

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: STRATEGIES FOR
GREATER PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN**

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**CASE STUDY ON COUNTRIES IN
THE MANO RIVER REGION**

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1. Introduction

Rationale

1. The United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa has convened an Expert Group Meeting on “Democratic Governance in Africa: Strategies for Greater Participation of Women”, to be held in Arusha, Tanzania, from 6 to 8 December 2005.
2. The promotion of democratic governance and the empowerment of women have been key priorities of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), whose implementation of programme activities is supported by the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa.
3. The purpose of the Expert Group Meeting will be to deepen the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders (the governments, the United Nations agencies and the civil society) in promoting gender equality in democratic governance with a particular focus on post-conflict countries. The main outcome of the meeting will be a set of recommendations to advance women’s participation in the political process at the national, local and community levels on the basis of the evaluation and analyses from case studies presented to participants for discussion at the meeting.

Objective of the present paper

4. The objective of this case study is to highlight lessons learned from Mano River Region’s experience in advancing women’s participation in the political process and serve as a basis for discussion at the Expert Group Meeting.
5. Mme Diop, the executive director of Femmes Africa Solidarités¹ was appointed to prepare the paper on the three countries (Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea), reflecting the uniqueness of national experience in advancing women’s participation in the political process at the national, local and community levels and propose strategies aimed at promoting women’s full participation in government.
6. The paper provides a brief history of the Mano River country’s conflict, its underlying causes and the role of women in the process leading to peace consolidation and post-conflict phase.

¹ Femmes Africa Solidarités (FAS) was created in 1996 and, that same year, gained official recognition as an international non-governmental organization. FAS has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and observer status with the African Commission for Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR). It is also represented in the African Women Committee on Peace and Development (AWCPD), the organization created by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to bring women’s voices into the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in Africa.

Methodology

7. The approach of this study consists in linking governments and women participation to peace and political processes by:
- Evaluating specific factors which facilitate the participation of women in transitional and new governments and the identification of measures to involve women in the political process, with particular emphasis on peace-building and reconstruction phases (i.e. coalition-building, constitutional drafting, as well as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants and war-affected communities);
 - Identifying practical measures to be undertaken by governments, donors, the international community, civil society, and other stakeholders (raising awareness, funding for capacity-building and training of women leaders, monitoring implementation of international agreements, public debate on discriminatory policies and practices against women) to link government mechanisms to prevention and resolution of conflicts and to support and generate political will and firm commitment to promote the advancement of women and the goals of gender equality;
 - Assessing women’s participation in political decision-making at the local level (i.e. implementation of pro-active gender parity policies, such as quotas for women in local governments) as a springboard to greater involvement at the national level;
 - Encouraging grassroots involvement and growth of independent women’s organizations (i.e. advocate for constitutional and legislative reforms); and
 - Strengthening the participation of the media in fostering unity, inclusion and supporting greater participation of women in the democratic process, as a mean to prevent conflict

2. Historical background and women’s movements towards peace and reconstruction

The Mano River Region

Historical background

8. The three countries of the Mano River Basin have close historical and ethnic ties. The Mano River Union, comprising the West African States of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, was established in 1973 as a customs and economic union between the member states to promote regional economical integration. The Mano River Agreement of 1973 gives evidence that the three States can co-operate to revitalise and consolidate this common market and take measures to prevent conflict in the region. However, these efforts have been frustrated by the political instability and violent armed conflicts that have beset the region in the past decade, firstly in Liberia, followed by Sierra Leone.

9. The three countries are presently facing a tough challenge in resolving persisting political and security tensions within the sub-region and developing stable democracies.

10. The root causes of the prolonged conflicts in the Mano River are attributed to interrelated internal and external factors such as bad governance, under development, gender inequalities, widespread poverty, exploitation of natural resources or colonial legacy. The conflicts have directly impacted the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of the civilian populations, particularly women and children. The deliberate targeting of civilians has generated unprecedented levels of population displacement, with Guinea serving as a haven for refugees fleeing the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone. For several consequent years, Guinea has been the host of the highest number of refugees in Africa. The socioeconomic situation of all three countries has deteriorated drastically and extreme poverty is widespread.

11. Though internal in nature, the conflicts have taken a regional dimension as a result of ineffective disarmament of ex-combatants coupled with limited opportunities to transform them into productive citizens. It is estimated that there are 473,000 ex-combatants in the region. The infiltration of rebels inside refugee camps is a threat to the security in the cross-border areas. The increasing trade in small arms and ammunitions and the re-emerging conflicts in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire exacerbate this situation. The physical borders between Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone are largely artificial.

Women's involvements

12. The women of the Mano River region have been active in pressuring for a peaceful solution to the pervasive conflicts in the region. Rural and urban women from all classes and ethnic groups mobilized to form active organizations, conduct marches, and lead rallies for peace and justice. The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), a FAS initiative established in May 2000, has been playing a leading role in mediating among the parties to the conflict in the region and has been carrying out important work to sensitize people at all levels—from grassroots organizations to politicians.

13. At the regional level, FAS extended its regional lobbying campaign on gender mainstreaming and parity in the organs of the African Union (AU) in partnership with the Committee on Peace and Development (AWCPD). In July 2003, FAS's efforts resulted in gender parity in the AU Commission, with the election of five women Commissioners out of ten.

14. On July 6, 2004, the African Union convened its Third Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State. For the first time in its history, the organization took ownership of the gender mainstreaming programme at the highest level, and dedicated a large portion of the summit to a dialogue on gender and gender equality. Prior to the Summit, FAS, in collaboration with the AU, organised a two-day "Consultative Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming in the AU" to highlight the AU's Gender programme and strategise future action with a wide network of influential women. The meeting enabled the women to fine-tune their strategies for the AU Heads of State Gender Debate. The adoption of the *Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa* is a testimony to the hard work and investments of

the women. The declaration not only incorporated many of the issues the women had raised, but with the strong support of various leaders including those of Botswana , Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa, it took the women's contribution one step further. FAS has been given the mandate to coordinate the implementation of the Declaration on the 6th Consultative Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming in the African Union held in Tripoli, Libya in July 2005.

15. The role that women have taken as a result has been critical in shaping informal and formal peace processes and has shifted away from the traditional role women have held in the societies of the Mano River region. Indeed, women were still discriminated against by customary law and practices such as genital mutilation, although all three countries are signatories of CEDAW, the Beijing Plan of Action, the Millennium Development Goals and their constitutions call for gender equality.

16. The move from the margins of society to the centre of the peace building efforts have been especially remarkable in Sierra Leone, where women organizations educated civilians on electoral proceedings, recruited and trained observers, and pressured the military to respect the results of the elections. For that reason, the present study will particularly focus on this country.

Sierra Leone

Historical background

17. Sierra Leone became independent from the United Kingdom in 1961 and the women obtained the right to vote in the same year. The first open elections were held in 1967, but before the elected government could take office, power was seized by colonels and majors, who formed the National Reformation Council. The NRC was ousted in a counter coup in 1968 and in 1971 Sierra Leone was declared a Republic. In 1978, the Sierra Leoneans voted in support for the new constitution, which gave the All People's Congress (APC) led by Siaka Stevens political supremacy and made Sierra Leone a one-party State.

18. Although Sierra Leone has been rich in natural resources, the country remained poor after its independence, partly because of the smuggling of diamonds and corruption. During its one-party rule, the APC took control of all official access to natural resources for people outside the APC, contributing to the decline in living standards for the average person.

19. The civil war began in 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Foday Sankoh invaded the country from Liberia. The RUF was supported by Charles Taylor and terrorized the population to gain control of the diamond mines. It is said that Sankoh met Taylor in the 1980's in a Libyan training camp, and the two parties made an agreement in 1987 to support each other to overthrow their respective governments. The APC was overthrown in 1992 and a new government, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) came to power. In 1993 the leader of the NPRC, Captain Valentine Strasser, appointed an Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) to begin rewriting electoral laws and political party guidelines. In January 1995, the NPRC formed a National Commission for Democracy (NCD), to coordinate a nation-wide civic education programme in preparation for elections scheduled to take place before 1996.

20. However in January 1996 General Julius Maada Bio seized power in a coup d'état. In February 1996, a cease-fire was declared between the RUF and the government and the Abidjan Peace Accord was signed in November 1996. But the peace agreement did not successfully end the civil war and fighting continued.

Women's involvements

21. Against the background of a civil war that tore apart Sierra Leone and its physical, social, economic, and psychological impact on them, the women of Sierra Leone mobilized themselves to promote the resolution of the conflict.

22. Like-minded women from all over Sierra Leone joined forces to create several women's movements with the basic aim of negotiating peace. The Women's Forum was formed in mid-1994 when the Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW) proposed that women's groups meet regularly for networking, information sharing and collective action on issues of common concern. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Women's Association for National Development (WAND), SLAUW, the Sisters Unit, the National Organization for Women (NOW), and long-time community activists such as Haja Isha Sasso formed the backbone of the new structure.

23. The courageous participation of women in the peace process needs to be held up as an example for the rest of the African continent.

24. The mobilization of women increased as fighting intensified in 1995 and the NPRC seemed unable to protect the civilians from the rebels. The Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace (WMP) was formed in January 1995 and joined the Women's Forum. The WMP's initial objective was to resolve conflict through peaceful negotiations.

25. It mobilised women to form branches all over the country and at all times to act in concert with each other in order to create an impact. It advocated for peace with the government of the NPRC, the RUF and through the international community. At all times, women saw to it that their activities were fully publicised both nationally and internationally.

26. The movements first event was a peace march in February 1995 which took place simultaneously in the major towns of Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Kabala, involving women's groups, youth groups, religious groups, the police, the army, schools, NGOs and people from all walks of life. It is thought to be the biggest demonstration in Sierra Leone since its independence. The message of the demonstrators was simple and compelling: 'Try Peace to end this senseless war'. As the march moved along, the crowd of women of all ages and stations called to onlookers to join them. Many found the appeals irresistible. As a result of the women's intervention, a negotiated peace settlement became a respectable option that offered both government and the rebels the opportunity to climb down from entrenched positions without loss of face.

27. By the end of 1995, the government made peace a priority on the national agenda, which they submitted for the cessation of hostilities and the consolidation of peace. After the ceasefire agreement was reached, the women took a leading role in supporting the campaign for elections.

28. Through NGO's working in the area in governance and democracy, such as Women Organized for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN) and the Women's Forum, Sierra Leonean women insisted on appropriate representation at the Bintumani consultative conference for good governance², held in August 1995, and pressured the NPRC to hold democratic elections. They educated themselves and their communities on the issues, and after debating them at the conference, they prepared a national position paper unanimously supported by all women delegates at the.

29. The conference recommended that elections, previously scheduled to take place in December 1995, should be postponed no later than February 1996.

30. The RUF turned down the invitation from the interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) to attend the national consultative conference and refused to participate in the elections or to recognize their legitimacy. Six weeks before the elections, doubt was cast on whether they would go ahead and a second national consultative conference was convened.

31. Women held a press conference on 6 February 1996 to present their position on the general elections. Leaders read a statement to all political parties, emphasizing the inclusion of women's issues on the political agenda. Approximately 300 people attended, including the United States Ambassador and other embassy staff, the British High Commissioner, several members of the media and UN representatives.

32. The second Bintunam i Conference, chaired by Mrs Gbujama (who became Minister of Foreign Affairs in November 1996 and Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs in 1998), was held on 12 February 1996 in order to discuss the status of the peace process and its implications for the upcoming elections.

33. The women were very active in influencing who chaired the meeting, how the questions should be phrased and lobbying other delegates to support their position. It resulted in an overwhelming vote in favor of elections to be kept on the 26th of February, as agreed by INEC, the political parties and the civil society.

34. The women's groups continued their activities up to the Election Day, defying scare tactics by the military. Credit for the success of the elections was attributed largely to the role of women in the process. They made sure that elections were free and fair. They supported full compliance with the electoral law in the period between the two rounds of voting.

35. Further, on election day, women mobilised themselves and others to vote. Despite security threats, people turned out in their numbers in defiance of heavy firing chanting, "We want to vote". For most women, this was the first time they were able to exercise their right to vote. However, 5 women only were on the list of 68 candidates representing the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) led by Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, which won the election.

36. After the elections, no women were present at the Abidjan negotiations, which led to the signing of the Abidjan peace accord in November 1996 and child and female combatants were excluded from official DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) processes,

² Eventually, sixteen women participated in the Conference whereas three women only -out of sixty representatives- were initially invited

sometimes because women did not have the prerequisite rifle needed to register as combatants and also because DDR practitioners failed to recognize women as potential combatants.

37. When FAS conducted its mission in Sierra Leone subsequently (in 1997), it met with the two female Ministers of the government (out of 25 cabinet ministers): Shirley Gbujama (the Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Mrs Amy Smythe (Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs); it found that despite their great efforts prior to the election, women were not mobilized enough to follow up on the peace negotiations.

38. Eventually, the implementation of the accords failed due to many reasons, one of them being the refusal of the RUF to lay down arms before the South African mercenaries hired by the Government of Sierra Leone had departed.

39. That failure led to the creation, in July 1996, of a new NGO "The Campaign for Good governance" to increase citizen participation in governance in order to build a more informed civil populace and a democratic State and promote gender empowerment for gender equality.

40. ECOMOG, the West African peacekeeping mission, intervened in 1997 after Kabbah's government, had been overthrown but its presence contributed to the violation of the human rights of the civilians. Desperately poor girls prostituted themselves to the ECOMOG troops, or became their "girlfriends". These women were often tortured and murdered by the RUF when the ECOMOG troops came under attack from RUF forces.

41. In 1999 the UN eventually brokered the Lomé Peace Accord between the warring parties. As a result, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone was created in a view to create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone, from the beginning of the conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lomé Peace agreement; to address impunity; to respond to the needs of the victims; to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered.

42. The Lomé peace negotiations were attended by many women, and in fact two of the negotiators were women, one a representative of the government and one of the RUF. There is one reference in the Peace Accords of 7 July 1999 to women, article 28 states: "Given that women have been particularly victimized during the war, special attention shall be accorded to their needs and potentials in formulating and implementing national rehabilitation, reconstruction and development programmes, to enable them to play a central role in the moral, social and physical reconstruction of Sierra Leone". However, they make no reference to female combatants, although it is estimated that they made up around 12% of the total armed forces during the war.

43. The UN Security Council established the Mission in Sierra Leone UNAMSIL in October 1999 to help implementing the Lomé Agreement but despite UNAMSIL's presence, fighting continued, and 500 UN peacekeepers were taken hostage. The women of Sierra Leone continued to put pressure on the parties to adhere to the Lomé accords, sometimes using radical tactics. In May 2000, with the RUF flouting the Lomé accords, a group of elderly women demanded a meeting with Sankoh, the leader of the RUF. On arriving at the RUF compound, they were mistreated and insulted. Frustrated, the women collectively hitched up their skirts, bent over and bared themselves to Sankoh and the other representatives of the RUF. In Sierra Leone, such an action by women is the worst curse that can be brought upon anyone. The women's action obliged the Sierra Leoneans to uphold the women's honour and support the

curse and gave the people the courage to stand up to the RUF. The women demanded that the RUF cease fighting and that Sankoh would be forced to leave the position as a Minister in the government given to him after the Lomé accords. Agnes Taylor Lewis³ visit to the rebels together with the women's protest and subsequent public demonstrations -including a mass demonstration on the 8th of March 2000- was pivotal in the struggle for peace, culminating in Sankoh's arrest.⁴

44. Declared over in January of 2002, the civil war raged for over a decade, leaving half of Sierra Leone's pre-war population displaced, 50,000 dead, 100,000 mutilated and over a quarter of a million women raped.

45. The conflict had a devastating impact on the socio-economic situation in the country.⁵

46. In May 2002, Sierra Leone held its first post conflict elections. They resulted in a landslide victory for President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's Sierra Leone People's Party. It has mostly been acknowledged that the results of these elections were a vote for peace. Ms Zainab Bangura of the Movement for Progress Party was the only female presidential candidate and received less than 1 % of the vote.

47. With assistance from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Sierra Leonean NGO 50/50⁶, over 100 women candidates and campaign managers were trained and as a result, developed new campaign skills, enhancing their capacity to compete in elections. In addition, women activists successfully lobbied political parties to secure improved representation on candidate lists. The Mano River Women's Peace network (MARWOPNET) leaders played an important role in this campaign. Of the eighteen women who eventually were elected to the Parliament, eight were graduates of NDI and 50/50 training. The women now represent 14.5% of the Sierra Leonean parliament. 50/50 was formed in 2000 in Freetown to increase the participation of women in politics and continues to advocate for increased female representation.

48. In January 2002 the UN approved the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) to try those responsible for the crimes committed during the civil war and the trials begun in 2004. All parties of the conflict, the RUF and the Pro-Government Civil Defence Force (CDF) committed various war crimes such as rape, torture, forcible recruitment of child soldiers and mass murder. In 2003 the Court issued an indictment for Charles Taylor, accusing him for

³ Agnes Taylor Lewis was the Sierra Leonean Minister of health and sanitation from May 2002 to August 2004 and former vice-president of MARWOPNET

⁴ Mazurana Dyan, Carlson Kristopher, *From Combat to Community; Women and Girls of Sierra Leone*, Women waging peace, January 2004

⁵ In 2003, life expectancy at birth was only 40.8% and the adult literacy rate only 29.6%. Further, 75% of the population was living on under \$ 2 a day. In 2003, Sierra Leone ranked 176 of 177 countries in the Human Development Index ranking list. That means that Sierra Leone was the second poorest country in the world. As far as women are concerned, in 2003, the women literacy rate was 20,5%. Today, Sierra Leone ranks 139 of the 140 countries on the Gender-related development index list. The female economic activity rate in Sierra Leone is only 45.2%. UNDP, *The Human Development Report 2005*, <http://hdr.undp.org/>

⁶ 50/50 was founded in Freetown in 2000 following a workshop, sponsored by the British Council, on "increasing women participation in democratic politics" in which 40 Sierra Leonean activists participated. It has been successful in raising funds during the elections. However it has been very hard to gain the interest of donors sufficiently far in advance of elections to mount the sort of training and sensitisation campaigns that could enable political first timers to have a realistic chance of success.

complacency in the violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, which had taken place during the war.

Liberia

Historical background

49. The first civil war in Liberia broke out on Christmas Eve 1989 when a small band of Libyan-trained rebels led by Charles G. Taylor, invaded Liberia from the Ivory Coast. Seven years of civil strife which claimed up to 200 000 lives and displaced over a million people were brought to a close with a west African ECOMOG intervention in 1996.

Women's involvements

50. Although they were excluded from the negotiations, given that official parties in conflict only were represented, women united their efforts and issued declarations and petitions to the international community. As an example, Mary Brownell, a retired school teacher, was among those who wanted to get women's voices heard at the peace table. In her home, she called a first meeting with just a handful of friends. They decided to call a public meeting. "We went on radio appealing to the women to join us at the city hall - and the women came out in full. We told them 'we can't just sit down' after all we are the victims - women and children - so we have to play a more active role. We must get our voices heard and make our presence felt."

51. Women activists coordinated their responses to this suffering through a national organization the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI). The LWI has also been instrumental in drawing local and international attention to the plight of women, in organizing women's responses to overseas relief, in channeling the views of women to national and international mediators and in representing women in local, national and international peace negotiations. In a lot of cases, women have assumed leadership roles demonstrating immense resilience, fortitude and wisdom. This could contribute to an irreversible change in the role and perception of women in Liberian society.

52. A cease-fire and peace accord was signed in 1996. It was followed by the installation of a transitional government consisting of all factional leaders.

53. The Liberian women became an integral part of the disarmament campaign and LWI began a disarmament project to assist in the collection of small arms and light weapons and to ensure that women were working on disarmament issues. For example, they produced a series of radio plays to incite former combatants to hand in their arms. As early as 1994, women earned leadership of the Liberian Interim Government; In 1996 Ruth Perry was appointed head of the Interim Government of Liberia and therefore the first woman head of state in Africa. However women's lack of organization prevented them from influencing the 1997 elections.

54. The years of fighting coupled with the flight of most businesses have disrupted formal economic activity. A still unsettled domestic security situation has slowed the process of rebuilding the social and economic structure of this war-torn country. However, against this background and the recommendations of Security Council Resolution 1325, that the minimal

involvement of women in the Accra peace accord process is disappointing, between 1997 and 2003, Liberian women brought into force significant national legislation on child soldiers and gender issues and new organizations were created. For example, the National Women NGOs of Liberia Secretariat (that is part of MARWOPNET) was established in 1998 to serve as a center for the collection and dissemination of information among women NGOs and act as conduit for directing and redirecting national rehabilitation and reconstructing resources to women's poverty alleviation projects and activities. In 2001, the UN imposed sanctions on Liberian diamonds along with an army embargo and a travel ban on government officials for Liberia's support of the rebel insurgency in Sierra Leone.

55. The rebel group Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) took up arms in 1999 to oust President Taylor. The second opposition group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), based in southern Liberia, began incursions into Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire in April 2003. Fighting intensified in 2003 when LURD and MODEL advanced towards the capital of Liberia, Monrovia, which saw heavy and brutal fighting between LURD, Charles Taylor's armed security forces and MODEL. At the height of the upsurge in fighting in Liberia in 2002 and 2003, Liberian women under the banners of the Liberian Women Initiative and Women in Peace building in Liberia organized many peaceful demonstrations calling on the factions to end the conflict and appealing to the international community to intervene. MARWOPNET issued several statements urging ECOWAS and the UN to intervene in the conflict in Liberia.

56. Free and open presidential and legislative elections were held in 1997. Charles Taylor was elected out of 13 candidates with almost 75% of the vote. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Unity Party candidate, who was working for the World Bank and the City Bank in Africa at that time, ran against him. She managed only 10% of the votes and Taylor charged her with treason. The party won 7 of 64 seats in the House of Representatives and 3 of 26 in the Senate. FAS, which had sent 20 women observers for the elections, reported no instances of intimidation and found that the few and minor irregularities and problems encountered were not serious enough to challenge the veracity of the outcome. These were restricted to a small number of cases related to the high illiteracy rate and lack of voter education, especially among women, who turned out in large numbers.

57. ECOWAS peacekeepers were deployed to Liberia and a ceasefire agreement was signed in Accra, Ghana in June 2003. MARWOPNET followed the discussions as observer and signed the agreement as witness. Charles Taylor committed himself to leaving power and took exile in

58. Nigeria. In September 2003, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1509, which approved the UN Mission In Liberia (UNMIL). In this resolution the Security Council called for a gender perspective in all peacekeeping operations, highlighting Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security. UNMIL, via its Office of the Gender Adviser (OGA), has actively sought to integrate a gender perspective in the Demobilization, Disarmament, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) Process. The OGA has the overall goal of integrating gender in all policies, processes and activities relating to the DDRR programme, security sector reform and rule of law, elections, human rights, protection of women and girls and national recovery. In addition, the OGA builds the capacity of UNMIL on gender. This was indeed necessary partially due to the fact that many of the combatants in the different armed groups were women.

59. Between January and June 2004, the Office of the Gender Adviser conducted training for 646, including 60 women Liberian National Interim Police.

60. In September 2004, a group of Liberian women presented parliamentary speaker George Dweh with a resolution calling for electoral law reform that would require “that every political party that qualifies for the elections earmark a minimum of 30 percent seats for women in their candidates' list”. “Also every political party that qualifies for the electoral process should earmark a minimum of 30 percent representation for women in decision-making positions within their parties,” said Lema Gbowen, a women’s rights activist. The petition triggered a heated debate in parliament when it came up for hearing on Sep. 17. Several legislators opposed the women’s demand. Deputy speaker Eddington Varmah said Liberian constitution did not marginalize anyone. He said he would not be part of those who would tamper with the constitution in favour of one particular group of people.

61. The first free and fair elections in Liberia after the end of the latest civil war took place on the 11th of October 2005. Voters went to the polls to elect a President and Vice President, 30 Senators and 64 Representatives. Two women were candidates for the position of President (Margaret Tor Thompson, Freedom Alliance Party of Liberia (FAPL), and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Unity party (UP).

62. Liberians returned to the polls on November 8 for a run-off presidential election between George Weah of the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (UP). Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf eventually won with 59.4% of the valid votes, compared to Weah’s 40.6%, and has therefore become Africa's first elected female head of state. Women made more than half the electorate.

63. The elected government will face the difficult task of rebuilding a country which is in ruins. In 2003, life expectancy in Liberia was only 42.4 and the adult literacy rate for women was only 39.3% compared with 72.3% for men. The Female economic rate is 52.8%.⁷

Guinea

Historical background

64. Independent from France since 1958, Guinea did not hold democratic elections until 1993 when General Lansana Conte (Head of the military government) was elected president of the civilian government. He was re-elected in 1998.

65. Although Guinea has not suffered from conflict on the same scale as Liberia and Sierra Leone, the country is still very poor and ranks only 156 of the 177 countries on the Human Development Index list. Life expectancy in 2003 was only 53.7% and the adult literacy rate 41%. Female economic activity is 77%. The Gender-related development index of Guinea gives the country the 54th place of 140 countries.⁸

⁷ UNDP, *The Human Development Report 2005*, <http://hdr.undp.org/>

⁸ UNDP, *The Human Development Report 2005*, <http://hdr.undp.org/>

66. The civil wars, which engulfed Liberia and then Sierra Leone during the 1990:s negatively affected relations between Guinea and the two fellow Mano River Union member countries. Guinea and Liberia accused each other of supporting opposition dissidents, and in late 2000 and early 2001, Guinean dissidents backed by the Liberian government and RUF rebels from Sierra Leone brutally attacked Guinea. These attacks caused over 1,000 Guinean deaths and displaced more than 100,000 Guineans. Furthermore, the UNHCR had to move many of the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone who were displaced in Guinea. Between January and April 2001, Guinea's army crossed into northern Sierra Leone on a number of occasions in pursuit of RUF rebels and other attackers from Sierra Leone and Liberia, killing civilians and destroying houses. Guinean army and police also rounded up Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees in Guinea and detained them on suspicion of fomenting war against the government.

67. The 2001 attacks led to Guinea's support for the LURD (Liberians United For Reconciliation and Democracy) rebels in their attacks against the Liberian government of Charles Taylor. UNHCR and NGO's reported that LURD forcibly recruited refugees in camps in Guinea during the outbreak in hostilities in Liberia in 2003.

68. Taylor's departure for exile in August 2003 and the establishment of an interim government in Liberia has led to friendlier relations between the two countries and lower tension on Guinea's southern border. Tension is still high in many areas of Guinea where Liberian and Ivorian refugees live supported by foreign aid alongside the poor rural population.

Women's involvements

69. In the face of frequent tensions between the resident populations and the refugees, COFEG, the Coordination for Women's NGOs in Guinea, organized a series of televised roundtable discussions, seminars, and training workshops for the staff of COFEG offices as well as for officials of the areas in question. COFEG comprises of 33 organizations grouping 3,000 women throughout Guinea. It began its peace-related activities in 1994 by establishing a programme to raise awareness among Guineans of the socio-cultural impact and consequences of the influx of refugees in certain areas. The COFEG Secretariat made its premises available to Sierra Leonean women's organizations in 1995-1996 to enable them to meet regularly. In January 2000, COFEG took part in the sub-regional conference on the role of women in the prevention and management of conflicts organized by the Network of African Women Ministers and Parliamentarians (REFAMP), which prepared the ground for the process which began in Addis Ababa in November 1999, during the Beijing +5 evaluation, and which came to fruition in Abuja in May 2000.

70. Other groupings of voluntary organizations and NGOs help to consolidate the partnership for the implementation of programmes on gender equality and women's empowerment: the Guinean Association of Women Leaders (AGUIFEL), the National Coalition of Guinea for Women's Rights and Citizenship (CONAG/DCF), the Guinean Association of Women Entrepreneurs (AFEG) or the Guinean Businesswomen's Group (GFAG).

71. Recent years have also seen important efforts to reform the legislation in Guinea. For example, female genital mutilation was defined as an offence in the Reproductive Health Act of July 2000.

72. Women have lately occupied various minister positions in the Guinean government: Camara Hadja Mahawa Bangoura has been the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2000 to 2002. *Hadja Aïssatou Bella Diallo* has been Minister for Information and *Dioubaté Hadja Fatoumata Binta Diallo*, Minister of Energy and Hydraulics, since 2004. *Sidibé Fatoumata Kaba* is the Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2005.

73. Furthermore, elections were held in June 2002 and women won 19.3% of the seats in the parliament. *Hadja Mariama Kolenkè Baldé* has been the second Vice President of the National Assembly since 2004.

3. The case of Sierra Leone

Women's Participation in the democratic process

74. "The evolution of Pecebuilding institutions as fraternities was another way of keeping women out of decision making processes", Berewa Jommo.

The evolution of women possibilities for participation in political and peace processes

75. Following more than a decade of conflict, Sierra Leone emerged from a period of disarmament and demobilization to conduct national elections in May 2002. As the brutal civil war raged in the 1990s, many aggrieved Sierra Leonean women tried to insert themselves into the political discourse and play a critical role in advocating for a peaceful settlement and democratic rule. Women also participated in the war as fighters on all sides. The presence, roles and experiences of women and girls within the fighting forces in Sierra Leone had a number of important implications for the design of those processes that seeks to build human and national security and peace in the post-conflict period. Women developed a number of skills and strategies that enabled them to survive and regain some control over their lives throughout the conflict.⁹ They were spies, commanders, and frontline fighters; some were herbalists, meant to supply fighters with magic potions for invulnerability. Others were cooks, medics, and spiritual leaders. They witnessed brutal rituals and suffered significant sexual abuse.

76. The period of transition after a conflict is essential in shaping a democratic society and sustainable peace and development. Efforts for reconstruction and reconciliation require broad-based involvement and, as women have disproportionately born the consequences of combat, it is of absolute importance that women's needs are taken into account during all stages of the peace reconstruction process and mechanisms should be created to give all stakeholders access

⁹ Mazurana Dyan, Carlson Kristopher, *From Combat to Community; Women and Girls of Sierra Leone*, Women waging peace, January 2004

to the decision-making process. In Sierra Leone, reestablishment of government authority throughout the country is slowly proceeding.

77. Yet, women often have limited possibilities to play a significant role in the peace and reconstruction process due to discrimination and marginalization. They often lack the resources, such as education, to become important players in the transitional societies.

78. The process of implementing the peace accord in Sierra Leone is slow and painful. Several issues in the context of reconstruction, rehabilitation and peace-building have been problematic to address. These issues have included the question of justice, reconciliation, resettlement, and reintegration of not only refugees but of the displaced, abductees and ex-combatants. The government still does not control the whole of the country's economy and is thus deprived of the resources needed to rebuild infrastructure and improve the people's living conditions.

79. Women were largely excluded from the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process, although women played a military role in both the governmental and rebel forces. It has been acknowledged that women are currently playing an unofficial role in the reintegration of former fighters, filling gaps in the official programs. At the start of the DRR programme in 1998 the estimated number of combatants was 45 000, of which 12% were presumed to be women. At the completion of the DRR programme in December 2003, over 72 000 people had been demobilized, which indicates that the first estimates were inaccurate. As 84 percent of the demobilized were adult men the program was effective in reaching out to this segment of the population. Since just 6.5 percent of the demobilized were women, that thousands more fighters particularly women and girls were not reached by the official process.¹⁰

80. The establishment of many new Committees at the National, Provincial, District and Chiefdom levels in connection with reconstruction activities, offered very little opportunity to women to serve on these committees. Women have not been included in the Committees/Commissions set up after the Peace talks especially in decision-making positions. A glaring example is the Commission on the Consolidation of Peace, headed by the former Junta Leader. Another is the National Commission on Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCRRR). Gender programming has been largely absent in NCDDR's work, and not enough attention has been paid to the challenges faced by women ex-combatants.

81. Including women in Negotiating Commissions and in the membership of Commissions and Committees set up by the interim government after the signing of the Peace Accord would have enhanced their role and give visibility to their role in peace building.

82. As well as women's involvement in peace negotiations was very limited, their possibilities for participation in the political process were also quite few.

83. The role of women on the political scene in Sierra Leone has been indeed minimized both prior to and after independence. However, women have managed to play an active role in bringing about change in their communities. Efforts to address women's issues from an institutional standpoint gained momentum in 1988, when the Women's Bureau was

¹⁰ Mazurana Dyan, Carlson Kristopher, *From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone*, Women waging peace, January 2004.

established. The Bureaus' broad mandate was to co-ordinate and advise the government on all issues pertaining to women. It also had the additional task of advocacy, information dissemination and monitoring and evaluation of women' related interventions. The Women's Bureau has now been replaced by a Department for the Advancement of Women within the Gender Division of the Ministry of Social Welfare. In this Sierra Leone is as progressive as Guinea, which established a Ministry for Social Affairs and the Advancement of Women and Children already in 1994.

84. Other bodies were also established in Sierra Leone to address women's issues. Various Women in Development (WID)¹¹ units/focal points were established in sectoral departments and agencies and numerous women's NGO's were also formed. In the late 1980's and 1990's, the machinery for promoting the advancement of women was established by the University of Sierra Leone. These institutions helped train women managers, conduct research and undertake sensitisation workshops and seminars.

85. In preparation of the 2002 elections, a nationwide series of National Democratic Institute (NDI)¹² workshops also equipped female candidates and their campaign managers with practical skills and tools to run effective, issue-based campaigns. During this training period, women candidates concluded that absent a clear and comprehensive platform on women's issues, they would continue to be marginalized from the political process. The 50/50 Group¹³, a special advocacy group and NDI's local partner, and women candidates produced and distributed the "Sierra Leone Women's Manifesto," which underscored the importance of meeting the needs of women in all sectors of development and established a strong foundation upon which to set priorities for a future legislative agenda.

86. As a result, opportunities for women's political participation increased dramatically during the 2002 election period. The 10 political parties competing in the parliamentary elections placed 165 women on their electoral lists, more than half of whom were situated in one of the top eight "winnable" positions. At special advocacy campaign workshops, 90 of these women candidates and 20 campaign managers received intensive leadership and campaign training, including the development of detailed work schedules, budgets, fundraising plans and financial goals. Ultimately, 18 women were elected to parliament, three times the number elected in 1996. Efforts by the 50/50 Group, which has been able to wrest commitments from leaders of 11 political parties to have at least 50-percent representation of women in their party list, successfully increased popular awareness of women candidates and new elected women parliamentarians are now prepared to engage actively in efforts to build Sierra Leone's democratic institutions.

¹¹ The FAO Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development (WID) was established in 1989.

¹² The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs is a non-profit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions.

¹³ See footnote 4 above.

Women in Central Government in Sierra Leone

“Women in Sierra Leone have shown a lot of knowledge and are capable of scoring remarkable political success. Lack of full opportunity for women to participate in representative government is one of the most serious problems facing the country.” Raju Bendre, the British Council¹⁴

87. The women now represent 14.5% of the Sierra Leonean parliament and 0.1% of the government. Ms Shirley Yema Gbujama is Minister for Social welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs, Dr K.A. Sesay is Minister of Trade and Industry and Mrs Agnes Taylor-Lewis is Minister for Health and Sanitation. The women of Sierra Leone have called for “affirmative” action to increase the representation of women in the decision-making bodies.

88. The constitution of Sierra Leone provides for equality of women before the law and protects the rights of women. However, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women noticed in her report following a country visit to Sierra Leone in 2001 that there is a dual judicial system of formal and customary law, noting that the Constitution provides for the equal treatment of women and men, but the rights and status of women vary considerably under customary law. The Special Rapporteur made several recommendations¹⁵ to the Sierra Leonean government and the international community, including:

- The Sierra Leonean government has to keep on getting women and women's groups involved in the peace process and special efforts should be taken to ensure that women's needs and interests are included in the political negotiations;
- The government should review the formal and customary judicial systems to ensure that gender-discriminatory provisions are removed and that adequate protection is provided, in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women, noting specific concerns related to inheritance rights and legislation preventing domestic violence;
- The government should:
 - Submit a report to CEDAW in accordance with its obligations;
 - Establish a working committee together with women's organizations to prepare reports to CEDAW and help implement any recommendations that CEDAW may make;
 - Develop and improve national systems for the collection of comprehensive data disaggregated by gender;

¹⁴ Mac-Johnson Rodney, *Sierra Leone – the Women who want Kabbah’s job*, New African, 01429345, May2002, Issue 407.

¹⁵ Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, submitted in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 2001/49*, Ref E/CN.4/2002/83/Add.2

89. The Special Rapporteur also recommended that UNIFEM should open an office in Sierra Leone so that women's issues receive the high-profile treatment that they deserve. The gender perspective should be taken into account in all efforts to reform the legislation.

90. The Government of Sierra Leone signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women in 1988 and ratified it in 1990. However, to date Sierra Leone has submitted no report under CEDAW. These reports would help to assess the situation of women rights in Sierra Leone.

91. The Government has also not reformed the legislation in accordance with CEDAW requirements. Discriminatory practises such as female genital mutilation are still pervasive and no law has yet been passed to outlaw the practise. Former Presidential Candidate Ms Bangura has said that it would be impossible for any uncircumcised woman to be elected in Sierra Leone, because she would be unable to win votes in the interior.

92. The UN Special Rapporteur has recommended the Government to set up a working committee, including women's organizations, in order to prepare reports and to implement any recommendations made by CEDAW¹⁶.

93. The establishment of the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs in March 1996 was a sign of the importance the new government placed on gender equality. However, the Department needs physical, material, and human resource strengthening. As the capacity of most government ministries were eroded during the conflict as a result of total neglect, staff attrition and vandalism at various levels, government has had to rely on its partners especially national and international NGOs for effective programme delivery.

94. In August 2001, the Cabinet adopted the National Policy on the Advancement of Women. Since then sensitization workshops have been organized for grassroots women's associations and organizations nationwide as well as for other women's organizations. During these workshops women have been sensitized to their human and legal rights; in addition there have been lobbying and advocacy for policy and legal reforms to benefit women including rural women's rights under customary laws. There are plans to popularize, including translation into vernacular, those rights enumerated in the recent government's National Policy on the Advancement of Women. The Cabinet has also adopted the National Policy on Gender Mainstreaming, which has led to many sensitization workshops, radio and TV discussions on gender and gender issues.

95. The two policies are important in underpinning and forcing adequate consideration of women and the exercise of their rights. It is hoped that these policies will assist the authorities to be able to incorporate gender equality provisions in new legislation's, the reform of old laws and strengthening of enforcement.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Women in Local Government in Sierra Leone

96. It is often easier for women to participate in local than at the national level, because eligibility criteria for the local level are less stringent, and local government is the closest to the women's sphere of life, and easier to combine with rearing children. It can be the first level that women can break into and as such it may serve as a springboard to national politics, by developing capacities and gaining experiences.

97. The basic unit of local government generally in Sierra Leone is the chiefdom, headed by a paramount chief and a council of elders. There is also an elected council and mayor in Freetown, Bo, Kenema, and Makeni. Female participation in the local government reflects the same pattern as in the national government structure. Out of 149 paramount chiefs, only ten are women. Paramount chiefs are given the authority to manage the affairs of the chiefdoms without undue interference. Women in Sierra Leone have been paramount chiefs for centuries, the first record of women paramount chiefs are from the 17th century.

98. Most of the women chiefs are found only in the Southern and Eastern provinces, as cultural and traditional barriers do not permit women to become paramount chiefs in the Northern provinces. All over Sierra Leone, inherited cultural and traditional constraints subordinate women and exclude them from the decision-making process. These include the traditional lack of access and control over resources and benefits, including education, employment and property.

99. The case of Sierra Leone shows the importance of the mobilization of women at all levels in society and the need to address cultural and traditional practices which discriminate against women. If change is not advocated from below, the international community cannot have a substantial impact on the advancement of women in a country. However, including women's groups in peace negotiations greatly improves their possibilities of actively participating in the political processes in the post-conflict period.

100. Local elections were held on 22 May 2004 and marked an important advance in the return to good governance in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone People's Party jumped in to an early lead and eventually won the control of sixteen out of the nineteen City, Town and District Councils. According to the UN Secretary-General, one hundred seven candidates out of 1,115 approved to contest local elections by the National Electoral Commission were women.

101. The effectiveness of women in reconstruction and reconciliation is possible only if they get into high positions in the traditional political structures. Such a development requires policies of equal opportunities, and the removal of invisible barriers of attitudes and biases that hinder the advancement of women. Above all, women need to have an access to education equal to men. Further, the inclusion of women in the power structure in the public arena can come about only if they are empowered both economically and politically.

Strategy and actors in the promotion of women's empowerment and gender equality

Capacity Building of Women

Strategy and activities

102. In the Mano River region, the enshrinement of patriarchy in the society argues for gender equality to primarily focus on the empowerment of women. The following activities would greatly improve the possibility of women to actively participate in transitional societies and post-conflict peace-building processes;

- Strengthening the capacity of women in the areas of: advocacy, lobbying, negotiation, leadership, elections and campaigning for increased participation in the democracy and decision-making process;
- Literacy training due to the high percentage of illiteracy among women and its related bottlenecks of poverty, poor health, low employment outside informal and agrarian sectors etc;
- Communication including training and exposure to all modern instruments and the promotion of an effective information management systems that include the internet, E-mail etc. as well as utilizing the informal traditional means of communication common to the region.
- Increase opportunity and accessibility of women in peace building and activities for more interactions and the sharing of information and best practices.

103. The successful implementation of the above mentioned facilitating activities require the active participation of all relevant stakeholders, including the governments, the UN partners as well the civil society.

104. It is essential that the women are trained before they are introduced to the decision-making processes. Initiatives which group *unprepared* women with men report that the women tend not to contribute to the process. When they do, they concede their viewpoints to those of men's and assume roles society expects of them e.g. serving the food, cleaning the venue etc.¹⁷

105. In addition it is important that technical assistance pay special to rehabilitating and building women's grassroots and other associations and to the promotion of social support and care institutions necessary for women's involvement in the socio-economic and political life. Without emphasis on these bodies necessary for advocacy, provision of advice, gender-sensitive and awareness raising, the lack of gender-sensitivity of rehabilitation and development programmes put in place after war is likely to continue to the detriment of women.

¹⁷ Arimiebi Ekiyor Thelma, *Women's Empowerment in Peacebuilding: A Platform for Involvement in Decision-making – the WIPNET Experience*,

Capacity building Sierra Leone

106. The various women's movements and organizations in Sierra Leone required strengthening and their members need to be empowered to enable them to participate in decision-making structures and strategies in the peace process and conflict resolution.

107. In 1997 FAS was invited by women's groups to undertake a mission and conduct a workshop in conflict resolution training in Sierra Leone. The delegation met with various government officials, party officials, women's groups and NGO's and women in displaced camps to train them on negotiation and mediation skills and gather them around common interests and help them to plan strategic alliances. During the mission the delegation observed that the Sierra Leonean women's groups need to be advocated for and that there was a need for counseling services. Incoming NGO's needed to associate local people in their projects, educate other women and the division amongst women's groups needed to be addressed. Concerning the participation of women in the peace process, affirmative action was a priority, lobbying to the government was important and functioning female networks were crucial. A communication network was needed amongst women, with sharing of information and mobilisation of resources. It was also recommended that the Sierra Leonean women train themselves in order for them to be able to take of positions in the political decision-making bodies.

108. It was also noted that **the government** needed to help build the capacities of women's groups. A real problem was that the government did not include women in their negotiating teams although women bore the burden of the war. The different ministries need to cooperate on gender issues and draw up joint programmes. It was also noted that the Minister of Gender, established in 1996, needed to make recommendations to strengthen her ministry, getting support from the highest level on every issue. The government was also recommended to provide a steady flow of information on the peace process to concerned NGOs.

109. There was also a need for the UN to include women more in the peacekeeping operation through monitoring and information seeking. A lack of information about the peacekeeping mission made women suspicious about the UN. Strategies identified included dissemination of information, mobilisation and support for movements of implementation.

110. FAS (financed by the Netherlands, the OAU, IMSSA and Synergies Africa) organized a training workshop in Freetown as part of the mission. The purpose of the training was to offer a conflict management and resolution framework in which they could apply their experiences of the civil war, peace process and elections. The Objectives of the training included:

- Understanding the root causes of conflict and how to manage them
- Promoting tolerance
- Learning and dissemination of information to others
- Acquiring skills in dispute resolution
- Developing strategies
- Sharing techniques
- Resolving conflict
- Acquiring skills to be effective in NGO activities

111. Both participants and trainers were content with the training. The participants recommended that the training should be followed-up and that other stakeholders such as ministers, diplomats, lawyers and police officers should be trained. The trainers recommended the organizations that a group of Sierra Leonean women should be trained as trainers and given materials.

The Role and Impact of stakeholders

The role of UNAMSIL

112. The UN Mission for Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), with a Gender Specialist in its Human Rights Division, was established in 1999 to assist the Government and the parties in carrying out the provision of the Lomé peace agreement. The UNAMSIL had planned to withdraw in December 2005 but many NGOs have raised concerns of the impact the withdrawal will have on gender equality in Sierra Leone. The UN recently sent an assessment team to visit Sierra Leone and determine how quickly the drawdown of UNAMSIL forces should occur, and what, if any, transitional force should replace it. The assessment team met with UNAMSIL officials, other UN officials, and international NGO representatives. According to local sources, the assessment team met with SLANGO (an umbrella organization of Sierra Leone NGOs), but they didn't meet with, nor ask to meet with, individual women's groups.

113. Despite the trainings UNAMSIL has conducted the judiciary of Sierra Leone and the police force still have serious problems regarding gender equality and protecting women's rights. For example, although female police officers have been hired, and the lower ranks of the Sierra Leonean Police have been trained in gender sensitivity, the commanders have not. The legal system in Sierra Leone is still very weak and rape victims very rarely get the justice they deserve.

114. The Government of Sierra Leone needs much more support of the international community if it is to successfully take over from UNAMSIL. If the handover is done prematurely and without due assistance, all the impacts of the gender sensitization activities and training UNAMSIL has conducted in the past will be lost. It is therefore recommended that the The UN Security Council accept the recommendations of UNAMSIL personnel and other local stakeholders and approve a transition force that will continue to support the GOSL. The transition force should maintain or increase the size of the human rights and gender components of UNAMSIL and continue capacity building and training of key Sierra Leone institutions such as the SLP and the judicial system.

The potential role of civil society

115. "This time we are going to give these male politicians a good run for their money and make them realize that we are a force to reckon with" *Nemata Eshun-Baiden, founder of 50/50 group*¹⁸

¹⁸ Mac-Johnson Rodney, *Sierra Leone – the Women who want Kabbah's job*, New African, 01429345, May2002, Issue 407.

116. In order to achieve gender equality in Sierra Leone, it is important that all stakeholders (the governments, the UN and the civil society) make efforts to promote the participation of women in all reconstruction processes.

117. NGOs in the Mano River region have made a considerable effort to encourage the participation of women in all spheres of promotion and protection of women's rights. They have strived to ensure that policy and programs integrate a gender perspective for greater impact and results. They have used sensitization campaigns, training sessions designed to reinforce women's leadership capabilities, and the lobbying of public authorities to strengthen women's position. The increased presence of women in various bodies can be seen as the result of NGOs sensitization of and pressure on the various governments.

118. During conflict situations, as seen in Sierra Leone, there can be substantial mobilization among women who have grown frustrated with the inability of the people in power to end the conflict. This momentum needs to be seized upon and all stakeholders need to help strengthen the women's groups and enable them to continue their work after the peace accords have been signed.

119. Also, although women's initiatives in peace building in the Mano River countries have been very constructive, most responses were reactionary, ad hoc and the efforts of grassroots women largely went unnoticed and undocumented. Therefore, it is essential to develop a strategic approach to women's involvement in peace building by coordinating women's groups' actions to give them greater visibility and capacity and to be able ultimately to assess achievements of these movements as well the constraints they meet when carrying out their missions.

120. MARWOPNET has been instrumental in fulfilling this capacity. The Women's Forum in Sierra Leone should be held up as a "best practices" example of how the establishment of a platform organization can strengthen women's civil society initiatives. The facilitation of the forum was rotating (twice a year), which made the forum an outstanding base for dialogue between the different member groups¹⁹. However, the rotation system also caused some difficulties such as little institutional memory; hence a permanent secretariat was established.

121. Recent years in Sierra Leone have seen a development of great importance and interest; namely, the emergence of NGOs as advocates, arbiters and activists for issues ranging from human rights, good governance, political and economic accountability and transparency, monitoring of public policies, rallying support and mobilizing women particularly at the community level in urban and rural areas.

122. FAS, further to its mission in 1997, has identified the following activities, which need to be undertaken to promote the advancement of women and gender equality:

- Projects to promote and protect women's rights; change discriminatory legislation such as inheritance laws and marriage laws

¹⁹The largest member organisations include the Coordination of Women NGOs in Guinea (COFEG), National Women NGOs of Liberia (NAWOL), Liberia Women's Initiative (LWI) and Sierra Leone Women's Forum (SLWF).

- Projects to fight poverty and the lack of access to resources, for example by introducing microcredit systems for women
- Projects to educate and build capacity for education for women; peacebuilding training, civic education, literacy and training on advocacy.
- Projects to help vulnerable groups such as victims of sexual violence, children, sex workers and pregnant women.
- Civil society groups should undertake national campaigns to educate the public on the Lomé peace accords and other relevant agreements to strengthen their role as local actors in the peace process.

Role and Impact of MARWOPNET

123. The Mano River Women's peace Network (MARWOPNET) was established by FAS in May 2000.

124. FAS first became involved in the states of the Mano River Union in February 1997 in Sierra Leone to assess women's participation and leadership within the peace process in that country and to reinforce women's local capacities through training and experience sharing. FAS subsequently intervened on the national level in Liberia during the 1997 electoral process and in Guinea in 1997 to assess the situation of women refugees and displaced persons.

125. After extensive work in each of the Mano River countries, FAS realized that a sub-regional approach was needed in order to fully address the problems within each country. After a process of preparation and negotiation with various women's groups within the Mano River countries, FAS organized a meeting in May 2000 in Abuja, Nigeria, together with the West African Women's Association (WAWA), African Women's Committee for Peace and Development (OAU/ECA) and with the support of AWCPD, AU, ECOWAS and several UN agencies. The meeting brought together women leaders and representatives of local NGOs from the three countries to discuss the issues at hand and build a common platform. As a result of the meeting, the **Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET)** was formed and charged with the mandate of engendering the peace processes in the sub-region and striving to bring a lasting and sustainable peace to the Mano River Union.

126. MARWOPNET works in partnership with sub-regional organizations such as WAWA (West Africa Women's Association), the African Women's Committee for Peace and Development (AWCPD), the Federation of African Women's Peace Networks (FERFAP), the Network of African Women Ministers and Parliamentarians (REFAMP). It has built regional partnerships with the Africa Union, the Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Program for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development in Africa (PCASED).

127. Since its creation, MARWOPNET has been advocating to government officials, Ambassadors, the OAU Secretary General, and the UN Security Council to ask for their support in the peace process, and call on them to strengthen the capacity of women engaged in peace building and conflict management. The Network has also been very active in the three countries meeting with rebels, distributing peace flags during ceremonies aimed at destroying small arms, organising peace marches, joining a walk for the eradication of Polio, and teaching

conflict resolution and negotiation techniques to media, NGOs and representatives of the civil society. It also been meeting with NGOs to discuss how to build partnership, and paying visits to refugee camps to distribute them provisions, and advocate for their special needs to be addressed. As well, MARWOPNET has been participating in various meetings and workshops to stress the importance of ensuring gender equality in all spheres of nation building, and press for more peace initiatives.

128. In December 2003, the United Nations General Assembly awarded the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) the **UN Prize in the field of Human Rights**, an enormous accomplishment for the women of the Mano River Region. This was a recognition of the achievements of MARWOPNET, which include the commitment of the three heads of states of the Mano River Union to enter into productive dialogue for durable peace, co-operation and sustainable development, and meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence as groundwork for the meeting of the three Head of States in Rabat, Morocco in February 2002.

129. The Sierra Leonean chapter of MARWOPNET has been supported by both the Government of Sierra Leone and various UN agencies. The Government of Sierra Leone has for example supported the organizing of a training workshop for MARWOPNET in Freetown in June 2002. Events such as this training workshop has provided a forum for the women of Sierra Leone to have an active debate with representatives of government and the international community present in Sierra Leone. MARWOPNET has also organized similar workshops in Guinea and Liberia.

130. Another important role played by MARWOPNET with the support of FAS is providing access to international conferences such as the Commission on Human Rights and the Committee on the Status of Women to women representatives of civil society in the Mano River countries. For example, FAS made it possible for a delegation of women from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to attend the Beijing + 5 Special Session of the UN General Assembly to promote their agenda and continue their advocacy work. During the course of the conference, the Network distributed a statement to participants, detailing the agenda they established in Abuja, May 2000, and appealed for technical and institutional support. They addressed the numerous peace building institutions and organized meetings with partners such as the UN Political Department for Africa.

131. The strength of MARWOPNET lies in the fact that it represents various women's organizations from three different countries. For example during the upsurge in fighting in Liberia, MARWOPNET responded rapidly and efficiently. MARWOPNET's members have met with rebels, distributed peace flags during ceremonies aimed at destroying small arms, organized peace marches, joined a walk for the eradication of polio, and taught conflict resolution and negotiation techniques to media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives of civil society. They have lobbied government officials, ambassadors, the OAU Secretary General and the United Nations Security Council for their support in peace processes in the Mano River Basin, and called on them to strengthen the capacity of women engaged in peace building and conflict management. MARWOPNET managed ultimately to bring the leaders of the three Mano River countries together during a three-day summit in early March 2002 in Rabat, Morocco. There, leaders agreed to jumpstart peace talks, to initiate dialogue between their Ministers for Defence, to re-open borders, to rebuild diplomatic relations, to decrease the proliferation of small arms, and to increase economic co-operation.

132. In situations of escalating conflict, the national and local women's groups are often unable to act efficiently since the members might have become refugees or are unable to organize themselves due to the intensive fighting. In such a situation, a sub-regional network can act as the voice of the national chapter internationally.

133. In 2002 MARWOPNET established an implementation committee for the Liberian situation, which called for the implementation of activities such as:

- Increased activities for the refugees in Africa.
- Challenges for UNHCR to facilitate the repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees across the Liberian border.
- Reintegration of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone in order to consolidate the fragile peace
- Advocate for government in Sierra Leone to tackle the root causes of the conflict. Bridge the gap between the various groups in Sierra Leone and between the rich and the poor
- Advocate for redress for gender-based violence in the war in the region, via the TRC and/or the Special Court
- Assistance to IDPs.

134. In Sierra Leone MARWOPNET has been supporting advocacy activities in times of crisis. When events in Sierra Leone led to fears that the peace process would be derailed, the Women's Forum organized a Peace March on 8 May 2000 on the house of Foday Sankoh. A task force of women from different organizations committed to peace in Sierra Leone, led 3,000 women to deliver a statement to the leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). As a follow-up to the 8 May March, women in Sierra Leone organized a follow-up peace demonstration. During that Demonstration, 22 peaceful demonstrators lost their lives and others were injured when they were fired upon by the rebels.

135. In the same year a women's delegation from MARWOPNET attended the Mano River Summit in Conakry, Guinea. FAS, together with the African Women Development Fund (AWDF), supported an observer mission in the three countries. With ECOWAS' assistance, the women were able to intervene at the ministerial and Head of State levels. They appealed to the Heads of State of the three countries, and especially to the Liberian leader, to restore peace in Sierra Leone. After their intervention the Malian Head of State, and chair of the meeting, along with the Heads of State of the Mano River countries, applauded their efforts and promised to support their movement. Representatives of the international community present in the room encouraged the women to continue their noble efforts.

Women grassroots involvement

136. Women in the Mano River region tend to be suspicious of the emerging women's organizations and see them as effort of the elite, not part of their lives and not representing their needs and wants. This was also the case with the successful 50/50 movement in Sierra Leone. Although many women said in the 2002 elections that they would "no longer keep their heads low but raise them high", others dismissed the 50/50 idea as "a political gimmick by

women of intellectual calibre to hoodwink their less favoured kin". Responding to these concerns, the founder of the movement said that the movement is continuing the political education among grassroots women and added, "We have also extended the group to the student population of 10 tertiary institutions in the country and we are developing a women's manifesto on women's concerns".²⁰

137. Local community efforts, mostly led by women provide critical support in the DDR process. However, local groups are under immense pressure; they lack resources, their work is rarely acknowledged in official processes and they receive very limited assistance from the international community.²¹ Supporting the work of grassroots women is a cost-effective and essential way for ensuring sustainable peace. It is also important to target refugee women. MARWOPNET has visited Sierra Leonean women in refugee camps in Guinea and Liberia, encouraging them to become part of the peace process and addressing the problems they face in the camps.

138. During the FAS field mission to Sierra Leone in 1997 it was observed that local women need to be included in women's organization and trained on conflict resolution. Women from all spheres of West African society should be part of this peace activism as peace which promotes inclusion and equity for women is a cause all women should be part of. However, many women are not aware of or do not appreciate the importance of their involvement in Peacebuilding. The onus falls on women to enlighten and educate other women on the importance of their involvement in all levels of Peacebuilding.

139. In order for women to participate in capacity-building exercises they need basic education. This is a problem in Sierra Leone, where female literacy is among the lowest in the world and many women and girls are unable to go to school even after education services have been restored after the war. For example mothers cannot attend school due to a lack of childcare arrangements and there is a misperception that older girls and young women are too old to go to school.

140. Many NGO:s have taken initiative to educate women and girls. One example is the Luawa Skills Training Centre (LSTC) in Kailahun, which was founded by six women. The organization provides women with tailoring and garrantie-dying classes which supports women in their attempts to earn their living indepently. The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) established its Sierra Leone chapter in 1995 and now offers a range of training programs. It has also rebuilt schools and community centres and has constructed and opened schools for girls.

141. One of the places where women's enlightenment can occur is in women-only spaces. This is especially true of women who have experienced physical violence in their personal lives or are survivors of war.

142. Lack of exposure, high illiteracy and cultural restraints have left most African women lacking self-confidence and esteem. Akina Mama Wa Afrika has used women-only spaces to build the capacity of women in leadership for years. Under the intense African Women

²⁰ Mac-Johnson Rodney, *Sierra Leone – the Women who want Kabbah's job*, New African, 01429345, May2002, Issue 407.

²¹ Mazurana Dyan, Carlson Kristopher, *From Combat to Community; Women and Girls of Sierra Leone*, Women waging peace, January 2004.

Leadership Institute (AWLI) women are trained, mentored and counselled by other women. As a result alumni of AWLI are working across Africa and beyond in key leadership positions in civil society, governments, and other institutions at national and regional levels.

143. The success of spaces like AWLI approve that women-only spaces should be the first point of empowerment for women. These spaces are training grounds for women before they engage wider societal issues. This is where alliances and support bases are formed, and leaders and visionaries are inspired and nurtured. Women regardless of ethnicity, class, education and geography benefit from the experiences and knowledge shared in women-only spaces.

The Role of the Media

The impact of war on the media

144. Provided with the means of communication, the untapped potentials, energies and resources of women could be harnessed. Participatory communication is the instrument to turn the eyes of the community members towards strengthening their local organisations and developing their own community resources. Many women access information only through men, since they are illiterate or do not own a radio. Also, women's workload does not permit them to join the men (in many cases they are not allowed to), or to read newspapers or listen to the radio.

145. The Sierra Leonean media was virtually destroyed by the war. More than 70 per cent of trained media professionals fled the country, leaving the industry in the hands of mostly untrained media practitioners. At the end of the war, there was only one television station and three radio stations working, all based in Freetown. However, all parties of the conflict had their own newspapers which were distributed widely in the provinces. This led to a situation when the people in Freetown and the rural population had a widely different understanding about different issues.

146. The Sierra Leonean journalist Alpha Jalloh recommended in an article from 2002 on the role of the media in fostering unity in post-conflict Sierra Leone that the media should write feature articles and organize talk shows that will motivate the people to embrace the concept of unity in diversity. He also noted that journalists need to practice what is known as "preventive journalism." What this means is that journalists need to forewarn people of the dangers of certain words and actions that carry the potential of plunging their communities or the nation into chaos. News organs should try to place correspondents in the provinces. These correspondents should work with the people and serve as agents of change by participating in community development and reporting on the needs of the people.

147. Jalloh also wrote that "In postwar Sierra Leone, journalists should elicit the views of pacifists when conducting interviews on issues that affect the future or security of the country. The public should be encouraged to participate in the media. They should be encouraged to take part in phone-in programs, write letters to editors, and comment on issues, or even report

to the media personally on what affects their rights. In other words, bring the media to the people. The media in Sierra Leone should now become a people's media."²²

148. UNAMSIL was the object of much negative propaganda from the rural newspapers and therefore started a campaign to spread information about the mission and the UN Security Council Resolution 1270 which established UNAMSIL. During the period from January 2000 to early 2001 the RUF and other opposing forces felt threatened by the presence of the peacekeepers, while many people believed that the peacekeepers would complicate efforts towards a military defeat of the rebels. The UNAMSIL public information section therefore needed to reposition the mission in the eyes of the public, to launder its image, and to present it as an impartial force and one whose primary responsibility was to assist the Sierra Leone people to bring about lasting peace. The UNAMSIL public information section was quickly organised into various units: radio, print, community liaison and spokesman's office.

The mobilization of the media

149. The Community Liaison Unit, through the women's 'mobiliser', has identified and organised groups of women at grassroots level, such as women in the markets, and women cooks, into a network for information outreach to the population. It organised a nation-wide Women's March for Peace, which, although controversial, got women out and active as players in the peace process. By forming and educating the women's network and channelling information through it, the women's 'mobiliser' has been able to sensitise a broader audience to the peace process. Representatives from the women's network have been interviewed on Radio UNAMSIL and featured on the television programme 'Kapu Sens'.²³

150. In October 2005 UNDP held a workshop together with representatives of the media in Sierra Leone to discuss the role of media in creating civic responsibility. Speaking on how to improve the relationship between the media and the government, Ombudsman Francis Gabidon says the media should inform the people about what is happening around and also publicized governmental activities adding it should serve as a channel for expressing opinion. UNDP Country Representative, Victor Angello said the media has a vital role to play in promoting the culture of tolerance, dialogue, conflict resolutions, national building, national commitment, accountability, responsible communication and transparency pointing out that communication is one of the most important tools to consolidate peace.

151. The experience of the Sierra Leonan women's movement is a proof of the important role media can play in peace processes and post-conflict political processes. During the war, the WMP made sure that their activities were fully publicized both nationally and internationally. Through continuous press releases, women publicly expressed their determination to end the military rule in Sierra Leone while continuing the peace process. The months following the signing of the Peace Accord in 1999 were devoted to radio and TV phone-in programmes for explaining and discussing the Peace Accord to the public with the active participation of women who had gone to Lome. Similar experiences have occurred in the

²² From the June 2002 issue of *World Press Review* (VOL. 49, No. 6), Sierra Leone, Bring Media to the People, Alpha Jalloh, *Concord Times* (independent), Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 2, 2002 .

²³ Coker Patrick, *Sierra Leone – Building the Road to Recovery*, Institute for Security Studies, Monograph no 80, March 2003.

other Mano River countries. The Liberian Women's Initiative successfully used radio plays to encourage former soldiers to participate in the DDR process.

The Mano River Peace Community Radio

152. The project foresees the establishment of community media centres in each of the countries of the Mano River region, Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. These centres will operate around the hub of a community radio station, which establishes its relationships with the surround community audience and even beyond its borders through satellite connections at specified periods. The community is encouraged to publish its own newsletter and web journal and create web sites that can contribute to generating income and improvement for the communities. The centres will be organised locally from among the participants of the community. And hence a stiff component of training is foreseen to supply skills, which may not be too commonly found in rural zones.

153. The Mano River Peace Community Radio project was designed with the following development objectives in mind:

- To establish a dialogue on how to build sustainable peace in the region by offering open channels of communication among the three countries and the border communities concerned;
- To build confidence, trust and co-operation among all ethnic groups, by strengthening common cultural values and ethnic languages;
- To unleash the potential of the community members by renewing and enlivening all forms of social and economic co-operation and thus helping them to create a common agenda for regional reconciliation based on a reinvigorated perspective on the previous accords of 1973;
- To encourage and facilitate a diversity of voices and opinions thus strengthening democratic processes and promoting good governance.

154. "Search for Common grounds"²⁴ also set up a radio, which was used a lot by MARWOPNET. The Common Ground Productions projects aim at creating a new role for radio and television in fostering new knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors around social conflict. Through partnerships with leading researchers, CGP strives to capture information that will ultimately make projects more effective in reaching their goals. Research is used in assessments, project development and impact evaluation.

4. Conclusions

155. The current situation in the Mano River region is stable, which gives the men and women in the region hope for a better future. For the still fragile peace to become sustainable, and for the countries to rise up from the extreme poverty they face now, all stakeholders in society need to be empowered and included in the political decision making processes. The women in the Mano River countries, particularly the women of Sierra Leone, had an enormous impact on bringing the conflicts to an end, pressuring the parties to make peace and move towards democratic cooperation. Their efforts were critical in shaping both the informal and

²⁴ Search for Common Ground is an organization which works with local partners in many countries to find culturally appropriate means of strengthening those societies' capacity to deal with conflicts constructively

formal peace processes. However, the mobilization of female political force during the peacemaking process does not automatically transform into greater participation of women in the post-conflict political bodies.

156. There are several obstacles facing women in their struggle to make their voices heard in the development of their nations. Poverty is widespread and extreme throughout the Mano River region. As long as the women are preoccupied with struggling to feed their families they will not be fully able to have an input in the political life.

157. It is also essential that political will is strengthened in order for the democracy to be consolidated. Central government could act as an advocate for the advancement of women, condemning local leaders who do not let the women have a say in the decision making process. This is especially important in Sierra Leone, where there are wide discrepancies within the country on the participation of women in the local government. Also, it is essential that UNAMSIL, before it leaves Sierra Leone, ensures that the promotion of gender equality started by UNAMSIL for example in the Sierra Leonean police force is continued. It is essential that laws are put into practice. There is indeed a real risk that the government and central institutions of Sierra Leone revert to old practises as soon as UNAMSIL leaves the country if the handover is not adequately handled.

158. In addition, several studies have noted that when the government fails to provide essential services and support to its people, it is the women who taken on the task of providing these services and filling the gap the lack of a functional government leaves in society. This greatly hampers the possibilities for women to for example obtain an education or develop their individual economic activity. Great differences still exist in all the Mano River countries between the level of education among men and women. Many studies have acknowledged that education is a prerequisite for people to be able to participate in democratic processes.

159. The women's movements themselves face several problems in the continuation of activities from advocacy activities to end the war to activities to ensure that women's needs are taken into account in building the post-conflict society. This change often involves moving from advocacy activities to capacity-building activities to empower all women to become influential actors in the new democracy. The move to capacity-building activities is easier if the organization in question belongs to a larger network of organization, since this make the use of external expertise and support possible. An example of the benefits of a network is MARWOPNET, which has played a significant role in capacity-building activities in all three Mano River countries.

160. Today, the whole international community, including the UN, the governments, the sub-regional networks, the women of the Mano River region, has to work towards the implementation of resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security which reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace building, and stresses the importance of their full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. It is hoped that such resolution will help in changing the vision of women's role in time of conflicts as it does not treat women only as victims of conflicts but as vital resources in resolving them.

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