

Restorative Justice: Healing Societies from the Wounds of Human Rights Violations

By Fatmata Tidankay Kamara

The Sierra Leone civil war, which began in 1991 and ended in 2002, is estimated to have killed over 50,000 people and up to 70,000 casualties in total. Among these casualties were some of the worst cases of human rights violations ever recorded in any conflict.

The post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in its report, recorded that women and children faced brutal violations of human rights. “While the majority of victims were adult males, perpetrators singled out women and children for some of the most brutal violations of human rights recorded in any conflict.” TRC Vol.2 Chap.2 Sec. 22, reads.

“They laid me naked after rapping me and inserted a stick in my womanhood in the presence of my husband and my 8 years old boy,” Suad Conteh (name change), a 45 years old woman recalled. Suad was a happily married woman who made a vow to live and love only one man; her husband, for the rest of her life. But this came to an end after the rebels attacked, raped, and inserted a stick in her womanhood in her husband’s presence.

Suad was helped by Red Cross through recovery, but the incident left her in shambles forever. “The Red Cross took me and helped me recover, but I was told never to be intimate if I wanted to live long,” she said. And because of this, her husband left her, leaving her in a state of frustration.

Suad has been living a life of torment, no menstruation, no intimacy, and no partner to lean on. According to her, life has been full of challenges with no one to run to except her only son who also finds life difficult. She only relies on her “cigarette box” for survival. She further stated that although her present life is not what she prayed for, she is happy and grateful for being alive and for finally having the courage to share her story for the first time.

“This is not what I prayed for, but I’m happy for the gift of life and finally having the courage to share my story for the first time,” she said.

The TRC, in its recommendations, stated that the government should provide psychosocial support and reproductive health services to women affected by the war, and the services must be free.

“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).

Talking on this recommendation by the TRC, Suad stated that she never shared her story with the TRC committee. Hence, she can not claim anything.

Lansana Samura (name changed) shared the story of his late sister, who also suffered the same fate as Suad. Lansana’s sister’s bride price had already been paid; he was only waiting on the date to be handed over to her husband when she was raped by the rebels.

“They raped and deflowered her even before she was handed over to her husband,” he said.

Her sister was, however, accepted by her husband, but things took a turn for the worse when the husband and his family discovered she was pregnant and her husband was not the father.

“She was hated by her in-laws and her husband for something she had no control of. Who would love to be raped and get pregnant for such satanic people?” he asked.

Samura’s sister was returned to her family, bride price refunded, leaving her in a more destroyed state. The villagers started mocking, laughing, pointing fingers at her and calling her all sorts of names. It got to a point that she could not bear the torture and decided to take her own life and her unborn baby. “She was found dead in our family garden. We believe she took her and her unborn baby’s life due to the discrimination she was facing,” he stated.

Samura’s family could not bear the humiliation and hatred from the villagers, so they left for another village where no one knew them and started afresh. But till date, according to him, the pain is fresh and there is nothing that can take the bitter and sweet memories of his beloved sister from the family's heart.

Samura and his family did not say anything to the TRC because they had different identities and they did not want to go through what they were facing in the previous village.

The National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) is a semi-autonomous government agency that focuses on social relief programs and promotes sustainable development to alleviate poverty and improve the lives of vulnerable populations. NaCSA provides social safety nets and protection to vulnerable groups, including those affected by conflict.

Several attempts to contact NaCSA for authoritative insight into this issue proved futile.

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