

Time to Make History, Time to Educate Women

**A Narrative of the Life and Work of
Christiana Thorpe of Sierra Leone**

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Acronyms

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
CDF	Civil Defense Forces
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration
ECOMOG	Economic Community Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
MSF	Médicins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council
OAU	Organization of African Unity (2004: AU African Union)
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOMSIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone
WANEP	West African Network for Peacebuilding
WAPI	West African Peace Institute

The Cotton Tree

In the center of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, looms a massive cotton tree. If you were perched in its limbs, like a bird, you could see all of Freetown, all the way to the sea from which freed slaves emerged to begin life anew. At its base, the trunk is a large complex of buttresses, reminiscent of the flying buttresses seen in grand gothic cathedrals throughout Europe. Indeed, both the majesty of the tree and its survival through the tumultuous history of Sierra Leone inspire almost a religious sense of awe.

No one knows the age of the tree. Most likely, it was there when indigenous tribes were the only inhabitants of the land. Historical records prove it was there in 1787 when freed British slaves and British philanthropists and abolitionists came to the country to establish a free settlement. It was there in 1792 when a group of freed slaves arrived from the Americas: they gathered under it to praise God for their liberation and safe arrival in a promised land. Freetown later developed into a base in West Africa from which these freed slaves and abolitionists sought to suppress the slave trade in the region.¹ The cotton tree was there, strong and resilient through this time, through colonization, through independence, through civil war—and still overlooks Freetown as Sierra Leone rebuilds today.

In January of 1954, the tree was there in all its stateliness as five-year-old Christiana Ayoka Mary Thorpe walked eagerly with her grandmother to her first day of school. “On my way to school, one of the birds in the tree spewed on me and I was so mad at the bird!” Her grandmother calmly began cleaning her sleeve and telling her the story of the tree to distract

¹ See Leslie Bethell, “The Mixed Commissions for the Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 7:1 (1966): 79-93, or Monday Abasiattai, “The Search for Independence: New World Blacks in Sierra Leone and Liberia, 1787-1847,” *Journal of Black Studies* 23:1 (1992): 107-116.

Christiana from her anger. She spoke words that embedded in her young mind and heart: “This tree is a very historic tree in our culture, and you are going to be an historic person.”

Her Grandmother’s Garden

Her grandmother’s garden was like Eden amidst ruins and remnants of the Fall of Adam and Eve. The sweet smells of thyme, ginger, and garlic, as well as peppers, tomatoes, and onions, would rise above the odors of the surrounding slums of Freetown. Christiana remembers it as a place of respite from the social ills of colonization. It was 1952 and Sierra Leone, like the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, had not experienced independence yet. The area of the capital where her grandmother lived was mired in poverty, a slum in the shadows of colonial buildings.

She went to live with her grandmother at the age of three, and took her infant sister who had been born prematurely and needed tender care by the matriarch of the family. Christiana and her sister, unlike her six other siblings, were raised by their grandmother, and thus observed how she cultivated her vegetable and herb gardens—the same way she cultivated peace among her neighbors. The community often came to her, not only because she was an herbalist, and therefore, a healer, but also because she could offer advice and settle conflicts unlike anyone else. She would dispense herbs or advice freely, all to keep the community at peace.

Christiana’s grandmother was a washerwoman by trade, and Christiana would accompany her to the streams and rivers of Freetown as she went about the work of cleansing, airing out, and ironing the laundry of the community. Between observing her grandmother in the garden and in the streams, Christiana would learn how to live.

The ideas about peace I think I imbibed from my grandmother. She was a very peaceful woman and I had a very happy childhood. Grandma was a good influence. She was very respectful of other people, whether a three-year-old child or a ninety-year-old person. I grew up more from her example, rather than ‘do’ or

‘don’t.’ That has impacted me throughout my life when I reflect on how I do things.

Teacher and Student

Relative to other families in her community, Christiana’s was fortunate: they never had to worry about their next meal, as they had their grandmother’s garden. Christiana never had to worry about school fees. “Mom and Dad said, ‘All we can give you is an education. We don’t have property; we don’t have anything.’” While the rest of the girls in the neighborhood remained behind to work with their families or play in the streets, Christiana and her sister went off to school. She thrived on learning, and each day when they returned all the girls came to her grandmother’s house so Christiana—or “Teacher,” as she became known—could relay everything she had learned that day.

Though Sierra Leone gained its independence in 1961 and the country began trying to heal from the wounds of colonization, independence did little for the status of girls and women. Christiana was twelve and just entering secondary school² at the time of independence. Just as she and her sister were the only girls from their neighborhood in primary school, she noticed this educational gap widening even more.

By the time I was thirteen, the girls I knew who were my age were having babies. Grandma said, ‘Because they are not in school, they have to marry young and have children. They do this because they have to ensure that they’re set in their lives—they need a husband to take care of them. But you are lucky: you can go to school and get an education.’ So with babies on their backs, they would sell fish and vegetables, and that was their life. That was one thing that made me get into education for girls. That is how it started, my journey into education.

Her grandmother fostered both her formal education and her religious education.

Christiana’s parents were Catholic, and though her grandmother was Methodist, she ensured the

² Sierra Leone, a British colony, followed the British system of education: seven years of primary school, five years of secondary school, and then university.

two granddaughters would be raised according to the Catholic faith. She encouraged them to go to church and confession, and was present for their first Holy Communion and confirmation. But it was less the outward expressions of the Christian faith that stayed with Christiana, for “Grandma thought religion was just part of your schedule: you go to school and you go to church. She was not overly pious.” It was her grandmother’s private life of faith that stirred Christiana. As a young child, she shared a bed with her grandmother and got used to her sitting up and talking aloud. Though she spoke about daily occurrences and concerns, to no one in particular, Christiana eventually realized she was praying. “This made an impact on me—that God is not just somebody ‘up there,’ but that He is somebody really close. The Divine Being is someone you can relate to.”

The Sea

In moments of reflection alone in her room in Ireland in 1969, Christiana would look out her window at the moonlight dancing off the waves of the sea. Nothing here was the same as tropical Sierra Leone—not the climate, not the food, not the community, not the garden—nothing except the sea. When it rained, or when the temperature dropped and the winds hastened through the corridors of the convent, Christiana would think, “At least I have the sea.”

She had left her home in Freetown and traveled 5,000 kilometers to Ferbane, County Offaly, Ireland. Her grandmother’s relational notion of God and the richness of her private faith had made a strong impression on Christiana throughout her school years. In addition, her schools in Freetown had been run by Irish Sisters from the order of St. Joseph of Cluny, who had modeled religious faith and inspired her. Rather than pursuing university studies immediately

upon graduating secondary school, she wanted to join the convent. In August of 1969, she left for the same convent where the Sisters running her schools in Freetown had studied.

At first, life in Ireland was trying. She was away from her main source of support—her family and particularly her grandmother—and the climate and culture kept her from feeling as if the place could ever be home, with the cold, the rain and occasional snow, the bland food. But a bottle of chili sauce from her mother, and the knowledge that the sea with the moonlight reflecting off it was just outside her window helped her adjust as the months passed. By the spring of 1970, it was warm enough to venture outside, and Christiana inquired about going to the sea for a couple of hours with the other novitiates and the Sisters. They told her that would be fine, but it would take a whole day, not just a couple of hours. As it turned out, the moonlight she had marveled at never reflected off the sea in that part of Ireland—it was reflecting off the plastic covering the fields of peat. Disappointed that this notion that had carried her through the loneliest times of her journey to sisterhood was all a misconception, she was still able to laugh with the Sisters. By this time, she had settled into life in Ireland, made friends that were as close as family, and was entirely focused on learning the ways of religious life.

Christiana took her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in 1972, and began attending University College, Dublin the following year. She studied for a joint degree in French and English, graduating in 1976. From there, she received her first assignment teaching at St. Joseph's Secondary School in Makeni, Sierra Leone. Christiana would stay at this school for sixteen years, first as a teacher, and then as principal beginning in 1982. During this period she also returned to Ireland for a time to undertake advanced study in adult education and religious studies.

Barriers

As a teacher and principal at an all-girls school, Christiana quickly learned that education was not a priority for many of the families of the young girls. “Once a girl came home from school, the parents did not understand that she had studies to do. The minute she came home, they wanted her to go to the market and sell for the family.” Many of the girls were from illiterate families; it became a challenge to convince the parents of the importance of education for their daughters’ future, “in order to help the girls move forward.” Each year, a class would start with 200 girls; by the end of the five years of secondary education, there would rarely be more than twenty at graduation.

Christiana was trained in counseling and called upon to use these skills, as well as the peacemaking skills she learned while watching her grandmother. Dealing with the students’ families, and working in the community to determine why girls were not getting their education, Christiana saw the barriers facing Sierra Leonean women. “It was there that I really realized the need for women to become educated; most of the women in that part of the country were so oppressed. It was a male-dominated area. This is when I started to get the conviction that women need to be emancipated, and education was very necessary.” She continued counseling and mediating family and community disputes, and initiated adult literacy classes for women. Working at the secondary school until the late afternoon, she would then teach the literacy classes, or counsel, until six in the evening—the time she was required to be back in the convent for the night. But Christiana found that “mediation exercises” and the “community’s needs” should not be “time-bound.”

I started feeling really frustrated because there were things I thought I could do, but was not able to do because I was at the convent. In the convent you are very time-bound. The more I thought about it and interacted with the women in the community, the more I began to realize I was constrained in the convent. I really

think I had a lot more to give than the time that was allotted to me. I was veering on the side of what people needed, not on the law of the convent.

She struggled with what her next step should be. Religious life was a part of her and had been for twenty years. She enjoyed the sisterhood and communal living, living with diverse women who considered themselves family, and she was grateful for the opportunities given to her to work with the community. It was a frustrating and “difficult period” for Christiana, as she felt torn between her religious vows and the responsibility she felt to the greater community. Christiana needed perspective. She found it in a three-month discernment program at the Monastery of St. Gertrude, in Cottonwood, Idaho. Like the convent in Ireland, this was another distant, land-locked place where she could reflect.

Battles

Christiana left for the United States just a few months after a rebel group known as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered Sierra Leone to begin what would become a decade-long civil war. The RUF rebels, led by Foday Sankoh, a former army corporal backed by the Liberian dictator Charles Taylor, were opposed to the corrupt leadership in the Sierra Leonean government, at the time led by Joseph Saidu Momoh.³ The RUF, however, also sought control of the lucrative diamond mines in the country, and by late 1992 had captured the Kono district in the southeast, the primary diamond mining area in the country.

As Sierra Leone was experiencing the onset of civil war, Christiana was trying to discern in what capacity she could help her country. “I had time to think over my life: where I came from and where I was going to. I had the opportunity to do things I had always wanted to do and never had time to do. There was a lot of peace and quiet during that period.” Christiana and the other

³ Momoh succeeded Siaka Stevens, who ruled Sierra Leone for seventeen years, from 1968 to 1985.

participants in the program had spiritual advisors to help them reflect and find new directions. They would take walks among the prairies and forestland, and there were crafts and other activities to enjoy. After the three months, she had come to a decision. “I realized that I really must move out of the convent. Not that I knew where I was going, but the conviction that I needed to move out became very, very strong.” Though Christiana had come to her own conclusion, the program required that she share her decision, and also listen to the evaluations of those advising her. “To my surprise, all the people that were working with me said they thought I should leave, too.”

Many years had passed since Christiana took her final vows, and she had risen to Mother Superior of her congregation. According to the laws of the order, she had to go through several channels within the Church in order to leave the sisterhood. She wrote a letter to the head order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, which was based in France; the office then sent her request to the Vatican. By March of 1992, she had been granted conditional dispensation from her vows. She would have one year to solidify her decision.

When I went into the convent, I believe that God showed me what He really wanted me to do. You do not go in for anybody else; it is a call between you and the Lord. I think that you must remain open to letting the Lord lead you to where He wants you and what He wants you to do. I think there is a place for religious life; it was just time for me to look at a new lifestyle. I believe that my being in the convent was a preparation for whatever the Lord has in store for me to do in life.

Politics and the Forum

Upon her return to Sierra Leone and “secular” life in 1992, Christiana was unsure in which direction her life would now turn. The country was a year into a civil war, and by April of 1992, a new military-led government was in power. The embittered, underpaid army had overthrown Momoh, and the government known as the National Provisional Ruling Council

(NPRC) was now led by a young officer, Captain Valentine Strasser. Though the government was military-led, Strasser wanted civilian professionals to run the ministries while the army could concentrate on fighting the rebels. The Ministry of Education in the government of Sierra Leone was familiar with Christiana's work as a teacher and principal at St. Joseph's and impressed by her academic background in education. In early 1993, she began work in the ministry, helping to implement a new system of education to try and deal with an estimated twenty percent literacy rate.⁴ By November of 1993, Christiana was appointed the Deputy Minister of Education; by August of the following year, she was promoted to Minister of Education. She was the only woman in a cabinet of nineteen ministers. "When I went into politics, it was like being thrown into the deep end, but I found that my studies and the discipline of the convent stood by me. I face challenges positively. If challenges come my way, I never back down. We look at each other face to face and see how things will come out."

While her official duties consisted mainly of fighting corruption in the educational system,⁵ Christiana had also become involved with a non-governmental organization (NGO) called the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), based in Nairobi, Kenya and begun during the early 1990s. Their objective was, and remains, ensuring that girls have access to quality education in sub-Saharan Africa. Christiana became a member, and in March of 1995, founded the Sierra Leone chapter of the organization (FAWE-SL). It was focused on educating children affected by the war. "It was very, very challenging because the war was at its height then."

⁴ The literacy rate for women and girls was roughly ten percent.

⁵ Christiana imparted many examples of corruption, such as the following: "Let's say we have ten teachers and these teachers should be getting \$2 each, which equals \$20. Instead of the ten, however, you see there are fifteen names on the books, which means the \$20 has to be divided between more people, giving each teacher less than \$2. My interest was in proving there were only ten teachers, so that each teacher could have their \$2. The budget stays the same, but the teachers who deserve the money get it and it doesn't go into the pockets of officials."

In early 1995, Strasser had invited Executive Outcomes, a mercenary group from South Africa, to help his army protect both the capital—which the rebels were threatening to overtake—and the diamond mining districts in the east. By May, there had been many battles between the forces. Civilians from the countryside were seeking refuge in Freetown, joining the already large number of internally displaced. Christiana recalls thousands of the displaced staggering into the capital. In the days that followed, she observed the children just roaming aimlessly with nothing to do—she knew they needed to be put in school, and that FAWE-SL could not ignore the problem. She first asked the local schools to take in extra children. These schools doubled their class sizes because of the emergency. But FAWE still had 4,000 children registered with nowhere to go. Because Christiana was Minister of Education, she was able to contact the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to ask for assistance in setting up schools in the displaced camps. These became known as Emergency Camp Schools. Another international NGO, Plan International, aided FAWE-SL and UNICEF by providing educational materials, as well as cooking utensils and appliances, so that the children could be fed at school.

Christiana was grateful she could use her position as minister to get the children in schools, but she was primarily interested in assuring that international NGOs complemented and empowered the local community. From the beginning, she wanted the full participation of the local communities, both the residents and the displaced groups, in order to utilize their skills. They needed to build their capacity, and deal with and survive this time of war. Retired teachers and caregivers were centrally involved, as were other locals and refugees who helped collect food and goods such as firewood that the schools needed. FAWE-SL then bought these materials from them. It was a system that permitted the organization to get what they needed for a lower price than they could find elsewhere while ensuring that the communities had a source of

income. The participation of the communities allowed the people themselves to witness FAWE's work, and demonstrated the great lengths people will go to ensure children have access to schools—showing clearly just how important education truly was for their kids. Though there were direct benefits, Christiana believes that working with the grassroots community illustrates that “more benefits come indirectly than directly. Empowering them to begin to see reasons for development in the community allows them to progress. The coalition building with the local community is most important in development.” FAWE-SL was a young organization (the Emergency Camp School program began before the group even had a charter), and the war was continuing, but Christiana was already thinking about the long-term development of the organization and the country as a whole.

Coup

As a civilian professional in a military government during a war, Christiana knew the dangers. When in her office at the Ministry of Education, she always sat facing the door, with windows to her left and right; she wanted to know what was taking place outside her walls. In the morning hours of January 16, 1996, she was at her desk working, and noticed army officials on the grounds outside her windows and in the corridors of the building. Not long after, her friend Sam, also a minister, called to warn her there had been a coup⁶ and she needed to leave immediately and report to the army headquarters. Instead, she grabbed the rosary beads that she still kept with her constantly and ran to the restroom to pray first. She assumed that everyone in Strasser's cabinet would be killed for their perceived loyalty to him. Then she collected herself, returned to her office and took only her bag, proceeding to the army headquarters where all the ministers had gathered to await word on Strasser, their careers, and their futures.

⁶ Strasser, the head of state, was deposed by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio.

It was Christiana's last day in the office, her last day as Minister of Education, but her life was spared. Instead of the predicted cycle of death typical of a coup, the ministers were thanked for their work and received glowing letters of recommendation. Julius Maada Bio, the new head of state, announced shortly after the takeover that he was forming a new cabinet, causing uproar among the civilian population who perceived this as a power grab and not a firm commitment to holding elections, but Bio soon affirmed that voting would take place to elect a civilian government. Elections were held in late February, with a runoff in March that was won by Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP).

Exile

A month after the coup, Christiana began consulting work with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), while also continuing to build and support the development of FAWE-SL over the next year. Early in 1997, she was asked by officials at the Nairobi headquarters of FAWE to attend the summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Zimbabwe, which was to be held in June. In her dual role as consultant with UNDP and head of FAWE-SL, she could gain valuable knowledge for both organizations.

Christiana arrived in Zimbabwe a few days before the scheduled start of the summit. She settled into her hotel on May 25. Listening to CNN in the background as she unpacked and relaxed, she heard something about unrest in Sierra Leone at the tail end of the first news program. She sat at the edge of the bed waiting for more information. Nothing else was reported, so she called her brother in the United States, thinking he had access to more information. He told her he knew little—only that there had been another coup.

As information filtered through, Christiana learned that President Kabbah had been overthrown by a faction of the military led by Johnny Paul Koroma. Despite a peace agreement signed between the government and the RUF,⁷ Kabbah had alienated the army by relying on the Civil Defense Forces (CDF), and in particular a large group called the Kamajors.⁸ Koroma and his Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) asked Foday Sankoh, the RUF leader, to join the new government. The country slid back into chaos, with widespread human rights abuses by the AFRC and RUF, and much of the civilian population fleeing to the borders as refugees.

As the summit began in Harare, Christiana joined two other Sierra Leoneans, an ambassador and the electoral commissioner, to officially condemn what had taken place in their country. The OAU issued a similar statement, calling on the international community to deny recognition to the military junta.

Following the summit Christiana was essentially stateless. She could not return to Sierra Leone because of the insecurity and her status as former minister. As communication into and out of the country was severed, she was unsure whether her own family had remained in Freetown or if they had fled. With the help of FAWE-Kenya, Christiana was able to fly to the United States to be with her brother. There they awaited news from her family. Three days later, her relatives called to tell Christiana and her brother to say they had been stuck at the border of Sierra Leone and Guinea, but had arrived safely in the capital of Conakry. Twenty-eight members of her family made the journey by road; her father, however, felt he was too old and the

⁷ The Abidjan Peace Accord was signed on November 20, 1996. Agreements in the accord included the disarmament of the rebels and their subsequent amnesty, and the expulsion of Executive Outcomes from the country. Abidjan is a city in Ivory Coast where the peace talks were held.

⁸ Also spelled Kamajohs, this faction of the CDF was a traditional group of hunters from southeastern Sierra Leone. Kabbah incorporated the group to help fight the RUF upon the withdrawal of Executive Outcomes. The Kamajors were led by Samuel Hinga Norman.

trek too long and dangerous. He remained behind in Freetown. By the end of June, Christiana returned to Africa, joining her family and thousands of Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea.

Among these thousands of refugees were most of the senior members of FAWE-SL. Christiana's contract with UNDP had ended, so she concentrated solely on FAWE and the goal of developing a sub-regional bureau of the organization. The needs of the displaced population, known as the "unregistered refugees," were overwhelming, however. Refugees were still pouring into the Guinean capital. "People were traveling for three and four days, and the Guinean soldiers were trying to keep order. I saw a soldier kick a girl right in the tummy. I knew we needed to do something to ease the situation and get the children off of the roads." The displaced members of FAWE-SL coordinated with FAWE-Guinea to begin educational programs for children in the displaced camps. With the financial support of FAWE headquarters in Nairobi and UNDP Sierra Leone, the Non-Formal Education Program began its work.

"We realized in the first week that we could not use the normal school curriculum because it was not working. Then we began to realize what trauma was all about." The civil war in Sierra Leone was now in its sixth year and for the children, had resulted not only in physical dislocation, but profound disorientation leading to what Christiana affirms was a culture of violence. The members of FAWE-SL, with the input of nearly one hundred volunteer teachers, developed curriculum that could address youth traumatized by conflict. "I would say we kind of stumbled on developing what we thought the needs were for the children at that stage." The program encompassed seven subjects: trauma healing and counseling, drama, physical and health education, English language, French language, mathematics, and peace education. It was a four-month program and by its completion had served roughly 4,000 externally displaced children and youth—boys and girls—between the ages of four and twenty-five. The curriculum became the

nucleus for a larger project, the development of modules for educating children for a culture of peace. These were implemented throughout the Mano River region,⁹ and are still in use today.

Christiana was busy with the displaced camp program and the new curriculum when she received news from Sierra Leone in September of 1997. Her father had passed away. He had been forced from his home in Freetown and went to live with Christiana's brother-in-law, who also had remained in the capital. "I think he just couldn't cope since none of us were there except for my brother-in-law. So the last time I saw him turned out to be before I left to go to Zimbabwe, before the coup." Christiana and her family made arrangements to return to Freetown for the funeral and to return her father's body to his home village, about eighteen kilometers from the capital. The night before they were to leave, Christiana received a warning: someone she knew had discovered that an ambush was being laid for her on the road back home. Her status as a former government official would jeopardize her journey to bury her own father. Family members who remained behind in Freetown after the coup "took full control of the funeral and really did everything." On the family's way to her father's home village, they were forced to open the coffin at numerous army checkpoints along the way "because the rebels used to use coffins to smuggle guns" into the country.

Indigenous Methods of Peacemaking

In addition to the successful displaced camp program and the positive reception of the new curriculum, another collaborative project was initiated. This project was with the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Because women are

⁹ The Mano River region encompasses Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

“stakeholders in conflict situations,” yet are “mostly left out of conflict resolution initiatives,”¹⁰ the coordinating FAWE group in Nairobi asked Christiana and the Sierra Leonean members to develop a Training Module on Women’s Traditional Conflict Resolution and Mediating Practices. The women returned to Sierra Leone in May of 1998 and by June were conducting research for the project. The research was carried out through October; the full module was introduced in early 1999. Drawing from her own childhood observations of her grandmother’s peacemaking, but also her experiences since then—particularly women’s leadership during their displacement in Guinea—Christiana and the other members of FAWE researched the structures of indigenous mediation processes in Sierra Leone. In many parts of Sierra Leone, traditional clan structures include paramount chiefs and elders who settle most large conflicts within communities. However, FAWE found that seventy-one percent of the communities they researched had “secret societies,” all-female groups whose primary purpose is to prepare girls for adulthood, but who also provide alternative modes of dispute resolution. Research concluded that within the secret societies, and within local communities where women participate directly in mediatory and reconciliatory processes, the success rate for resolving disputes is very high.

We don’t say that women are better peacemakers, but we do affirm that in conflict resolution where women participate, it is more sustained. For them, it is not just a matter of right and wrong, but they look at what is the best for the community and what will be acceptable for both parties in the long run because both parties have to live in the community. It is a very interesting process. This is where FAWE is keen on getting more women trained to be able to come out and participate in society, be part of the group, and do the processes with confidence.

The final module based on these findings concentrated on raising awareness of the mediating roles women play in the family, community, and schools to keep societies mended, as well as methods of raising that awareness, such as through drama and songs. Christiana believes

¹⁰ Taken from the Training Module on Women’s Traditional Conflict Resolution and Mediating Practices, available at <http://www.ginie.org/ginie-crises-links/pr/fawe.html>.

that “if we can begin to use some of these traditional means of peace and reconciliation that we have, it would pay off very, very well.”

Attack on Freetown

“They are here.” Christiana was asleep in her two-story apartment on the west end of Freetown, near the army barracks, when Sam called at two in the morning on January 6, 1999. His message was one no one in the capital wanted to hear: “They are here.”

Within days, the rebels were all over the city, “like locusts.” Civilians were told by ECOMOG forces¹¹ to remain inside their homes. Inside there was no power and no telephone service. Within days there was little food or water. Before long, bodies littered the streets and smoke covered the city as the rebels systematically burned buildings and whole city blocks. Civilians who were not already tucked away in hiding were murdered, mutilated, or raped—or used as human shields by rebels, some as young as seven years old.

Christiana and ten others sheltered in the ground floor of her home for ten days. “Soon we ate ourselves out of everything, and for the last two days we had nothing but salt and sugar.” Rebels were going from house to house committing abuses, while ECOMOG forces and Kamajors were in search of rebels hiding in people’s homes.

It was frightening. You could not look out the window, afraid of being seen. If you heard that knock on the door, whether you opened it or not, you were dead. If you opened it, they would kill you. If you didn’t open it, they would break it open and then kill you. The bullets were whizzing by, so you could not sleep during the day—or during the night. The waiting was the biggest torture I had ever had in

¹¹ The Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was the intervention force sent to Sierra Leone by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) after Kabbah was deposed. They were able to establish some control in the country, and reinstated Kabbah as President in March 1998. ECOMOG forces fought alongside the CDF against the military/rebel alliance. ECOWAS comprises fifteen states in the region: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

my life. It is something that you will never forget in your life, the torture of just thinking, or expecting—there are no words for it.

Christiana and her housemates were not spared the knock on the door. “The men were not in uniform, so we didn’t know who they were.” Nobody wanted to answer the door as they were all trembling. “My ward [a child from the extended family] was trying to open the door, but he couldn’t. So I took the handle and opened the door. They said, ‘We’ve seen some rebels in the house.’” Christiana told them they were not hiding any rebels. The group ordered all of them to go outside and line up against the building. “At that time, it could have been life or death. The rebels would call you out and line you against the house and start shooting. These men could have done the same thing.” They told Christiana and the others that they were going to go inside to search for rebels, and, “‘If we find anybody, you are all dead.’” Just as the first man stepped through the door, one of the others caught Christiana’s eye. A glimmer of recognition crossed the young man’s face. He quickly told her and the others to get back inside.

We couldn’t move. We couldn’t even move. They were leaving and they said, ‘Go in,’ but we couldn’t move. They finally pointed a gun at us and yelled, ‘Go in,’ and so we rushed in. For the rest of the day we were in shock. It could have happened the other way.

Christiana assumes now that the men were Kamajors who were fighting against the rebels, and that the young man probably recognized her as a former government official. Or perhaps when they locked eyes, it was recognition of her humanity, and so he spared all of their lives.

“We let all hell loose”

By January 26 the rebels were being pushed out of Freetown by ECOMOG forces; there was still fighting on the outskirts of the capital. Christiana risked returning to her office at FAWE-SL to view the damage: mostly broken windows and evidence that the rebels had

ransacked the building. Two girls whom FAWE had previously worked with came to the office with their parents—they had been raped; they did not know where else to turn for help. In the aftermath of the rebel attack, the scope of sexual violence during the entire course of the war was becoming clear. Christiana began hearing more stories like those of the two girls, and like that of Zainab:

I was among the schoolchildren captured by the RUF in 1995. When we were captured, we were all taken to a very remote RUF base. By then I was 15-years old and a virgin. I was gang raped the very night I was captured, as an initiation to the RUF community. We spent three months in military training in the hills there. When government jets bombarded our base, we pulled out to another location for one month. . . . On coming back to the base, there were three particular rebels who would ask me for sex. If I dare refused, I would be forced at gunpoint or gang raped. They did not want us to escape and join our relatives. . . . I seized the opportunity to escape when we attacked Freetown in January 1999. By then I was eight months pregnant.¹²

The more stories she heard, the more furious she became. Sexual violence was being used as “an instrument of war.”¹³ According to one report, “The rebels sought complete domination by doing whatever they wanted with women, including sexual acts that, by having the additional element of assailing cultural norms, violated not only the victim, but also her family or the wider society.”¹⁴ There is a culture of silence in Sierra Leone around sexual violence and it is taboo to mention such acts. But Christiana realized something needed to be done for these girls. “We let all hell loose and decided to fight against sexual violence.”

Though Christiana’s work—and FAWE’s work generally—had been solely about education, Christiana asked the headquarters in Nairobi for money to assist the rape victims. She believed that “before we can focus on education, we must restore the dignity to the women and

¹² Christiana recited the story of Zainab in her statement before the United Nations Special Session on Children, held in New York on May 9, 2002. She spoke as a representative of FAWE.

¹³ Rebels and soldiers of the RUF/AFRC made up the largest group of perpetrators of sexual violence, but the CDF and ECOMOG forces, as well as other international peacekeepers, were also responsible for some incidents and other human rights abuses during the fighting in Freetown and in the course of the war.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, “‘We’ll Kill You if You Cry’: Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict,” Vol. 15, No. 1 (A) (January 2003).

girls who have been abused in war.”¹⁵ To restore their dignity, the organization, with the help of groups like Doctors without Borders-Holland (MSF-Holland) and other NGOs, developed a program that included medical care and trauma counseling for the girls, and a “sensitization team” that would try to educate the local communities about sexual violence and gender-based issues. Knowing that there were most likely thousands of girls like Zainab and the two who first reported to FAWE, Christiana and the other members began broadcasting their message to the communities through radio programs and press releases, and in visits to schools, marketplaces, and other centers of community life. Initially, Sierra Leoneans were hesitant to be associated with this aspect of FAWE’s work; some even verbally attacked the group for what they perceived as exploiting others’ shame. The group had to work hard to counter this perception, but Christiana recalls that by the third week of their advocacy, girls and women began pouring into the center.

Most of the girls who reported to the centers had been abducted by the rebels, just as Zainab had. Abduction was a primary method for rebels to fill their ranks, and it became a means of terror as the RUF retreated from Freetown. Most of the abducted girls were forced to become sex slaves and the “wives” of rebels; many were impregnated and became child mothers, or reported to the center while they were still pregnant.

There were twenty-five girls who came to us when they were about eight-and-a-half months pregnant, so we saw them through the pregnancy and having the child. We rented the building across from the maternity hospital, and as soon as they were out of the hospital, they would come there with their babies. Everyday we would work with them and teach them how to take care of their babies. Some of them were also learning how to read; others were learning how to cook.

Their training in the centers encompassed child rearing, but also literacy training and skills building so that they could earn a living and contribute to the development of the community.

¹⁵ Statement by Christiana upon accepting the International League for Human Rights’ Defenders Award in December 2002.

“FAWE helps those children to shoulder the responsibility of motherhood and single parenthood when most of them have never experienced adolescence.”¹⁶

The girls’ eyes were dull and expressionless when they would first enter the program. Still undergoing unimaginable trauma and fearing rejection for reporting the violence done to them, the girls were indifferent to the hope of understanding, or education, or employment. But Christiana reports that in conjunction with psychological counseling, the education of the girls and women became a method of trauma healing. “The good thing in all this bad is that there has been a breakthrough in ending the culture of silence on rape.”

Each one’s experience is unique. The contours of the physical experience may seem similar—abduction, slave labor, and sexual abuse—but the emotional response is different with each individual. The essence of our intervention lies in honoring that individuality and difference.¹⁷

The girls were able to talk more freely about what they had experienced; they could take care of their children without feeling shameful; and they could look forward to a brighter future because of the skills they had learned. By the completion of the program, you could see it in their eyes.

Achieving “Actual Peace”

Following the rebel retreat from Freetown, President Kabbah and the RUF began negotiations for an end to the conflict, signing a ceasefire agreement in May 1999, and later the Lomé Peace Agreement.¹⁸ Under the agreement, Sankoh would become vice-president, while a U.N. peacekeeping operation would be deployed to the country as the United Nations Mission in

¹⁶ Statement at the U.N. Special Session, 2002.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The Lomé Peace Agreement was signed on July 7, 1999. Lomé is the capital of Togo, where the peace talks were held.

Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).¹⁹ The Lomé Agreement tragically did not hold and by May of 2000 was completely discarded as the RUF took hostage 500 members of UNAMSIL. British troops were deployed to help improve security, while Sankoh was arrested by the government. Fighting continued until May of 2001 when the second Abuja Agreement was signed²⁰ and the process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) was implemented. In a ceremony on January 18, 2002, President Kabbah officially declared the war over.

“Once you have the peace treaty signed and the government running again, there is a big vacuum in the actual peace of the people, because signing a peace accord does not necessarily mean that peace is there.” The burning of Freetown in 1999 and the decade-long civil war did not just destroy buildings or infrastructure; the war was the ignition of a culture, and a fire that burned away concepts like human rights, respect, hope, peace. After the signing of the peace accord, the people of Sierra Leone needed more than just the rhetoric of peace—they needed to see the changes that peace was supposed to bring.

The first test for actual peace was in the process of DDR, mandated in the first Abuja Agreement and reconfirmed in the second. For girls and women abducted into the fighting forces, the DDR process was an utter failure.

The pathetic side of this is that when it came time for demobilization, only the men came forward to turn in their guns because the women had no guns. So the men were put into skills-training schools and the girls were not. No one asked where they were, so they had to make their own way out of the bush and make a living. Nothing happened for the girls. They did not benefit from DDR. It sent the message to the girls that they were second-class. Everyone was telling them they were victims of the war—if all of them were victims, then why were they not helped as well?

¹⁹ Preceding UNAMSIL was the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), strictly an observation and monitoring mission. UNAMSIL would be strengthened in numbers and in mandate.

²⁰ The first Abuja Agreement was a ceasefire declaration signed in November of 2000, but it failed to hold. Abuja is the capital of Nigeria, where the agreement was signed.

The DDR process effectively excluded women and girls. There was no official recognition of their needs, which made the reintegration process all the more difficult on the ground level as communities were reluctant to accept them back into society. FAWE has tried to address these needs through skills-training centers, but the demand is much greater than their resources.

Another test for real peace concerns the aspect of justice for those women and girls who suffered so much in the war, the girls that FAWE works with each day. One avenue where justice is to be attained is through the Special Court of Sierra Leone. The Special Court was established in January of 2002 by the United Nations Security Council. It began its work in July of that year and issued its first indictments in March of 2003. The Court was created to try “those who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law” committed since 1996.²¹ But just like the official peace agreement, the Special Court and its findings do little for civilians at the ground level. “I support the Special Court, but I believe the successes of the Special Court will not be felt by seventy-five percent of the people who have been hurt.”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Sierra Leone, however, has provided some healing and reconciliation, if not justice, for victims. The idea of the TRC was first introduced in the Lomé Peace Agreement, but after its collapse, the TRC was not officially mandated into law until 2000, and did not begin work until 2002. Amnesty had been granted to all perpetrators of the war—apart from those accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, who were to be tried in the Special Court. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Act of 2000, the purpose of the TRC was, among other things, “to respond to the needs of victims” and “promote healing and reconciliation.” Christiana herself testified at the TRC as a

²¹ The quote is taken from the Statute for the Special Court of Sierra Leone. The Court is restricted to crimes committed since 1996, when the Abidjan Peace Accord was signed.

representative of FAWE, on behalf of the women and girls who have been through FAWE programs. The organization also helped prepare some of the girls before their own testimonies at the TRC. The girls felt that by being able to share their stories of the war, some healing may occur. Christiana has witnessed some healing of these girls through FAWE's work and their testimonies before the TRC and believes it is this kind of healing and agency women desire in the attainment of peace—that healing and agency are essential for all of Sierra Leone to heal: “If you zoom into the future of the country, and these girls are not at peace with themselves and given the roles women play in the development of families and communities, we see disaster at the end of the tunnel. I believe peace will come when people are at peace with themselves.”

Apart from the tests of DDR and the pursuit of justice, which have largely failed the girl and women victims of the war, Christiana affirms that real peace will not come to her country until issues such as institutional corruption and widespread poverty are acknowledged.

The fact that there is corruption, that people are poor, that people can't have a square meal a day, that there is such a high percentage of illiteracy, ill health, and lack of sanitation—these are big issues which anybody could use as a matter to do anything.

Christiana is concerned with building institutions of integrity, something she says the government of Sierra Leone has lacked in its history since independence. But, her overarching concern is that the people of the country are not left out of the rebuilding process, the way civilians often are after official peace agreements or international courts that are removed from the realities they experience each day.

Now, as we are trying to build peace, we cannot build our institutions in isolation of these structures that keep people in poverty. You can't talk to someone about peace if they are hungry, if their children can't go to school. The conflict is over, but the causes of the conflict are still there. We need to sweep away the causes of the war, the ashes of the war.

Teacher, Commissioner, and Dreamer

With Christiana's deep understanding of the war in Sierra Leone and its causes, and her dedication to ensuring the dividends of peace reach the ground level, she has expanded her work in many directions. For a time, she was on the board of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), based in Accra, Ghana. The organization developed peace education programs for primary and secondary schools, which are being used along with government curricula in many West African countries, as well as peer mediation programs in schools. The network also started a summer program called the West African Peace Institute (WAPI), a training program for scholars, practitioners, and students to strengthen their peacebuilding skills and knowledge base. As part of the faculty of WAPI, Christiana taught a course on "Active Nonviolence and Peace Education."

"Sustainable peace must be built on a bedrock of quality basic education for all children."²² Through the founding of FAWE-SL and their growth and commitment, this foundation of a "quality basic education" is within sight in Sierra Leone. FAWE-SL currently has twenty-three functioning branches all over the country, with at least one primary school in each branch. Fifteen branches have skills-training centers. The work of the branches spans the needs and demands of a postconflict society. It includes programs in formal and non-formal education, adult literacy, early childhood development, HIV/AIDS sensitization, community awareness of rape and sexual violence, research and advocacy, and scholarship programs. Since its creation in 1995, FAWE-SL has served over 10,000 girls and women, a significant example of what Christiana considers an aphorism: the education of women equals the development of the country. "A majority of the answers to our problems lies in education, the education of women in Sierra Leone."

²² Statement at the U.N. Special Session, 2002.

Christiana's recent work has expanded beyond the bounds of traditional education. She was appointed the National Electoral Commissioner of Sierra Leone in 2005, with multiparty elections to take place in 2007. Though not directly related to education, she believes her work as commissioner will contribute to the building of sustainable institutions of integrity within the government.

If Christiana is able to fulfill one of her largest dreams, it will be an indelible mark in the history of Sierra Leone. She imagines a permanent Peace Center, based in Sierra Leone but with a regional focus, where women can come to learn and work for peace. It will be a marriage of the concepts she has worked for her whole life—education and peacebuilding. It will be a bridge of what she has repeatedly tried to link in her work—that the education of women will lead to peace. It will be a manifestation of all her grandmother exemplified to the young Christiana—the necessity of education and the priority of peacemaking. And it will be a fulfillment of all her grandmother aspired for her granddaughter under the cotton tree.

We need to build a place for the whole region that provides peace training for women. It should be in a location where like a tree it can grow because it has its roots in the conflict and now in the peace of the country and its people.

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