



SIERRA LEONE COUNTRY REPORT

ON CHILDREN BORN OF WAR

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Women's Forum Sierra Leone

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All photos provided by the CSiW Project.

Title page: Photo by Karlee Sapoznik, Bunce Island, Sierra Leone, 2011.

REPORT OF THE RESEARCH ON CHILDREN BORN OF WAR (CBoW) BY THE WOMEN'S FORUM (SIERRA LEONE)

December, 2018.

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Figure 1. Photo by Karlee Sapoznik, Aberdeen, Sierra Leone, 2011

1 INTRODUCTION

Children born of war (CBoW) represent the group of children born in the bush to women raped by rebels during the eleven-year civil war in Sierra Leone. According to the literature, 9-10% of rapes during the conflict resulted in pregnancies. This would mean that more than 20,000 war babies were born during this period (Physicians for Human Rights, 2002). Discussions with the children's mothers as well as personnel working with reparations programmes confirmed that no special recognition was given to CBoW. Rather they were put under the general category of children affected by the war. This has had negative implications for due attention to be given to their long term needs and challenges, as survivors of wartime violence are often ill-equipped to provide education and care for their children given their trauma and double stigma. According to reports from Uganda, reparations programmes often focus on mothers and wrongly assume that benefits trickle down to the children (Justice and Reconciliation project, 2017). In Sierra Leone, CBoW were never identified as a separate category of vulnerable children as was done in the case of Street Children, Child Soldiers and Abandoned children (2009); this shortcoming stems from "the misconception that sex and the family are neither a political nor a security issue" (Mackenzie, 2015:119). Likewise, due attention was not paid to CBoW in the reparations programme in Sierra Leone.

Whatever action could have been taken since the end of the war in 2002 has been overshadowed by lack of organisation of CBoW, community dynamics, the outbreak of the Ebola Viral Disease (EVD) and environmental disasters, like the 2017 mudslides, and other emerging issues. CBoW exist all over the country and the findings of this research in the named locations could be regarded as a fair representation of the challenges affecting them in Sierra Leone.

2 OBJECTIVES

- To gather information on how CBoW and their households live today in the community.
- To gain insight into CBoW's struggles and determinants of their identity.
- To better understand the role of stigma, discrimination/or isolation in the lives of CBoW.
- To provide opportunities for CBoW to talk about their aspirations for the future.

3 PROFILE OF SAMPLE POPULATION

The research has been an eye opener about how the war impacted negatively on the lives of certain categories of people such as CBoW, in spite of all the arrangements made in different sectors for amelioration of the socio-economic status of war- affected persons.

A total of 11 females and 8 males were contacted in Grafton War Wounded Camp in the Western Area of Sierra Leone.

In the other location, Mattru in the Southern Region, 6 males and 9 females were contacted. In total 34 CBoW were contacted for the research, 20 females and 14 males. The age range for the girls was 19 to 22 years with an average age of 20 years; the average age for the males was 18 to 24 years with an average age of 19 years.

The respondents for the research were selected with the help of the Chairlady of the Victims of Sexual Violence in the Grafton camp and the Head teacher of the primary school, with the active support of the mothers of the CBoW. In Mattru, respondents were selected with the support of Women's Forum Coordinator in the region and the parents. Planning meetings were held with the people on the ground to discuss the objectives of the study and seek their support for identifying the CBoW.

The CBoW themselves were enthusiastic to talk to us and willingly gave up their time to share their experiences. The majority of the CBoW contacted are attending school and majority of them will be attempting the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) this year. Two females have taken the examination, passed in 5 and 6 subjects respectively but failed in English Language. Others (2 males and 2 females) are engaged in tailoring and weaving. They find it difficult to continue in the vocational institute because of lack of funds. A few of them have

dropped out of school and the vocational institute and are contemplating a return to school and institute depending on availability of funds.



Figure 2. Photo by Annie Bunting, Special Court for Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone, 2011.

4 METHODOLOGY

Information was generated through a variety of methods such as interviews, experience sharing, diary entries, conversations and observation. Also a tour of the camp was made to find out the living conditions of the respondents. Preliminary interviews were held with mothers and CBoW to seek their consent, support and acceptance of their participation in the study. Also a brief interview was held with the headman of the camp to inform him about the purpose of the research. Visits were made to the two locations for conduct of the research i.e. Grafton and Matru Jong. Because of proximity to Freetown, where the researchers are based, many more visits were made to Grafton.

Information about how the CBow were living, their place in the society, their identity and sense of belonging and their interaction patterns with their parents, siblings, stepfathers and the wider community were obtained. The team received informed consent from the respondents for each activity.



Figure 3. Photo by Annie Bunting, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2011.

5 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CBOWs SHOES OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING

5.1 Experiences of War

Most of their experiences of war are based on the information received from their mothers. They were told about all the bad things that happened during the war e.g. disembowelment of pregnant women, loss of families, unhealthy environmental conditions and the economic strain that ensued after they moved from the bush to town.

It is significant to note that the mothers of these CBoW should be commended for providing the link between their children and the outside world through the stand they took to care for their children and support them despite the odds.

According to a female respondent, she said that her mother escaped from the rebels after she became pregnant. She returned to the village and stayed there until she was born. As far as she is concerned, war is not good as it involves destruction of lives and property, rape and forced marriage.

Another respondent disclosed that his father was a Liberian rebel leader. He said that his mother escaped with him to Sierra Leone because of ill treatment. He said that they suffered a lot because of the war as well as because of the fact that his father was a rebel.

Many of the CBoWs contacted explained that their mothers disclosed their real identity to them after they confronted them demanding an explanation as to why they were referred to as a rebel child/bastard.

There was a case of the rebel father passing away before a female participant was born. Her new father took up her responsibility because he did not have a child of his own. When once her mother gave birth to his own child, he changed his attitude towards her; it became so bad that her mother had to move from her stepfather's home to set up a home in the camp.

Another bad experience was when a girl was told by her mother that she was abandoned by her rebel father after she gave birth to her. When the girl was ten years old, she asked her mother why people were looking at her as if she was not somebody important in society. Then her mother broke the news to her that her father was indeed a rebel who no longer existed.

Most of the experiences of war are based on what their mothers told them regarding their 'fatherlessness' and the economic strains that ensued after they moved from the bush to town.

Luckily, the majority of the respondents are attending school. Most are in secondary school, a few have to re-enter school because they dropped out, two are attending vocational school and others have plans to do so.

A key determinant in the sense of belonging for CBoW relates to the strong attachment most of them feel for their mothers apparently because these women have been there for them since the beginning. The majority of participants live with their mothers and when they cause trouble it is their mothers who go to 'bail' them from the police.

In the case of one female from Grafton, she has been forced to relocate because her mother, with whom she was living in the camp, died from snakebite when she went to fetch wood for sale.

In the school setting and wider community they complained of provocation, stigmatization and being referred to as ‘rebel child’ or ‘Foday Sankoh’s¹ child’. They said that they really felt embarrassed because they had no father and that on a few occasions when their fathers were invited to the school, they really felt lonely as they had no father to respond to the school’s invitation.

Most of the feelings expressed related to the fact that their fathers were rebels and that they had either abandoned them genuinely or no longer existed. In terms of belonging, they said that they were provoked about their having no father, their stepfathers always make derogatory comments about their rebel father which they say makes them feel offended. Also, their peers provoke them that they do not have a father and look low on them because of poverty. They lament the absence of their fathers and one of them remarked that her mother is suffering because she does not have access to her rebel father’s property. It was further revealed that people tend not to listen to them because they have no father and that they lack fatherly support. Some of them said that they do not disclose the identity of their father because they feel they will mock them if they knew the truth. They feel that life would have been different for them if their fathers had been around.

5.2 Education

The majority of those in Grafton and Mattru are attending secondary school, two of them have attempted the West Africa Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination passing in four or six subjects but without a pass in English Language. They look forward to using education as a stepping stone to various careers in the future. For example, one of them wants to become a petroleum engineer, another girl wants to read medicine and a boy, the oldest of the lot, wants to become an American Marine.

5.3 Land Access

Land access is problematic for these CBoW because of their status as fatherless children. Some of them have no direct contact with their fathers’ relatives and so this is a problem. This is why most of them are requesting for shelter assistance, and their mothers request land so they can move away from the squalor of the camp and the bad influence of the former rebels. Given the limitations of land access to women in the country, the children cannot acquire land through their mothers.

¹ Foday Sankoh was the founder of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group that committed atrocities during the Sierra Leone war.



Figure 4. Photo by Annie Bunting, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2011.

5.4 Economic Opportunity

This is another area of challenge. Most of the parents of these CBoW are single parents and they are having a hard time maintaining their children. The CBoW complained of lack of access to food, shelter, support for school materials, bags and shoes among others. They said that their mothers are indigent. They have to take goods on credit to sell in order to eke a living to pay the rent. Even some of the CBoW do tailoring in order to supplement the income of their mothers. Most of them are still in school and so do not have any steady source of income.

A tour around the camp in Grafton revealed that these CBoW live in very difficult conditions. They live in single room apartments with no toilet facilities poor ventilation and lighting facilities. One respondent explained that he lives with his mother and two siblings in a one room. He said that he is forced to sleep at a friend's house because of the congestion. Additionally, they have to pay exorbitant rent for these inadequate structures.

6 IMPROVED SENSE OF IDENTITY, BELONGING, PARTICIPATION, INCLUSION

Prior to the research, participants explained that they were unhappy: there was a lot of silence about their existence. They said that they experienced provocation and this made them unhappy, in some cases they said they reacted violently and this put them in trouble at school, in the community and even with the police. They said that they felt bad about themselves, had low self-esteem and no confidence. They felt hopeless as no one asked them what they were doing. They felt a lot of discouragement and some of them even dropped out of school. As a result of all of these, they said that they indulged in bad habits like smoking, drinking alcohol, drugging, fighting and gang violence.

As a result of the research intervention, they said that they have experienced a lot of changes in their lives, sharing that “We now have confidence, encouragement and are hopeful for the future.” Furthermore, they said that the research has created opportunities for them to talk about themselves and this has given them a new lease of life. They said that they have now been helped through counselling and advice to focus on the future and to reflect on the best means of improving their lives. According to them, “You have paved the way for people to pay attention to us.” Also, they referred to the research as an effort to ‘search’ for them, which has really worked wonders. They went on to say that some of them who had dropped out of school are back in school.

Following the research and discussions with the CBoW, the respondents were unanimous about the value and importance of the research for them. Several reasons were advanced for their stance. They said that the research has helped to make them happy as it gave them recognition about their existence. Through the research they have been given new confidence and hope and opportunity to talk about their lives, feelings and challenges. One of them stated that “the research has changed my life”. Another said that his self-esteem has been raised, “hitherto, I was unhappy because of too much provocation which I did not like but I am now in a better position to manage my emotions.” They stated further that they have been helped through advice and counselling to focus on their future. They were hopeful that this research would pave the way for greater interventions with CBoW.

It is significant to note that some of the CBoWs in Grafton have formed an organisation and they meet every Sunday to share experiences and discuss challenges and how to overcome them. Changes have been made as CBoWs know more about each other and they discuss matters in common. According to them, the research has given them visibility and this has minimised the mockery and stigmatization they have been experiencing: “The research has given us confidence to talk about our problems to others.” One of them said he has been able to secure a better

location for his tailoring shop just because he had the confidence to seek help from the Chair lady of the camp: “Some of us felt shy before and we could hardly speak in public; now we are bolder and have more confidence. We hope that we will become someone in future as the research has helped us to overcome provocation. Now we have developed the tendency to overlook our detractors and focus on our future.”

Some of them remarked: “I feel I am an important person in the community.” “Now I have determination to study”. “I feel like a person in society.” “I have more courage and hope for the future.”



Figure 5. Photo by Annie Bunting, River No. 2, Sierra Leone, 2011.

7 MOTIVATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS OF CBoW

From the above we are witnessing the CBoW in transition from a forgotten category of people to one with visibility all because of the research that has been conducted with them. They are now in a better position to talk about themselves and interact better with their colleagues and the general community. Discussions reveal that they are now determined to go ahead with their education; they even have aspirations to for the future in terms of the roles they would like to play in society later on. The jobs they would like to do include: Petroleum engineer; oil businessman; nurse; bank manager; medical doctor; tailoring; Lawyer; army officer.

Based on the above, the CBoW have great aspirations for the future. This is why they are requesting assistance for school materials, support to further their studies and help for adequate shelter. In fact, the mothers of these respondents support their plea for support; they said that tangible support to them would contribute to resolving the inner conflicts that have been going on in their minds; failure to do so could once more spark feelings of hatred and conflict especially as they themselves are products of our rebel war which we do not want to recur.

8 THE ROLE OF THE MOTHERS

With regard to motivation, it is important to single out the role played by mothers in the lives of CBoW. Apart from a few whose mothers are not around the majority have been able to weather the storm because of the encouragement given to them by their mothers. The following excerpts support the above:

“My mother advises me to be patient and to work hard for my future benefit.”

“My mother advises me not to retaliate when I am molested.”

“My mother advises me to be patient and motivates me to be strong”.

“Our mothers support us with the scarce resources that they have.”

“My mother had to borrow money to bail me from the police when I was arrested for putting up a fight because of provocation.”

9 CONCLUSIONS

From this study the following conclusions can be drawn. CBoW are an important category of war affected persons; they represent a particularly vulnerable class of war affected children who need sustainable and holistic integration into their communities; they require specific resources and attention.

They need recognition and support from society to help them overcome their initial feelings of rejection and sense of loss due to their ‘fatherlessness’. CBoW are very much a part of the equation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals especially the Goals on poverty, quality education, gender equality, peace, justice and stronger institutions and above all on reducing inequalities.

Male and female CBoW alike are faced with the challenges of discharging their societal and family responsibilities in future if they are not supported to overcome their current psychosocial and economic inadequacies and shortcomings.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need to explore possibilities for creating economic opportunities for CBoW through access to land ownership, shelter and education. It is important to devise strategies for linking research on CBoW with concrete plans for enhancing their socio-economic status. Efforts should be made to generate more information about them as they constitute a large majority of vulnerable children affected by the war that were left out of initial arrangements for meeting the needs of children affected by the war. Given the long term neglect of CBoW as a category of war affected children in their own right, we need to explore the best means of transforming the notion that they are handicapped for life to one that speaks to their inclusion, productivity and role as active participants in the discourse on peace and security, justice and reconciliation.

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