

The War in Sierra Leone, its Aftermath, and Women's Resilience

One Mother's Narrative

Women living through war and in post-conflict societies may face extreme risk that can then function to jeopardize their resilience. Recent studies have explored various aspects of the effects of war and its aftermath on women, however little research has been undertaken in the area of mothers' resilience in the face of and following armed conflict. Using as its framework the concept of risk and protective factors and resilience, this article considers the conditions of life for mothers in a society broken apart by war; ways in which mothers in a post-conflict society may be resilient and how their resilience may be sustained; and what mothers themselves say about their resilience. These questions are examined through the narrative of one mother who lived through the decade long war in Sierra Leone. During this time, she escaped from her town during an attack by rebels and later lived through an attack on the capital city. She is currently the principal of a school for war-affected girls. The article concludes that certain protective factors in this mother's life, such as her social and career status and her care and responsibility for her children, function to support her resilience. However, her struggles with depression caused by her war experience remain as her major risk factor. Her resilience therefore, balanced as it is as the fulcrum between risk and protective mechanisms, remains somewhat tentative.

That women suffer disproportionately to male combatants and in unique ways during and following war is now commonly understood and has come out from the shadows of the discourse of armed conflict to be made more visible. Recent research has explored areas such as the effects of armed conflict and post-conflict¹ on women, forced pregnancy, and maternity (Carpenter; Carpenter et al.), and the situation of young mothers and their coping mechanisms during and following war (McKay 2006, 2004; McKay and Mazurana). There is no denying the horrendous acts of violence committed against women during

and following war. The common discourse concerning women caught up in war and its aftermath generally falls along the axis of humility and dignity, with emphasis on sexual brutality and rape committed against them. This article seeks to further expand an understanding of the resilience of women and indeed mothers in these albeit extraordinary situations which in turn may well both develop our knowledge base and support beneficial strength based programme and policy formulation.

This article is based on a broader ethnographic study I conducted in Sierra Leone which looked at issues of risk and protection factors and resilience among girls and women following the civil conflict in that country. This article considers these issues in relation to mothers in Sierra Leone. For this aspect of the research, I wanted to know: What are the conditions of life for mothers in a society which had been broken apart by war? In what ways are mothers in post-conflict societies resilient and how is their resilience sustained? And importantly, what do mothers themselves say about their resilience?

The Framework of Risk and Protective Factors and Resilience

Through the framework of the concepts of risk, protective factors and resilience, this article will explore one mother's experiences of war and its aftermath and her narrative of survival, coping and prevailing. To do this, I will provide an overview of the major effects of armed conflict on women and mothers, a brief description of a specific war, that of the decade long civil conflict in Sierra Leone, and the situation faced by women following the war. I will then delineate the circumstances and profile of one mother. Her narrative will provide a lens through which to understand some of the ways in which mothers' lives are affected by the brutal upheaval caused by war and by post conflict circumstances. It will also explicate the mechanisms through which her resilience is displayed.

Personal Narrative

As an important feminist methodological approach to research, narrative inquiry can contribute much to the understanding of women's experiences of resilience in overwhelmingly negative circumstances. This approach allows for an articulation of the constraints, opportunities, *raison d'être*, and logic of a woman's ideas, decisions, and behavior from her own perspective. Significantly, this approach also opens up the interplay between the person and her social ecological environments.

Resilience

Resilience is seen as a positive outcome and successful adaptation in the face of adversity (Kirby and Fraser; Masten and Garmezy; Werner). Thus, individuals with less resilience are those who have not successfully managed or overcome their adversities. For the purpose of both my research study and

this article, resilience is defined as a dynamic quality which opens up or keeps open a sense of hope, the ability to recover from and/or adapt to negative environmental changes, and a sense of personal success in or following difficult situations. Focusing on the construction and development of one's capacity to prevail within negative environments and following negative circumstances and situations requires a consideration of the factors that influence that construction, and therefore encourage a person's trajectory toward well-being.

However, examining resilience in a person's lived experiences is not a straightforward or clear cut endeavour. As resilience is context specific, what might be considered a resilience creating behaviour or trait during civil conflict may not be such in a more benign context. As well, resilience is culturally sensitive with culturally variant aspects. Based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1989; 1994) model of a person within her environment, resilience can be modeled within nested concentric layers with the person at the centre surrounded by each layer. The social ecological layer closest to a person, the microsystem, consists of the closest environments such as home and school as well as the people with whom one has direct contact. This level contains activities and interpersonal relations "in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief" (Bronfenbrenner 2005: 148).

Broader than this level is the mesosystem where the connections between microsystems occur. This level comprises the interrelations between and among two or more settings in which a person directly participates. The next level, the exosystem, is made up of the relationships and environments that indirectly influence a person and which in turn, a person indirectly affects, such as the relationship between a partner and that partner's work colleagues. No active role is played here by the person, but this level nevertheless influences and is influenced by the person. The next and broadest system surrounding a person, the macrosystem, is the most distal from the person and consists of the economic, political and cultural factors, and the laws and customs that frame and influence the interactions within the other concentric rings of the model. The dimension of time, the chronosystem, cross-cuts the others and explains chronological changes in relation to environments and the person, such as socio-historical conditions and environmental events and transitions (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Norman). External factors (for example, separation from family) as well as internal factors (for example, changes in health status) are situated within the chronosystem.

Resilience is constructed through the person's strength based relationships within, between, and among each of these environmental spaces with each social ecological system influencing each other. For this reason, "ultimately, it is the people in each level of the model who determine how well each level connects with the others" (Sokal 17). As such, the capacity to respond to one's quest for well-being is contained in each of the levels of this model.

However, in situations where each of the spaces contains undue stress, resilience can then be highly challenged. This can be illustrated in the context of a post-conflict society where, for example, a person may have lost her home and family (microsystem); relationships within the mesosystem and the exosystem may have been destroyed through lack of trust and factors of enmity; the state infrastructure may have fallen apart and laws may be enacted which discriminate against certain groups of people (macrosystem); and long standing historical feuds between groups may be exacerbated due to war (chronosystem). Thus, these harsh conflict and post-conflict settings are sites where the opportunity for construction and development of resilience exists.

Resilience is positioned as a balance between risk and protective factors. Increasing the likelihood that well-being will be negatively affected and that a positive outcome will be jeopardized are factors of risk (Sroufe, Cooper and DeHart). During and following war, external risk factors can include events such as sexual assault, limb amputation, and forced displacement, and internal risk factors can include post traumatic stress syndrome and lack of nutrition. However, interacting with factors of risk to offset their negative effects are protective mechanisms (Pollard, Hawkins and Arthur), which like mechanisms of risk, can function as both internal and external factors. In the context of a war zone, external protective factors can include the provision of physical protection and appropriate medical attention for injuries. In the aftermath of conflict, emotional support and community acceptance of women returning home from abduction by armed forces or forced displacement can be robust internal protective mechanisms to support healing from trauma.

Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings

In settings involving armed conflict, women face great risks to their well-being and may experience extreme levels of stress which can be both wide-ranging and long-term. Consequences of women's war experiences may include disappearance or death of children and other family members, physical, sexual, and psychological violence, injury and terror, unmet medical needs particularly in the area of sexual and reproductive health, and psychosocial trauma. As wars are settings where women may face horrifying forms of violence, the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) in Beijing and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2002) both noted that women are affected by armed conflict specifically because of their sex and their status in society. Sexual violence (Brittain; Enloe; Fox; Jacobs, Jacobson and Marchbank; Lindsey; McKay and Mazurana), lack of safety and recourse, and trafficking of girls and women (Bouta, Frerks and Bannon) are all risk factors facing girls and women during war.

Following conflict, the situation for girls and women may undergo little amelioration as high levels of sexual violence perpetrated against them may continue (McKay 2006). McKay notes that among war-affected girls and young

women in Mozambique, Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone, sexual violence, shame concerning sexual violence, and gender discrimination following armed conflicts have had serious impacts on their healing processes. One of their most severe hardships is separation from their mothers. As well, following prolonged conflict in Mozambique and elsewhere, stigmatization, threats, physical abuse, and sexual violence by boys and men made the reintegration of girls and young women extremely difficult (Wessells and Davidson).

The Context – Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has a population of five and a half million people, of which over one half are under the age of eighteen. Located on the west coast of Africa, it was established in the late 1780s (Chege) as a protectorate for freed slaves from Britain and Nova Scotia, and the Black Loyalists who had fought with the British in the American War of Independence (Gberie 2005). In 1896, the country became a British Protectorate. Possessing abundant natural resources, there was, however, little industry. Raw materials such as iron were extracted for export with minimal benefit accruing to the population as a whole. Diamonds were first exploited commercially in Sierra Leone in 1931 (Gberie 2005).

Since formal independence from Britain in 1961, the country has continually struggled with issues of economic distress and unpopular and harsh government rule. The 1980's was a period of high inflation and a weakening state and many young people of the country were disaffected, disenchanting with the government, and felt their lives stalemated (Chege). Civil war broke out in 1991, with attacks launched by a rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Through attacking villages, massacres, torture, amputations, abductions, and sexual violence against girls and women, their control of the country grew until by 1999 the RUF held 80 percent of Sierra Leone.

An extraordinarily vicious war, it was one of the goriest in recent history (Chege). Among its features were brutal rape and torture and thousands of girls and women were systematically abducted, forced into slave labour and often subjected to repeated sexual assault and other atrocities (Denov and Maclure; HRW 1998, 2003; PHR). Over ten years of ferocious conflict half of the population was displaced, and more than two thirds of the country's infrastructure was destroyed (Gberie 2005). During this time between 215,000 and 257,000 girls and women were victims of sexual assault (PHR). Many were forced from their homes and separated from their families and while the number of babies born as a result of war rape is not known, it is likely that the burden of caring for them by their mothers has been great. This burden is in addition to the stigma of being a rape victim and of dealing with the effects of trauma and perhaps infectious disease, including HIV/AIDS (Mazurana and McKay).

Until it was attacked in 1999, Freetown, the capital city, remained largely unaffected by the war, but during this terrifying and infamous attack on the capital, six thousand people were killed, many women and girls were raped,

and thousands of girls and boys were captured by the rebels. Throughout the month of January alone, four thousand children were abducted by rebel forces. Of these, sixty percent were girls, and the vast majority of these were reportedly sexually abused (Otunnu). The war finally came to an end in 2002. However, signs of destruction were omnipresent, in razed villages, the shells of burnt out houses and other buildings, camps for displaced persons and for amputees, and a population suffering from mass trauma.

Sexual violence and exploitation have been rampant historically in Sierra Leone where the forces of low educational attainment levels, poverty, and diminished social status and employment options exist. Women's secondary position in that country keeps them vulnerable to male authority (Denov and Maclure). Discrimination, forced early marriage, and violence towards women together can function as a force in maintaining gender inequality. Out of 158 countries, Sierra Leone ranks 157th as the most difficult place in which to be a mother (Save). Only one country, Niger, ranks lower. This is the context in which Aminata, a 50-year-old mother, school principal, and survivor of the decade long war, lives. I now turn to her narrative of risk, protective factors, and resilience.

Aminata

Aminata was born in Sierra Leone in a village where her father was a chief. Because of his status as chief, each year a girl from the region who was considered the most beautiful was given to him as a wife. For this reason, there were many of his father's wives in Aminata's environment, although her own mother died in childbirth when Aminata was a young child. As her father did not think girls should be educated, it was not until the age of ten that she started to attend school. This was when she left home to live with her older brother who was working in the diamond mines in Kono.

Fortunately for her, she was a strong student and did very well in school. Each year in her primary school the results of its graduates who had gone on to the secondary level were announced. At her school there was an older girl in the secondary level whose name was Aminata and whom Aminata admired for her intelligence. Up until that time Aminata had a different name, but at this point she changed her name to emulate the girl in secondary school. Unfortunately the girl whom she admired never finished school as she got married before graduation and was therefore forced to leave school.²

At her secondary school a nun who was teaching there told Aminata that she ought to be a teacher, so when she graduated, she taught in that same school and married someone who was also teaching there. She had her first child within a year and another child a year following that. Ten years later, she went to teachers college and received her teaching certificate.

She then taught for another twenty years, but during this time the war arrived at the village where her parents were living and the village was at-

tacked, Aminata's family house burned down and the village destroyed. For this reason her parents and some family members came to stay with her and her family in their two room house. Aminata's village had different customs than her husband's, and at this point for her family's sake Aminata began to revert to the customs of her village. These included women and men not eating together and not washing in the same location. Her husband gave her an ultimatum: either her family leave or he would. She decided that given the war, her family was not in a position to leave. Instead her husband left. In order to be away from her husband, she then applied for a job teaching in another town. Her application was accepted, but her school principal would not release her, and when this happens, the hiring school is not permitted to accept the applicant. The school principal called Aminata in and although she told him that she wanted to leave because of her husband,³ the principal would not release her.

Before the first attack by the RUF that she lived through during the war, Aminata described how everyone in her town was continually on alert hoping their town would be spared. They were keenly aware of sounds. Sounds dominated everyone's consciousness and any sound that seemed unusual was quickly attended to. But her town was not spared and it was attacked one day while she was teaching school. Fortunately she was able to escape with her two children and a small group of people, running for two and a half days through the bush. At this point they found food and water and later were able to make their way by boat to the capital city, spending two days on the with no food or water to drink. When they arrived in Freetown, the authorities would not permit them to disembark for a day and a half because they thought there might be rebels among the group in the boat. When she finally got off the boat, she and her children went to live with a friend's family, where they stayed for two years, sharing a one room house with three other people.

Each day in Freetown Aminata would leave the house to line up for food rations. If a person's name was called, that person would receive some bulgher. On a particular day when her name was not called, someone she knew said he would share his rations with her. They walked together along a part of the city unfamiliar to her and there she met a person she knew who said people were looking for her to work in a new school established specifically for war displaced girls. She was quickly hired as the principal of the school whose student body was largely composed of students who had fled to Freetown following RUF attacks on their villages. The majority of the students were either not living with their parents or their parents had been killed in the war.

Then the war came to Freetown. During this time, each night Aminata, her children and her friends went to sleep in a different empty building, in order that the rebels would not be able to find them. During this time her school was not functioning as the rebels were occupying it. On one particular day people had gathered near the State House, and in the crowd a man suddenly said 'I think I smell a rebel in the crowd', and in a flash, people had surrounded a

young man, put a tire around his neck and set it on fire. Right before her this man was killed. Aminata realized that the crowd could have selected anyone, even her, as they were looking for an outlet for their terror.

Although the attack on Freetown was brutal, leaving many people with amputated limbs, leaving bodies piled on streets, and leaving many buildings burnt down, Aminata and her children survived. At war's end, Aminata was able to move into a two room house⁴ and the school was reopened. Several people brought children to her in the hopes that she would take them in and that their children would receive an education, as she was a school principal. Within a year there were nine children living with her in her home. She states simply that she then became the mother of all of them. However, shortly after this point she had a stroke which left her paralyzed for several months. Her main worry was that as the sole breadwinner in her home and with so many children relying on her, they would have no food and would starve. She therefore felt that because of them, she had to recover. Fortunately, she recovered fully and was able to resume work.

Today, as a principal, she carries to school a second hand cloth bag with the logo of a YMCA from a Canadian city. As an educator, Aminata believes strongly in girls' education and states that she is somewhat unusual in this belief. She relates that even when she was a young girl she was different from others. She loved to learn and she loved to teach. She considers herself a stern disciplinarian at school and believes in corporal punishment. For example, if a student is late for school, she gets three lashes with a stick to her legs with the logic that the student will therefore walk faster to school the next day. But she also worries for her students. Water runs into the grade one classroom, causing health problems. In the dry season the schoolyard becomes a sea of dust leading to coughs and illness among the students. As well, the classrooms do not have textbooks for the students and many of the students do not have the funds to purchase a pencil or paper needed for assignments and exams. Many do not have enough food to eat.

Aminata will retire in five years, and although she has had more opportunities and privileges than most women and mothers in Sierra Leone, she knows that she will not have sufficient income to support her and her children. For this reason, she will have to start a small business project and hope that it will generate sufficient income. In addition, having lived through rebel attacks both in her town and following that, in Freetown, she frequently describes deep feelings of desperation and depression brought on by thinking about the war.

Nevertheless, employing the three markers of resilience—a sense of hope, the ability to recover from negative changes and a sense of personal success in or following difficult situations—certain aspects of Aminata's life point to her resilience following the egregious circumstances of war. Growing up, her father was a chief and she was one of a small minority of girls to receive an elementary education and one of even a smaller minority to graduate from

secondary school and teachers college. Based on this, she maintains a social status and privilege far beyond the majority of women in her country. In a society where marriage and motherhood for women are expected, she did both. Her nine children who are currently living with her rely on her for their basic needs and her sense of responsibility and her caring towards them support her when deep feelings of despair based on her war experiences surround her. Nevertheless, although she admits to depressive and despairing periods, her personality is generally upbeat and cheerful.

Having "beaten the odds" in spite of extreme negative circumstances in her environment, Aminata has been able to forge her resilience. During and following the war, through such circumstances as living in her village when it was attacked by rebels and subsequent displacement, the microsystem of her environment posed extreme difficulties. Chaos caused by war and its aftermath affected Aminata's mesosystem and exosystem, as this was a war that blanketed the country leaving no one in Sierra Leone unaffected by the conflict. In addition, with norms and institutions such as education flung into disrepair and left in shambles, the macrosystem of Aminata's space offered little positive reinforcement during and immediately following the civil conflict.

There is no doubt that the war has affected the trajectory of her life. As a risk factor, she was caught up in its horror and destruction and the subsequent personal aftermath of depression. Although she continues to suffer from depression, it has not debilitated her so that she is unable to function in her roles as school principal and mother. As well, from the perspective of protection, her life's trajectory was affected through the war as it acted as a catalyst for her to be hired as a school principal and to become the mother to nine children in addition to her two birth children. While being hired as a school principal was in part due to the war and post-conflict circumstances, that Aminata pursued her schooling as a girl and young woman and worked as a school teacher prior to the civil conflict were prior protective factors involved in her being hired as a principal. These factors relate to Aminata's status as the daughter of a chief and his permission and encouragement for her to be educated.

Balanced as it is as the fulcrum between these serious risk and yet strongly protective mechanisms, her resilience can therefore be considered somewhat tentative. Personal narrative inquiry commonly asks the basic question of the person herself: 'how were you able to manage in the face of such negative circumstances?' Aminata answers this question by summing up her resilience in this way:

You ask me if I think I'm resilient. The war's over now. I suffered too much then and I still have difficult times when I think about it. Everyone thinks I support the students at school and my children, but really my job and children support me. Well, I can say that at last I have hope for my children, my students, and for me.

¹These are societies in which violent conflict has formally ceased, although this does not mean that all violent conflict has ended. Violent conflict often persists and peace is typically fragile.

²Today, the granddaughter of this woman lives with Aminata.

³Her husband had already by this time married another woman, much younger than Aminata.

⁴Her children moved to a different location. The second room of the house is still not finished as Aminata has not been able to afford the materials and labour involved.

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