

‘The Other Half on Gender’ in Sierra Leone’s Civil Conflict: A Critical Response to John Idriss Lahai’s “Fused in Combat”

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Abstract

This article responds to John Idriss Lahai’s article “‘*Fused in Combat*’: *Unsettling the Gendered Hierarchies and Women’s Roles in the Fighting Forces in the Sierra Leone’s Civil War*,” published above in this issue of ARAS, and suggests that a more detailed account of male privilege and oppression is needed when exploring gender relations in combat. It is argued that when analysing gender relations in ‘the camp’ the focus should not be on *how* women’s actions led to their suffering abuse. Rather, the focus should remain on men’s actions as abusers. The explanation of sexual violence in Sierra Leone’s civil war is critically explored from a pro-feminist perspective. To do this a clear account of masculinity is needed that can fully understand how gender relations are constructed.

Introduction

Since the end of Sierra Leone’s conflict in 2002 an increasing body of literature has attempted to understand the gendered dimension of violence. John Idriss Lahai enters into this landscape with a unique attempt to conduct a comparative study of the *Kamajor* and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). There are many positive contributions made by his article ‘*Fused in Combat*.’ It is a fresh perspective, presenting an account of these groups’ internal functioning and its attempt to understand the difference between the warring factions is appreciated. Despite these positive contributions, some of the gender analysis within ‘*Fused in Combat*’ reproduces problematic perceptions of men and women’s roles. Particularly problematic is how sexual violence is discussed. When instances of sexual violence are explored the victim’s actions are generally brought into question rather than exploring the perpetrators actions or intentions. This, unintentionally, becomes dangerously close to victim blaming. Questions of male entitlement and exploitation are also pushed to the side line as are the benefits that men received from women’s subordination. Lahai also de-emphasises the active roles that men and masculinity take as causes of Sierra Leonean women’s woes, often exploring ‘gender’ as a euphemism for women with a very limited focus on its other half.

A critical response

'*Fused in Combat*' conducts a cross-organisational analysis of how gender constructed the practices of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the *Kamajor* militia during Sierra Leone's civil war. Most of the comprehensive pieces that focus on gender in Sierra Leone, such as Chris Coulter's *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers* and Myriam Denov's *Child Soldiers* use specific cases.¹ However, there have been smaller efforts to discuss gender from a cross-case approach. These include Human Rights Watch's '*We'll Kill You If You Cry, Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone*' which was produced by Irish Aid and '*From Combatant to Community*' written by Dyan Mazurana and Khristoph Carlson.² However, these sources tend to focus particularly on the abuses that women suffered, rather than trying to understand the conflict from a gendered perspective. Lahai's presentation of an insider's perspective is a unique contribution due to his own involvement in the *Kamajor* faction. The author's work also confirms the conclusions of other authors on women in Sierra Leone's fighting factions; that the gendered experiences of oppression and abuse within the armed factions were an extension of pre-war patriarchal practices.³ Lahai's suggestion that sexual violence was used to undermine the masculinity of the opposition is also valuable and follows broader pro-feminist theorisation on wartime sexual gender-based violence (SGBV).⁴ '*Fused in Combat*' also asserts that the "the violence... to destroy the foundations of society." The assertion that the

¹ Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: women's lives through war and peace in Sierra Leone*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009); Myriam Denov, *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Human Rights Watch; "We'll Kill You if You Cry' Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict," *Human Rights Watch*, 15:1 (2003) 1-79; Karen Barnes, Peter Albecht, and Maria Olson, *Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone: mapping challenges, responses and future entry points* (London, Irish Aid, 2007); Dyan Mazurana and Khristoph Carlson, *From Combatant to Community: women and girls in Sierra Leone*, (Women Waging Peace, 2004) http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/PartPPGIssueDisp_CombatToCommunity_WomenWa gePeace_2004.pdf (accessed June 12 2011).

³ Human Rights Watch, 24; Chris Coulter, 2009, 133; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Witness to Truth: Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 2*, (Freetown: Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2004)

⁴ Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: how gender shapes the war system and vice versa*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 360-365; Paul Kirby, "How is Rape a Weapon of War?: Feminist international relations, modes of critical explanation and the study of wartime sexual violence," *European Journal of International Politics*, 18 (February 2012): <http://ejt.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/02/10/1354066111427614> (accessed 22 February 2012).

RUF wished to undermine social ties and structures is not new.⁵ However, the suggestion that this effort was the primary driving force behind the conflict is novel, as most accounts argue that political grievances or greed were the primary driving forces. *'Fused in Combat'* should be commended for focusing on gender, for its cross-case approach and its unique insider's perspective. Even with these positive contributions the gender analysis is problematic from a pro-feminist perspective.

The discussion of the RUF and mainstream society presented by Lahai reproduces damaging accounts of women's roles in culture and nationalism. Notions of civility and respectability tend to be problematic when analysing gender relations. The concept of civility and civilised society is often used to police women's behaviour. Distinctions between those who adhere to a strata of society's norms and expectations (individuals who are 'civilised') and those who are socially denigrated (the uncivilised) can be used to naturalise inequality between groups. In Sierra Leone this can be seen as playing out in the marginalisation of young males that *'Fused in Combat'* describes as *lumpenproletariat*.⁶ Appeals to civility can also be used to vilify women who suffer the brunt of patriarchal oppression: such as prostituted women, adulteresses (a label that is often placed on survivors of rape) or women who break societal expectations such as assertive women, lesbians or single mothers. In post-war Sierra Leone the distinction between civilized and uncivilized society has also been used to disproportionately disadvantage women who were associated with the rebels.⁷ Numerous studies have demonstrated that women who were associated with the rebels, freely or due to force, are often stigmatised by their involvement and marginalised to the

⁵ Karen Barnes, Peter Albecht, and Maria Olson, 11; Human Rights Watch, 4; Myriam Denov, Richard Maclure, "I Didn't Want to Die so I Joined Them": structuration and the process of becoming a boy soldier in Sierra Leone," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18:1 (2006a): 130.

⁶ Danny Hoffman, "Dissent Politics and the War in Sierra Leone," *Africa Today*, 52:3 (2006), 11; William P. Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientism in Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars," *African Studies Review*, 46:2, (2003) 61-87; Paul Richards, "To Fight or to Farm: agrarian dimensions of the Mano River conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)," *African Affairs*, 104:417 (2005): 571-590

⁷ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, and Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone*, (New York, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001); Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, "Engaging the Voice of Girls in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone's Conflict: experiences and perspectives in a culture of violence," *Canadian Anthropology*, 48:1, (2006b): 73-85.

periphery of ‘civilized’ society.⁸ This often results in them receiving the force of male power in exploitative industries such as street prostitution. For these reasons, the reproduction of patriarchal notions of civility is deeply problematic when attempting to explore gender relations, and is likely to reinforce notions that are harmful for women. Instead, the concept of civility should be challenged and destabilised when exploring gender.

Lahai’s analysis of gender relations is also problematic due to an overemphasis on women’s actions when exploring their treatment at the hands of men. As the intention of *Fused in Combat* is to explore the construction of gender relations and the nature of two forces the author correctly places heavy emphasis on the interpersonal relationships between males and females. The author’s analysis falters in its almost exclusive focus on the actions of women and girls in trying to understand the treatment that they received. For example, when exploring women’s social mobility within the RUF Lahai asserts that “mobility from one class to the other was possible — a possibility that was determined by their ‘fighting skills’ and as some argue by their ‘seductive feminine charms,’ in enticing camp commanders into sexual relationships” . The description of relationships between camp commanders and bush wives as seduction is deeply problematic.

The extensive qualitative research that has been conducted with females who were associated with combatant organisations as soldiers and/or as sexual slaves suggests that they tended to have heavily restricted sexual autonomy.⁹ Research indicates that relationships between commanders and younger women or girls were particularly problematic. Interviews conducted by Chris Coulter show that when a commander claimed a girl soldier as a bush wife this was best described as a survival tactic for the girl, rather than a seduction.¹⁰ The active emphasis on the seduction, rather than on male entitlement in claiming the right to sexually penetrate women and girls, is very challenging as it places the emphasis on what

⁸ Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: getting reparation right for survivors for sexual violence*, (Amnesty International, 2007), 14; Karen Barnes, Peter Albecht, and Maria Olson, 12.

⁹ Chris Coulter, “Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone; challenging assumptions,” *Feminist Review*, 88:1 (2008): 54-73; Chris Coulter, 2009; Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, “Reconstruction versus transformation: post-war education and the struggle for gender equity in Sierra Leone,” *International Journal of Educational Development*, 29:6, (2009) 612-620; P.W. Singer, *Children at War*, (New York, Pantheon Books, 2005), 104-105.

¹⁰ Chris Coulter, 2008, 150.

women did, rather than on what men demanded. This also does not fit with the research conducted by Myriam Denov who suggests that -

[f]or women and girls in the RUF, the provision of sexual services to the men and boys in the group was, perversely, included as part of their expected 'duties'. Indeed, all but two girls interviewed reported being subjected to repeated sexual violence, and gang and individual rape were common.¹¹

This would suggest that when trying to understand women and girls' relationships with male commanders their "seductive feminine charms," should not be emphasised. Rather, norms of masculinity that supported men's sexual claims should be central.

Chris Coulter's extensive interviews with female combatants illustrate that becoming the property of a commander through 'bush marriage' was often the only way for a female to survive in rebel camps. Coulter's research suggests that women who were not claimed by an individual male were seen as communal property that could be sexually penetrated by any male that wanted her. One of Coulter's interviewees reported that "if you refuse (sex), you will be killed. Some women don't do any work but to be sexing."¹² Similarly Coulter's research finds that individual women tended to have very little autonomy over whether they were chosen as a bush wife or kept as communal property, Coulter describes the process as "haphazard."¹³ Lahai's depiction of camp relationships as a context where "women's sexuality shaped their mobility within the 'rebel camps,'" incorrectly places the blame on females. It also suggests that some women were, at least in part, responsible for not procuring male protection against the abuse that they suffered. To fully account for these complicated camp relationships an understanding of male power needs to be integrated.

The picture of camp relationships presented by *Fused in Combat* lacks a complete account of male responsibility. Despite attempting to explore "the hierarchies and patterns of interaction that defined gender relations between combatants," Lahai does not explore the privileges that were enjoyed by male combatants due to their exploitation of women and girls. He suggests that the gender arrangements in combatant groups "were merely an extension of the pre-war patriarchal order." Despite this important observation, little attention is paid to the ways in which women's labour was appropriated by men through the institution of bush

¹¹ Myriam Denov, 2010, 109.

¹² Chris Coulter, 2009, 107.

¹³ Chris Coulter, 2009, 112.

marriage. During the conflict men on both sides claimed women, and often girls, as wives. As the author documents, women's duties as bush wives included being sexually available to men. What is important to add here is that other labour was also appropriated by men during the conflict to support their combat activities. Lahai references Chris Coulter's work liberally throughout his article however, the piece has not integrated her vital suggestion that "one important aspect has received too little attention in most writing about abducted women in the Sierra Leonean war: women's productive labour."¹⁴ This is a significant omission from '*Fused in Combat*.' Once in the rebel camps Coulter's work indicates that women experienced severe disadvantage at the hands of their male peers, where they were required to render free service both domestically and sexually. If a female was not claimed by an individual combatant they were at extreme risk, as multiple males were free to demand sexual access that was often accompanied by some degree of violence.¹⁵ In contrast to this, females who were claimed by an individual fighter were only required to be sexually available to a single man's demands and were often given a degree of security. However, within these relationships the research also suggests that women generally did not have any degree of sexual autonomy and were in a state of sexual slavery with the husband/master.¹⁶

Women who did not comply with men's sexual demands, whose husband became disinterested in them or whose masters became suspicious would often be viciously punished. These punishments also appear to have involved brutal sexual abuse.¹⁷ To describe these arrangements as the seduction of commanders is deeply problematic and resembles victim blaming descriptions of rape. The description of sexual violence as punishment that Lahai presents again emphasises what the females did to warrant abuse, rather than the actions and responsibility of abusers. When discussing public rape it is depicted by Lahai as "another method used against recalcitrant women." Similarly when examining the demotion and murder of commander's wives Lahai's emphasis is placed on what the woman or girl did to get murdered, "it was a common occurrence for an

¹⁴ Chris Coulter, 2009, 116.

¹⁵ Dyan Mazurana and Khristoph Carlson, 14.

¹⁶ Amnesty International, 2007, describes sexual slavery as a "situation where girls and women are forced into 'Marriage', domestic servitude or other forced labour that ultimately involves forced activity, including rape by their captors." The bulk of research on the treatment of women and girls by rebels suggests that this is an accurate account of how most females were treated.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, 38.

abducted slave to become a commander's wife; and for a commander's wife to be demoted, raped and even killed at the authority of the commander when caught sabotaging the survival of the camp: by selling secrets, spying for the enemy or engaging in sexual activities with a junior rebel in the camp."

The emphasis on what the woman or girl has done here ("sabotaging the survival of the camp") rather than on the actions of the murder/rapist is particularly problematic as it hides male responsibility and action for the exploitation and subordination of women and girls. Additionally, it reinforces the distinction between 'civilized' females who cooperate with patriarchy and those 'uncivilized' women who have 'sabotaged' a camp's survival through 'dangerous' activities like "engaging in sexual activities with a junior rebel in the camp." Even if this were a factual representation of women's actions leading to their rape and murder the emphasis placed on what the female has done is problematic.¹⁸ This is made doubly challenging due to the research on female combatants in Sierra Leone that does not support the notion that there was a direct correlation between females' actions and the treatment they received.

The research presented by Human Rights Watch, Myriam Denov, and Chris Coulter, proposes that there was not always a strong correlation between women's actions and the treatment that they received.¹⁹ Denov's research with girl soldiers suggests that almost all girls were subjected to repeated sexual violence.²⁰ Human Rights Watch also records a number of instances where women and girls were accused of crimes by their husbands and then brutally tortured.²¹ This torture often appears to have involved a sexual dimension such as using an umbrella as a tool of rape.²² As it does not appear that actual crimes were the primary determinant in a female's brutalisation by their commander/husband/master to emphasise this when exploring gender relations occludes the responsibility of men and male violence.

¹⁸ There is also ample evidence given by Human Rights Watch and others that women were often accused of crimes and punished even if they had not committed any infraction. The research of Chris Coulter 2008 and 2009; and Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure 2006a, 2006b and 2009, also suggests that punishment was often used indiscriminately against boys as well as girls to create a culture of fear and distrust.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, Chris Coulter 2009; Myriam Denov 2010.

²⁰ Myriam Denov 2010, 109.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, 34.

²² Human Rights Watch, 34.

The discussion of patriarchy presented in *'Fused in Combat'* does not present a clear or coherent indication of how the author intends the term to be understood. The term patriarchy is used throughout the article in very different ways. The war ideology of combatants is referred to as patriarchal; and the internal gender relations of armed groups are argued to be an extension of pre-war patriarchal arrangements. At the same time it is claimed that women who volunteered in the RUF were "liberating themselves from the shackles of patriarchy." Lahai correctly confirms the work of previous authors in suggesting that none of the combatant organisations in Sierra Leone worked to liberate women.²³ The assertion that some women were able to find a reprieve from some of the more odorous oppression that they suffered is also supported by other research on female combatants.²⁴ However, the idea that this was a liberation from the "shackles of patriarchy" is inconsistent with an account of combatant organizations as "a patriarchal hierarchy" that worked "towards patriarchal ends." At another point the author goes further to suggest that women within the combatant organisations "worked within a patriarchal hierarchy and towards patriarchal ends." Not only is this inconsistent with a description of liberation from patriarchy it also does not fit with the research that shows women and girls displaying a great deal of agency in resisting male oppression in camp life. What the research on women and girls in Sierra Leone also suggests is that during the conflict they were widely disadvantaged due to their gender in ways that their male peers did not experience.²⁵ In post-war Sierra Leone the research also suggests that women and girls who were volunteers were subjected to a wide range of gendered disadvantage ranging from unintentionally being excluded from the Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration programs, as females were either assumed to not be 'real combatants' or had their weapons taken by male peers, to family rejection.²⁶

In contrast to feminist critiques of patriarchy, *'Fused in Combat'* does not present a challenge to traditional gender relations. Lahai chooses not to critique traditional gender roles in Sierra Leone that contributed to

²³ Chris Coulter, 2008.

²⁴ Megan MacKenzie, "Securitization and Desecuritization: female soldiers and reconstruction of women in post-conflict Sierra Leone," *Security Studies*, 18:2, (2009) 241-261.

²⁵ Myriam Denov, 2010, 107-108.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, 34; Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: their lives during and after war*, (Montreal, International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 2004).

women's disadvantage during the conflict. When describing the shift in gender relations during the conflict Lahai describes this process as a 'distortion' of gender rather than a change, a wording that seems to accept a natural state of gender relations. Similarly the inclusion of women in fighting groups is described as an attempt to "distort pacifist perceptions about women." The discussion of Mende culture prior to the war also suggests that the author is critical of the 'distortion' of gender caused by war as opposed to the patriarchal attitudes and arrangements that he locates in pre-war culture. This is particularly problematic due to the number of sources that the author refers to which have provided a critical analysis of how pre-war culture facilitated the poor treatment of females during the conflict. While the author is clearly critical of a wide range of abuses that women faced because of patriarchy, there is no correlating critique of male privilege that patriarchy ensures.

'Fused in Combat' presents a simplified account of how gender affects men and boys. The article sets out to explain "the patterns of gender relations within the fighting forces." Despite this intention very little attention is paid to the ways in which masculinity and homosocial power relationships had constructed the practices of males within camp life.²⁷ Lahai goes to great effort in explaining how gendered hierarchies affected females in camp life. In particular there is a clear focus on the different social stratification of females and the differing experiences that they had within these roles. Despite this, no similar attention is paid to inter-male hierarchies. Myriam Denov's extensive work with boy soldiers suggests that masculinity was essential to the socialisation process of boys, such as developing a sense of group membership and fostering their emotional detachment.²⁸ In addition to this, the practices of men in relation to women are not solely determined by women's own actions or by perceptions they are also structured by notions of masculinity and what it means to be a man.

How masculinity shapes perceptions of sex and violence seems to be a striking omission from the analysis of "the hierarchies and patterns of interaction that defined gender relations between combatants." Work on

²⁷ Homosocial relationships (same-sex relationships) were highly significant for boys and men in Sierra Leone's conflict. In particular research with boy soldiers suggests that their relationships with powerful male figures who took on father like roles were very significant. Despite the fact that these relationships are between two or more males the relationships are still deeply gendered and are constructed around masculine bonding.

²⁸ Myriam Denov, 2010, 97-128.

masculinity in Liberia conducted by Mary Moran also suggests that masculinity was essential to the practices of combatants and the organisation of militia groups.²⁹ It is reasonable to assume that in Sierra Leone masculinity had a similar influence in constructing the practices of the RUF and the *kamajor*. Lahai also asserts that within the RUF “social stratification affected women more than the men.” It is certainly true that social stratification *negatively* affected women more than men. However, within these gendered hierarchies men reaped great positive benefits if they cooperated with their dictates. Accordingly the idea that social stratification had a greater effect on women as opposed to men presents a restricted understanding of how gender works to benefit men as a corollary to women’s disadvantage. By approaching gender in this way the author follows broader trends to ignore how gender is used to unfairly benefit men while simultaneously disadvantaging women. As such ‘*Fused in Combat*’ continues the trend to ignore the other half of gender.³⁰

Lahai opens the door for a fruitful discussion of masculinity when exploring Ibrahim Abdullah’s notion that the RUF was a *lumpenproletariat* movement.³¹ Lahai clearly demonstrates that there was a great deal of class tension between young marginalised men who constituted the core voluntary membership of the RUF and what the author terms ‘civilized’ society. In addition to the use of Abdullah’s work, the author references Paul Richards’ research on the historical precursors of conflict in Sierra Leone.³² These literatures clearly demonstrate that there were substantial tensions between men; such as access to productive work, ability to obtain women for marriage and patricians’

²⁹ Mary Moran, “Warriors or Soldiers?: Masculinity and ritual transvestism in the Liberian Civil War,” in ed. Constance R. Sutton *Feminism, Nationalism and Militarism*, (New York, Association for Feminist Anthropology/American Anthropology Association, 1995.)

³⁰ United States Institute of Peace, “The Other Side of Gender: including masculinity concerns in conflict and peacebuilding,” *Peacebrief*, 75 (2011) 1-4; Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart, *The “Man” Question in International Relations*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

³¹ Ibrahim Abdullah, “Bush Path to Destruction: the origins and character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36:2, (1998) 203-235; Ibrahim Abdullah, 2002, “Youth Culture and Rebellion: understanding Sierra Leone’s wasted decade,” *Critical Arts*, 16:2, (2002): 19-37; Ibrahim Abdullah, “I am a rebel’: youth, culture and violence in Sierra Leone,” in eds. Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck *Makers & Breakers: children & youth in postcolonial Africa*, (Trenton, Africa World Press, 2005).

³² Paul Richards, 2005.

control of land. It is reasonable to assume that these factors would influence the gendered relationships and hierarchies between men in the RUF and *kamajor*. The opportunity to explore these relationships is not taken up by the author. For these reasons it is reasonable to assert that '*Fused in Combat*' tends to ignore gender's other half, treating gender more as a synonym for women. This has the unintended effect of removing men from the picture, occluding the benefits they receive and their culpability in the oppression of women and girls.

Conclusion

It is imperative that discussions of gender relations in contexts of conflict and sexual violence take a considered and methodical approach. Lahai provides some valuable analysis and discussion of the RUF and the *kamajor* due to his insider's perspective. Despite this, the discussion of gender by Lahai often ends up reproducing problematic notions of men and women in conflict without providing a detailed critique how gender relations privileged men. Accordingly, '*Fused in Combat*' should be approached with a degree of reservation and an awareness of its important omissions as well as its contributions.

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