other organisations will help.”

Case Study 4:

Frances: In 1995, the RUF attacked the village of Kpetema, located 30 miles from Bo. After surrounding the village, the RUF killed anyone trying to escape. They then went door-to-door demanding money in exchange for not killing people. According to Frances, *“rebels came to my house and asked my father for Le250,000.00 or face the death squad. Where was my father going to get that sort of money from being a poor villager himself? He and my mother were executed in front of me. I felt so utterly helpless and alone as I was captured by one of the commandoes who took me away screaming and struggling . . . On reflection, it is a wonder I was not executed as well considering the noise I made screaming. But for some strange reason God*

had not destined my death. I grieved for the happy, trusting child I had been before this attack. The rebel war we had heard about in passing whilst playing or doing household chores had now become a reality.

The RUF brought many captive women and girls to the same bush camp where Frances was taken. It was at this camp that she was raped, tortured, and forced to take drugs. *"Nighttime proved to be most stressful, as I was forced to take drugs and other substances by my captors. I refused and was forcefully handled and raped. I nearly died because I was a virgin. The experience was so bad I started taking the drugs offered together with the alcohol to help dull the pain of what I was going through. This did give me temporary relief and helped me cope with what was to become the order of the day. What happened to me that night was the same for all the girls and women that were captured. It was the rule of the game. After two weeks I was taught how to use the rifle both for self-defence and offensive operations. We attacked many towns and villages, more significantly Sierra Rutile Mining Company where more girls were abducted, houses burnt, people killed, and a host of horrific things committed.*

I remember a young virgin who ended up haemorrhaging after losing her virginity in the usual brutal way that was typical of the rebels. After being torn up internally by many adult sex partners, this poor girl was found dead on the street. Almost all of us at one time or another were ordered to torture, maim, or kill other children or adults who either attempted to escape or leaked information to enemy forces. We obeyed like machines. I was forced to carry heavy loads for long distances on an empty stomach with exploding landmines and gunfire from the government forces. I coincidentally ran into my aunt who was half naked, in tatters, and smelling because it was ages since she had the luxury of a bath. She was covered in bruises with both feet very swollen. This was what life was like with the RUF. We always lived in constant fear and a life of uncertainty for fear of an enemy attack and kept changing locations all the time. It was tough.

I managed to escape in 1996 and came to Bo where I had no relatives and no one to care for me. I later lived with a boyfriend who proposed to marry me but life was difficult and unbearable for me. In 1997, when the AFRC came to power and attacked Bo, it was an opportunity for me and I joined them in order to survive on looted properties. At the fall of the Junta in 1998, I followed them into the bush where I lived until the start of the disarmament programme. Now that I have been disarmed I want to live a decent life and to join my relatives. Thanks to WAGA, PPA SL, WORLD VISION, WFP who have been taking care of me.

There are over 10,000 girls of my age who have been living with the RUF. Some of them have been reunited with their families, others reintegrated, but some are still with their jungle husbands. It will be difficult for them to leave the jungle or return home because some are prevented from doing so by their husbands whilst others are afraid and many ashamed because of their deplorable conditions as compared to the relatively decent lives they were living before their voluntary or forced interaction with the rebels.

I am appealing to government, NGOs, and others to rescue my sisters who are still lurching in the jungle and for them to create extensive programs and services for us who are going through the reintegration process. Please remember that it is difficult for us, as we know no other life but that which we experienced in the jungle. Please be patient."

Case Study 5:

Frances: *"One of my friends, about 15 years old, was the first to be raped by five men consecutively under gun point. I was the third in line to be raped. I shouted that I was a virgin. One of them immediately dragged me and dropped me on the ground and scattered my legs, 'If you are a virgin, then you'll know a knife today,' he said. He drew a knife from his side still holding my legs apart with the help of another rebel. Then he stabbed me in my private parts three times with the knife. I immediately became unconscious. I woke up later to discover myself in the same location. I don't know whether they gave me up as dead, but they abandoned me. I did not even know which day it was. I managed to find my way back to Allen Town. I was lucky that no*

member of my family was killed nor our house burnt. My parents immediately took me to a doctor for medical treatment, where the doctor told me that my urinary gland had been destroyed. To this day a tube is connected inside me to channel my urine to a bag attached under my dress. I feel so uncomfortable carrying the tube and bag."

The Impact On The Social Support System Of The Girl

It is not necessary to reiterate the impact of these horrific acts on the social, spiritual, and physical life of the girls mentioned in this paper. The scars they carry and the traumas they endured will remain with them for the rest of their lives. What makes this worse is that their support systems are also affected both by the war and by what happened to them. This section looks at the impact of these acts on the family and community.

The family

Family tension could be described as a situation in which family members are affected by stressors that influence aggressiveness towards one another. This aggressiveness may develop into conflict. In Sierra Leone today, the 12-year-old war has caused many family tensions. This has occurred because the extended family structure is common here: and so when one member has a problem it affects the rest of the family. If for example, a girl who was abducted and sexually abused came back pregnant from the bush it may cause tension in the family because while some family members may think it wasn't her fault and may accept her back into the family and the community, others might not want to be associated with her any longer.

Family tensions also occur when a family is affected by change such as marriage, parenthood, loss of home/property, and bereavement over a death (natural or otherwise). For example, many families were broken when their houses were burnt down and they had to move in with friends or other relatives. Close ties were severed because of distance or other pressures such as a lack of intimacy or privacy. Every member in the family is forced to adjust to a new life and so these changes not only cause tension on the displaced families, but also on the host family.

The abduction of girls has had diverse psychosocial effects on their families, most of whom have been traumatized because of the abduction and disappearance of their children and are then unable to deal with the child's return without help. Fathers have found it difficult to accept their daughters because of the stigmatisation of rape and other sexual violations committed against them. Most families lost contact with their children and had actually given them up as dead. Economic hardship to take on the added burden of caring for their daughters and possibly their babies borne while in captivity have all added to the problems faced by families in the conflict. Other serious consequences include the break up of marriages that have become fraught with frustration as families were now faced with hunger, abject poverty, and diseases.

The conflict also accounts for a tremendous increase in female-headed households because many men were killed, abducted, or slipped away to join one of the fighting factions. Having few marketable skills, many women have resorted to prostitution in order to provide for their families. Others have abandoned their children and condoned their teenage daughters/wards to prostitution. Mothers have willingly handed their teenage daughters to older men because of financial constraints. Equally difficult is the fact that their daughters have been raped and are no longer virgins before marriage, which is against local culture/tradition and makes a "good" marriage more difficult to find.

The community

Neighbours and friends have shunned and teased victims of rape. Some have been branded as rebel wives who served as combatants and spies during the conflict. These girls are highly traumatised to begin with and suffer a second traumatising through the negative reception by their communities. They have been made to feel guilty, neglected, and are treated as misfits in

society. Communities are faced with societal breakdown and loss of livelihood, as total control on the economy was lost.

Socially, there is an outbreak of armed robberies and theft, an increase in domestic violence, widespread communicable diseases (e.g. HIV/AIDS and STDs), and the breakdown of the educational and health systems. There are divisions in communities where captors and victims were from the same community and have now both returned to that community. This problem has become more widespread in recent times as perpetrators who have gone through the disarmament program are being reintegrated and encouraged to return to their communities. Perpetrators and victims of atrocities are now forced to live within the same communities. Problems of reconciliation, mistrust, grudges, and revenge, coupled with trying to deal with the trauma due to the death of their loved ones are threatening Sierra Leone's fragile peace.

Reintegration Of Abducted Girls Into Communities

Reintegrating abducted girls into society is one of the most daunting tasks faced by civil society groups working with these girls. A major problem is that cultural beliefs look down on girls and women that have been raped, making them outsiders in their own communities. Families are sometimes reluctant to accept them back. On the other hand, some families and communities are afraid to accept them back as they are perceived as rebels. Other families cannot afford to look after themselves let alone their returned children, some of whom have returned with children, meaning more mouths to feed.

Reintegrating the girls is more problematic than the boys as certain issues unique to females have to be taken into consideration:

- The families, relatives, and communities do not accept some girls. This sometimes results in the abducted girls returning to their captors. A typical example is in Makeni where some of the girls returned were uncertain of their future in the community. They went back to their abductors where they felt more comfortable.
- There are cases when parents cannot maintain their returned girls who have become used to certain facilities/luxuries offered in Interim Care Centres and cannot cope with the poverty of their homes/families.
- Some of the girls come with extra mouths to feed because they have given birth to children. This puts a financial burden on their already poor families.
- Girls need to be debriefed as they are most times traumatised and sometimes do not speak for days after being liberated. It should be noted that ex-combatants are normally very talkative and aggressive and this is one way to tell the difference between the ex-combatants and the ex-captives. All are offered skills training and trauma counselling.
- Financial support for these girls, especially those who have returned with children, is one of the biggest problems. With children to look after and little or no support from their families, they do not have enough time to get into something as structured as schools and vocational training if they are to find money for daily sustenance. The alternative for them is to get into some form of petty trading or prostitution in order to support their needs.
- Another critical issue about the return of the girls is that of the higher benefits presented to disarming as "women" as opposed to "girls". These are benefits given to the parties, not the individuals. Because of this, a lot of girls especially those with children were not returned as abducted girls/girl soldiers but as adults. This obviously affected the total number of girls recorded as returned. The "women" unfortunately could not benefit from

the services provided for returned “girls”, which includes psychosocial counselling, fostering, and free medical support.

- Some girls prefer to be anonymous which makes it difficult during the identification process. This also makes tracing and identification of relatives difficult.
- Captors sometimes refuse to release the girls who have become their wives, have borne them children, and are seen as their immediate and sometimes only family.

Leading organizations involved in the reintegration of these girls are UNICEF, Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs, which heads a Child Protection Unit with members drawn from NGOs with Child Protection Sections. These include CARITAS Makeni, COOPI, IRC; WAGA; UAC; UNICEF; WORLD VISION; IOM; SLRC; ICRC; NCDDR, Christian Brothers, NFTR, WAGA, Family Homes Movement, NCDDR, CCF, SCF, etc.

Lessons Learned

There are important lessons to be learned from the situation we have described in this paper, especially as it relates to rehabilitating and reintegrating the girl child into a post-conflict society:

- Very few ex-girl soldiers benefited from the official National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR) packages because of their status below disarming men. Reasons include
 - I. Male fighters who take the guns from the girls so that they (the men) can qualify as an ex-fighter and benefit from the DDR packages;
 - II. Scared of the stigma, girls avoid the exposure associated with the DDR process;
- Sensitisation and counselling sessions as well as medical treatment for the survivors were just the beginning of what was needed. Other needs included shelter, food, clothing, educational support, and seed money to restart their battered lives;
- Survivors became strong advocates for the protection of the girl child;
- Education is a useful tool to deal with sexual and gender based violence. It became evident that families as well as survivors needed education about parenting skills (which should include culturally appropriate programmes), life skills training, and health education;
- Funding is necessary for the continuation and sustenance of the reintegration process;
- Partnership with many agencies that offer differing services is essential for the success of any reintegration process.

Suggestions For The Prevention Of Sexual Violence Against Women And Children

We the people of Sierra Leone have vowed never to again tread the dangerous path of war. This “never again” commitment must be extended to the way we perceive and treat the girl child in our society. The following are my suggestions:

- Active participation in public information and education on violence prevention from the cradle to the grave. Let us catch them young.
- Intensification of Peace Education in school curriculum - with emphasis on conflict resolution through peaceful or non-violent means.

- The media - in particular television programmes - should desist from portraying violence without pain. Sometimes violence is portrayed as funny and this encourages children to become aggressive and others learn to become passive survivors of violence.
- Violence is a major health problem that can be prevented and National Campaigns similar to “Roll Back Malaria”. “Kick Polio out of Africa”, and HIV/AIDS Awareness Campaigns should be vigorously launched.
- Schools of Nursing and the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences must include Violence Prevention in their curricula.
- Follow-up support for violence prevention programs must be monitored and evaluated by the community.
- Male involvement in the prevention of violence against women and children should be encouraged. Men are part of the problem so they should be part of the solution.
- Research into sexual and gender-based violence must be coordinated and sustained so that organizations do not waste time and money repeating each other’s work.
- Women and children must be actively involved in the peace building process.
- Survivors must be part of future sexual and gender-based violence programmes.
- Survivors should be trained in a variety of skills including but not limited to:
 - Basic literacy and counting skills as well as peace education.
 - Specific skills relevant to the economy of the area where they reside.
 - Skills taught should be sufficient to enable them to live above subsistence level.
 - Leadership skills to empower survivors to participate fully in society.
- Monitoring and evaluation of sexual and gender-based violence programmes must be an integral part of the planning and implementation activities. Keep it simple and systematic (KISS).

Conclusion

As Sierra Leone is gradually emerging from a conflict situation, let us match our words with action. It is only when action and words agree that the message becomes loud and clear. The message is “Prevent Violence against Women and Children”. Now is the time for all women’s organizations, legal and law enforcement agencies, health organizations, religious and traditional leaders, school groups, sports associations, drama groups, the media, men’s association, community-based groups, and all well meaning Sierra Leoneans to come together to support survivors and help put an end to violence against women and children. Men must work on this problem as well as women. The prospects for economic growth are threatened if all of our people, including and especially our children and women, are not educated. The Global Movement for children – Sierra Leone Partnership has begun a hopefully unstoppable crusade to end at long last, the poverty, ill health, and violence that have destroyed so many young lives. This is a step in the right direction.

The setting up of a National Commission for War Affected Children with an Ombudsman for children must be pursued vigorously with the right political will. A prevention and response plan should be designed because sexual violence is a multi-sectoral/inter-agency problem and it should be well coordinated. In short, concerted participatory efforts and partnerships are necessary to deal with this problem.

Funding is the biggest problem facing the reintegration process. Some of the girls were able to go back to school because of strong family support. But girls who have children need money to look after themselves and their children. They do not have enough time to get into something structured like schools and skills training if they must also work full time. The alternative is to embark on something fast like petty trading so as to earn daily takings. In order for these girls to benefit from skills training, facilities like a Crèche or Play Centre should be opened where they can leave their children whilst they attend vocational training. They would also need some allowance to tide them over until they are able to complete their courses and start earning income for themselves.

Emphasis should also be put on traditional cleansing ceremonies of the girls, which would have great psychological impact not only on them but also on their home communities. It would facilitate their acceptance by both the family and the community.

Never again should we sit back and allow our society descend to such a horrible depth. Never again.

Barbara Bangura is National Coordinator of Grassroots Empowerment for Self Reliance (GEMS), a human rights NGO in Sierra Leone. She is also Country Coordinator of WIPNET-SL. She is a member of the Board of Sierra Leone Association of Non Governmental Organisations (SLANGO), which is the umbrella organization of NGOs in Sierra Leone. She advocates for women and children's rights through awareness raising campaigns in Sierra Leone.