

War Hidden Victims: The Harrowing Struggle of Women in Sierra Leone's Conflict

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Women are bearer of every cross. Women are the softest and most powerful beings. Women, the 'object of pleasure', says society. Women, the 'weaker vessels,' says society. Women are the symbol of life. Women are the most vulnerable ones. Women are women and the most victimized.

As said, women are a symbol of life and that life can be taken away by the society that describes them as 'weaker vessels', as was witnessed in Sierra Leone's 11 years' civil war. Were women suffered the most of the atrocities, including assault, rape, abduction, mutilation, displacement, forcefully drugged, forceful recruitment, and forced marriage, among others.

The Sierra Leone Civil War began in March 1991 and ended in 2002, witnessing several atrocities. That included dehumanization of women and young girls due to their vulnerability. Many were raped, exploited, forcefully recruited, and made objects of torture.

"Their vulnerability was deliberately exploited in order to dehumanize them and perpetrate against them the most gross of violations. They were raped, forced into sexual slavery and endured acts of great sexual violence." (TRC report Vol. 3b; chapter 33 page No.86)

As much as many women came forward to testify before the TRC, many found it difficult to do so. Some did not even give it a thought, as in the case of Kadiatu Koroma. (Name changed)

Kadiatu is a 68-year-old woman who was 'mercilessly' raped in the presence of her husband, children, and neighbors in a village in the Northern Province. She had lived in her hometown all her life, but this tragic incident turned her life upside-down, where she had no choice but to do what she thought was right for her family. In her words: "I was raped mercilessly in the presence of my husband and children. They threatened to kill my children and husband if they dared close their eyes. Not just one of them, three of them raped me while their colleagues were cheering them on."

Faced with such dreadful experience, Kadiatu, who was 31 years old at the time, decided to end her life as a result of shame and stigmatization.

We have heard stories of husbands abandoning their wives because they were sexually violated by rebels. But in the case of Kadiatu, her husband was her greatest support and stood by her and accepted her with no hesitation.

“I couldn't bear the thought of being raped by boys who were small enough to be my children. The fact that my husband was there watching together with our children almost killed me. I attempted to take my life several times, but my loving and supportive husband couldn't let me,” she said, while crying.

But the family relocated, due to shame.

When asked if she ever testified before the committee of TRC in order to have justice for what she experienced, she said: "No, no, no, my family and I had to relocate here because we couldn't stand the shame and humiliation in our home town. So testifying in special court or going anywhere close to special court would have alerted our new neighbors that something happened, and this would have made our new settlement uncomfortable. So my family and I chose not to."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 2002, providing a space for victims and perpetrators to share their stories and promote healing and reconciliation. Since its reason for establishment was known throughout the country, many chose to stay silent in order not to be reminded of their wounds or be isolated by community members, as in the case of Kadiatu.

Kadiatu lived with the trauma for years. This affected her greatly in ways she never imagined, to an extent that her son, who was not yet born at the time, had to go through the traumatic torture placed on him by his mother.

"Whenever I recalled the bitter memory, I would vent my frustration on my innocent son, who was not in the world when that happened to me," she said.

Kadiatu made it clear that she did not conceive during the rape, which she is grateful for. She vented her frustration on her son because he was the only one living with her and her husband. His elder sisters who were present when this happened had gotten married and things took the turn for a worse when she lost her husband in 2019.

“The government should provide psychosocial support and reproductive health services to women affected by conflict. These services should be provided free to those who have experienced physical trauma, torture, and sexual violence.” (TRC Vol.2 Chapter:3 p.174).

When asked if she has in any way benefited from this, Kadiatu clearly stated that since she didn't want any one to know about what happened, she has never gone close to anything recommended by the TRC for women affected by the war.

Adama Mansaray, who was living in Kenema, unlike many women, didn't experience as much as others. She was a young woman who had just gotten married. In some way, she did not face any human rights violation. However, her community people, including her mother-in-law, were brutally killed, while she watched from her hidden spot. She was always forced to run for her life whenever she heard people yelling: “Them dae pa cam oh.”

Adama and some of her colleagues were sometimes forced to witness the torture of their loved ones.

“Mosquito and his men caused atrocities in my town and all neighboring villages and towns. They took people forcefully with them and killed them brutally, all in the name of fun. They throw stones at them until they die.” She said.

When asked if women were among those who were killed by Mosquito and his men, she said only her mother-in-law was unfortunate to be killed by them. Even though she fortunate not to have experienced the atrocities faced by those she knew, Adama had her own traumatic experience. Seeing your loved ones being tortured and killed in your presence is the most traumatizing experience.

Salamatu Kargbo, who was 10 years old, experienced the worst. As the saying goes, ‘He that feels it knows it.’ Nothing is as traumatizing as witnessing your mother being raped, amputated, and killed.

Salamatu, at 10 years old, witnessed what no child should witness. In a place (not disclosed) in Freetown, she and her family and community at large were ambushed by the RUF. They killed as many as possible. Upon hearing “them don ambush we oh,” Salamatu's mother hid her and ordered her not to come out no matter what. As a child, she couldn't bear seeing her mother being tortured

without being emotionally affected, so she started crying and calling out for her mother. "They brought me out of my hiding place and they wanted to take me along, but my mother cried and begged them to take her instead. I was crying bitterly, and one of them said they should grant my wish," she narrated.

Most women lost their lives in order to save their children's. Children died because they could not leave their mothers' lifeless body behind. Mothers were raped and killed in exchange for their daughters as in Salamatu's case. "My mother was raped, amputated, and killed in my place," she said. Salamatu was later saved by people who were also running for their lives as she was left alone with her mother's remains. She was displaced for five years before reuniting with her father.

Salamatu was a child and had no idea of TRC. "I only came to know about the TRC in recent times, like two years ago."

Hence there is nothing she can say about the TRC. Because of what happened to her, she had to drop out of school at a very young age since her father had taken another wife.

Even though a lot of women testified before the commission, a significant number of them did not. They were mostly afraid of isolation, and some had no idea about TRC. If Kadiatu could not share her story because she was afraid of stigmatization and isolation, and now, she is sharing her story as anonymous, it means there are thousands of them out there who suffered the same or similar fate as Kadiatu and chose to be silent for the same or similar reasons. The government and the Ministry of Women's Affairs should organize a campaign, educating and encouraging these women to come out and share their stories. These women find it hard to survive with little or no support from relatives, and because they chose to stay silent, they can't access or ask for anything recommended by TRC for them if there is any. They need to be encouraged. They deserve to be heard. They need to be educated. And most importantly, they need help!

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