



War, intervention and development

The womens share in the war.

Zainab Bangura, former presidential candidate

Women in Sierra Leone usually don't take independent decisions they follow the decisions, because women don't have the economic rights, economic power because of the traditional role in which women are placed. Because also women don't have a lot of self confidence because of the large number of illiteracy among women, women tend to be secondary players to issues, and so they tend to side with the position that is taken by either the male member of the family or their husband or whoever it is. So definitely women played a part in the RUF in the war but they were not primary players they were not leaders.

Emilia Taylor, former RUF

The rebels attacked my village and killed my people and they captured a lot of us, and they have to go with me along with them. I was nine years old.

Narrator

Emilia Taylor is now 19 years old and living in the suburbs of Freetown. Somehow she survived and manages to both educate herself and look after the four-year-old son she had by the rebel leader that captured her, and who was killed towards the end of the war.

Emilia Taylor

Women were victims in war because in anything that you find women doing during the war they were forced, and some were drugged, they'd hold you by force, maybe like 4,5, 6 people and they hold you very firm, strong, and they inject drugs in you, so that they can use you any how they feel.

Women were used to be the rebel's wife, and used to do domestic works, and used to be arm carriers. The majority was forced because when they captured around here they would make sure they hold on all the strong youths, people even can try to escape from them, in fact if you venture one time and you've been found they will punish you, and secondly when you tried for the second time you would be killed.

Hannah Foullah, Radio Democracy

You would probably think because of the nature of our conflict that women are victims and a lot of times we are victims most of the times, but then increasingly over the past few years in our conflict in Sierra Leone and in the conflict in Liberia we've realised that women are also perpetrators.

Zainab Bangura

There were women commanders in the RUF not very many but they did play that role, but women were mostly secondary fighters, because they were not recruited, very few women were recruited as fighters. Women were recruited in other areas of the war, yet they were trained to fight so when there was a short fall in the number of fighters, women were given guns and they fought but then after that they were then taken back to perform the other roles, so they performed various roles in the course of the war.

Jemba Ngobe, former RUF

Some were commanders, some were just like men, and they go to the war front, where I did not go. They were brave, some women were brave to go, some were not brave, some were married, taking care of their children at home because we have a lot of children, there was no planning, planning was against one of the rules here, there was no family planning here, so

most of the women have so many children. Family planning was against here, because people were dying and the revolution need more children.

My job was purely for education, I was taking care of children in the war. It was a free education, but how we used to manipulate our education was, we did not used to pay teachers, and we used to leave it to the community. I go to town I call a meeting, I say well, we want children to be going to school, because this is one of the things that the war is fighting for. So now I want a school building, we go into the bush, we make a thatch house, we call it "jor bush" from there I give them chalk, I give them books and we ask for educated people in that town and we deploy them as teachers.

Hannah Foullah, Radio Democracy

You would have women within the RUF who would leave the provinces and come, they transported weapons, because obviously when they talk about war, issues of a woman carrying a baby on her back a military, an armed person isn't supposed to fire on someone like that, but then what do you say when a woman carrying a baby on her back has an AK47 just in between herself and the baby.

Narrator

It was by using this kind of natural cover that RUF women were able to smuggle arms into Freetown for the January 1999 attack. The freedom of women to move around the country trading particularly in foodstuffs gave them cover for other activities too.

Hannah Foullah, Radio Democracy

You shouldn't under estimate the role that they played in intelligence, because they were able to take news of what was happening in Freetown to the rebels back there, then you couldn't ascertain whether this woman was really an ordinary market woman or member of the RUF.

Narrator

But women also played key roles in peace building – like Hannah Foullah herself who helped establish Radio Democracy which was set up to support President Kabbah's ousted government in 1997 with British backing.

Hannah Foullah, Radio Democracy

Radio democracy came in as an alternative voice trying to counter the propaganda then, at that particular time. We were making a statement, that however terrible the civilian government could have been, it didn't give the military any right or justification to do what they had done.

When we went to the airport it was sometime in July and we had to set up the equipment, we started broadcasting on the 7th of July and I remembered when we first went on air, immediately after that there was a battle for the airport, so it was very very dangerous at that particular time, because ECOMOG were there trying to hold their ground, and the military and the rebels were also trying to gain control of the airport, so it was quite difficult in the first few days, lets say the first week, and most of the radio stations in fact all of the radio stations had been taken over by the Junta, so this was sort of like a coup on them as well because they weren't expecting it, because finally they were going to have an alternative.

The woman is the mother to the rebel, the mother to the soldier and the mother to the politician or the sister to the politician, so women cross all the lines. So there's no way you can keep the women behind the scenes then when it comes to making peace, of talking peace, so women in Sierra Leone have actually been involved on all fronts.