



# From the ground up

*Country focus: Women's roles in local  
peacebuilding in Sierra Leone*

**act:onaid**

**IDS** Institute of  
Development Studies

**WOMANKIND**  
WORLDWIDE EQUAL RESPECTED PROUD

**“Rural communities in Sierra Leone are characterised by a strong patriarchal culture where traditions, customs and religious beliefs significantly influence and regulate the behaviour of women”**

1. The full report can be found at: [www.womankind.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/From-The-Ground-Up-FINAL.pdf](http://www.womankind.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/From-The-Ground-Up-FINAL.pdf) (accessed 19/12/13).

2. Castillejo, C. 2009. 'Building accountable justice in Sierra Leone'. [pdf] FRIDE Working Paper 76, Madrid: FRIDE.

Cover: Mothers' group meeting, Sierra Leone  
Des Willie/ActionAid

Despite the increased international attention to women's participation in peacebuilding, the achievements and challenges facing women building peace at the local level have been largely overlooked. *From the Ground Up*, a research report published by Womankind Worldwide, ActionAid and the Institute of Development Studies in 2012, addresses some of these gaps by providing qualitative evidence on the roles of women in local peacebuilding in five countries: Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone.<sup>1</sup>

Research was conducted in each country, both through focus group sessions in conflict-affected communities, and interviews with staff of local and national civil society organisations, government representatives and community members working to support peacebuilding at the local level.

The research uncovered important commonalities across the countries, providing guidance on how women can be supported to build peace in conflict-affected communities. Certain contextual differences between the communities and countries were also identified, and much rich and insightful information was collected in each country. This paper provides a picture of women's participation in peacebuilding in Nepal. It explores the national context,

examines gendered understandings of peace and peacebuilding, and explores the impact of women's participation in peacebuilding. Barriers to women and women's rights organisations building peace are identified, and recommendations to mitigate these are proposed.

### Women's rights at a glance

Rural communities in Sierra Leone are characterised by a strong patriarchal culture where traditions, customs and religious beliefs significantly influence and regulate the behaviour of women and men in almost all spheres of life.<sup>2</sup> This curtails women's right to take up leadership positions and access property and justice, and is directly associated with the high incidence of violence against women. It also relegates women to secondary roles in different aspects of the life of their communities, such as in religious celebrations, community functions and the type of economic activities they can undertake. Access to productive resources like land is unequal, while teenage pregnancy, early marriage, poverty and illiteracy levels are very high amongst women. The incidence of female-headed households as a result of the conflict has also increased. In addition, widespread destruction of infrastructure and homes has exacerbated poverty, depleted livelihood opportunities, and increased food insecurity.

### Selected Statistics on Women in Sierra Leone

Indicator	Women	Men
Population (thousands/%)	3,130 (52%)	2,996 (48%)
Life expectancy at birth (years)	49	48
Population aged 15-19 ever married (%)	30.9	0.9
Population (+25yrs) with at least secondary education (%)	10	20
Economic activity rate (%)	66	69
Maternal mortality ratio	890 per 100,000 live births	
Adolescent (15-19yrs) fertility rate	104.2 per year per 1,000	
Women in national parliament (%)	12.5	
UNDP 2011 Gender Inequality Index (world rank/value)	139 (0.643)	

Sources: UN Statistics Division and UNDP. Latest statistics available for each indicator.

## Women, conflict and peace: general context

The decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002) involved the perpetration of brutal violence against civilians, with tens of thousands of deaths and around 2 million displaced people. The war had a specific and disproportionate impact on women, who were targets of sexual violence, torture and insecurity, with reports that 94% of displaced women experienced sexual assault.<sup>3</sup> Restrictions on women's mobility due to their caring responsibilities made them particularly vulnerable to harassment, abduction and physical violence, including sexual abuse as well as food shortages. Displacement to large cities or the bush was a common survival strategy. Women also took active roles in supporting war efforts, often by coercive means, but they were largely excluded from disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation programmes.<sup>4,5</sup>

**"... Even during the war [women] were the ones that initiated peace. Even now, they are the ones holding the topic."**

– Hannah Koroma, WAVES

During the war, women in Sierra Leone showed unprecedented unity. Women from all socio-economic groups challenged the military junta through public demonstrations and rallies, and worked together to support the agenda of women's empowerment, expansion of civic education, the ousting of military rule and the establishment of a responsive democratic government. Although women in Sierra Leone were not formally integrated into official peacebuilding processes, they were active participants through the formation of women's civil society groups (particularly through the Women's Forum, a network of women's groups). These groups created spaces of debate around peace issues where women activists could express their views and advocate for peace and inclusion.<sup>6</sup> Currently only 12.5% of the parliament is made up of women, and women's rights organisations are still working towards the introduction of affirmative action policies for women's representation in decision-making.<sup>7</sup>

The post-conflict reconstruction of the state has created new opportunities to redefine women's rights in relation to their participation and influence in government, in the community, and in customary institutions that are being rebuilt or transformed. Important policy changes in the post-conflict period include the Nation Action Plan (NAP) for Resolution 1325 developed in 2010, and the '3 Gender Laws': the Devolution of Estate Act, the Domestic Violence Act, and the Registration of Customary Marriage Act. However, these have at times created local tensions with existing informal or customary institutions recognised in the constitution.

Despite numerous accounts of the prominent role played by important women's leaders and national-level women's organisations, not much is known about the role of women in local-level processes of peace and stability in Sierra Leone. Some studies recognise the important role women and women's groups have had post-conflict in the promotion of truth, reconciliation and forgiveness and the reintegration of ex-combatants, the education and care of children, the support to awareness campaigns and to ensure access to resources.<sup>8</sup>

## Community profiles: Bo District

The research took place in two communities of Bo District, located in the southern region of Sierra Leone. During a five-day period nine face-to-face interviews and nine focus group discussions were conducted. The district has a population of approximately 473,000 and is characterised by high levels of poverty (64% of the total population), inadequate sanitation facilities, limited employment opportunities, poor road network conditions, lack of schools and low attendance by girls. Agriculture is the most important economic activity, alongside forestry, small-scale businesses, fishing and mining.<sup>9</sup> Community A is a small village located in a rural setting within a short distance from the district capital (around 30 minutes by road), and has an estimated population of over 2,700, with a higher proportion of women than men. ActionAid Sierra Leone and its partners

3. Human Rights Watch (HRW). 2003. "We'll kill you if you cry": sexual violence in the Sierra Leone conflict. [pdf] New York: Human Rights Watch.

4. Richards et al. 2004. 'Social capital and survival: prospects from community driven development in post-conflict Sierra Leone'. [pdf] Social Development Paper No.12, Washington, DC: World Bank.

5. Mazurana, D., and Carlson, K. 2004. 'From combat to community: women and girls of Sierra Leone' [pdf] Washington, DC: Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, Hunt Alternatives Fund.

6. Jusu-Sheriff, J. 2000. 'Sierra Leonean women and the peace process.' In: Lord, D., ed. *Paying the price: The Sierra Leone peace process*, Accord, Issue 9, London: Conciliation Resources, pp.46-49.

7. Abdullah Hussaina, J. 2010. 'Forging ahead without affirmative action policy: female politicians in Sierra Leone's post-war electoral process', IDS Bulletin, 41(5), pp. 62-71.

8. Ogunsanya, K. 2007. 'Women transforming conflicts in Africa: descriptive studies from Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Sudan'. [pdf] Occasional Paper Series, 2(3), Durban: ACCORD.

9. For a details of Bo District see: [www.actionaid.org/sierra-leone/where-we-work/bo](http://www.actionaid.org/sierra-leone/where-we-work/bo) (accessed 19/12/13).

**“If you have a livelihood you can come together in unity... With more poverty there is more conflict and splits in the community”**

have implemented several interventions over the years related to women’s rights, human security in conflict and emergencies, justice and democratic governance and education, and income-generating activities in this area.

Community B, also a small village in Bo District, is also located within a short distance of the district capital (though the road infrastructure is very poor so it takes about an hour to reach). It has similar characteristics and faces similar problems to Community A, but the presence of NGOs has not been as prominent. Supported by Womankind, Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (WAVES) since 2011 has begun to implement an access-to-justice programme for rural women in this community.

### **Impacts of conflict at the local level**

The dramatic experiences of women from both communities during the conflict, which they bravely shared during the research, make it important to realise the serious negative impacts on local women during and after the war. Gendered roles in households meant that women often stayed at home to care for children whilst men fled the conflict area, and the women left behind were vulnerable to abduction, punishments, sexual abuse and physical violence. The main concern for women in both communities was not being able to provide food to sustain themselves and their children during the war. In response to this, the main coping strategies used by women were displacement and migration to the capital cities, where they depended on external assistance, or to the bush, where they strived to find their own means to survive.

These traumatic experiences had lasting effects on women and led to an overburdening of roles and responsibilities. The incidence of widows and single mothers was very high in the two communities visited. In addition, the communities experienced widespread destruction of houses and the looting of property, as well as the destruction of basic infrastructure. According to most women and men in the

communities, this has left long-term legacies in terms of poverty in the communities, lack of livelihood opportunities, and difficulty in getting proper food intake and maintaining children in school. As one participant confirmed:

**“After the war the instability and lack of safety has minimised a bit – but things have not returned to how they were before.”**

– Young women’s focus group, Community A

### **Understanding of peace and peacebuilding**

The women of the two communities visited overwhelmingly associated peace with economic stability in the household (being able to provide food and schooling for their children) and harmonious intra-household relations (respect for each other). They did not consider themselves to be living in ‘peace’, despite the absence of national-level conflict. This was attributed to the high incidence of poverty and violence against women (physical and emotional abuse, as well as abandonment), as evidenced in many of the personal histories related:

**“If you have a livelihood you can come together in unity. With more poverty there is more conflict and splits in the community.”**

– Young women’s focus group, Community B

Among the factors that build peace, women mentioned repeatedly the understanding and enjoyment of their rights, as this ensures they have access to land and property, promotes positive relations with husbands, and protects girls from forced marriage. Togetherness and unity in the community were viewed as necessary to solve conflicts and disputes peacefully. Several women mentioned the importance of having a space for women to discuss their issues and a town chief that speaks in their interest.

Men and leaders in the same communities also spoke of peace in terms of unity, collaboration with each other, and

**“Seeing a woman standing in front of them makes them feel more able to talk in public”**

economic self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, they considered factors contributing to peacebuilding to be more related to stable political conditions and absence of conflict at the district or national level. They also made strong links between peace and increased security in their communities, respect for rule of law, accountability and transparency in governance, access to basic infrastructure, and support from government or NGOs to build basic infrastructure such as schools, water wells, and sanitation facilities.

### **Women’s participation in peacebuilding and its impacts**

Traditional customs and laws act against the equal involvement of women in formal decision-making spaces at both national and local levels. However, women in the communities in Bo have challenged this by creating informal spaces for collective organisation. This includes women’s forums that facilitate all women’s programmes in the community and organise the selling of agricultural products; mothers’ clubs that work with teachers to promote school attendance of children, and are also involved in the cleaning and sanitation of the town; ‘mothers’ globes’ that produce and sell palm oil; ‘STAR circles’ that promote farming in swamps or wetlands; and ‘Saturday Clubs’ which provide adult literacy classes. The existence of such groups was noticed in particular in Community A,

where different projects have been implemented in the past five or six years. In contrast, the participation of women and the number of groups found in Community B is more limited, which is largely because projects have only more recently been implemented in the area.

**“Anything that happens, as women, we talk about it in our spaces, the women’s forum, STAR circle, Mothers’ club. We meet every Saturday and with contributions from the members we provide micro-credit to our members, and also invest in educating children from poor families, and address other needs.”**

– Young women’s focus group, Community A

In each community, women did not regard themselves as ‘peacebuilders’, or at least not as relevant as authoritative institutions in their community that have traditionally been engaged in conflict resolution and mediation, which mainly include town and section chiefs and religious leaders. However, after the training and sensitisation on women’s rights and access to justice, the ‘Mamy Queen’ (traditional women’s leader in the community) and Women’s Chairlady (leader of a women’s group or forum) in each community was also recognised as forming part of these official structures.

This lack of recognition as ‘peacebuilders’ contrasted with women’s acknowledgment

### **Women’s rights awareness and self-confidence**

Martha is a young woman in Community A, who is currently teaching grades 1 to 4. She is also a member of the ‘Saturday’ group, a facilitator of the ‘STAR circle’, the secretary of the woman’s forum, and the ‘chairlady’ of the nutrition group. The confidence gained through training and her position within different women’s groups in the community helped her to assume the role of teacher for young children (before her there was no teacher) and make clear positive impacts on the welfare of the community as a whole.

**“I went to school and got to Grade 5, but I was not able to take my exams because my family could not afford it. I was given away for marriage and had six children. My husband works away as a miner and so when I did not receive money from him I had to sell Fufu [local alcohol made from cassava] to make money. I suffered a lot. But through ActionAid I learned about my rights. The community decided they wanted a female teacher and nominated me. I was taken to the school as a teacher and now I am a female mentor for the children, which builds my confidence and their confidence. Seeing a woman standing in front of them makes them feel more able to talk in public.”**

### Women's rights awareness and access to justice

Gladys is the women's forum leader in Community A. Her husband (a police officer) abandoned her after their baby was born. As a divorcee she was driven out of her house with her baby and had no place to stay. After the introduction of rights awareness programmes in the community, she was able to reclaim the property that she is rightfully entitled to by law and improve her and her child's welfare. In her view, the positive impacts of the women's forum have also been felt by other women in the community, particularly through increased economic independence and control over the income they generate. The main impacts of this are again related to the welfare of children in the community.

**"Previously, we had no rights, but now we are involved in decision-making. Now women can have a share in family assets. This is peace for me"**

**"Previously, we had no rights, but now we are involved in decision-making. Now women can have a share in family assets. Now, even though I don't have a husband, I'm sitting in my father's house and know I cannot be driven out. Knowing my rights has allowed me to be in my house. My child is now in secondary school. This is peace for me."**

**"There are now more children in school. Before that, there was no way to pay school fees. Now we have accounts. Now we have peace. My swamp farming: I now have full control over my rice. It's for me and my family. Women now have more control over the produce. This is good because they pay the school fees for their children."**

of the vital role they play for the community, particularly in relation to their responsibilities for raising, educating and providing for children, which fall considerably more heavily on women than on men. Women also highlighted the positive impacts on peace emanating from their involvement in income-generating activities, such as gardening and farming, as this has created spaces for them to build positive relationships. They also recognised their role in easing the physical and psychological traumas.

**"A woman is a strong leader in the house and she is the one who finds new ways to earn a livelihood."**

– Female community teacher, Community A

The existence of spaces to discuss their issues and support each other has had significant impacts on the daily lives of women, particularly in terms of increased awareness of gender-based violence, women's rights' monitoring and the education of girls. This has led to other positive effects such as the creation of cooperative livelihoods schemes, or the promotion of women into leadership roles within the community.

Increases in confidence and awareness of their rights reduces women's dependence on men for solving disputes or dealing with

problems, as they now consult the 'chairlady' before taking their cases to the Chief. While inheritance cases were previously often decided in a way that bypassed women, programmes on 'rights awareness and access to justice' have helped women claim property and assets that they are entitled to by law.

### Support to women's participation in peacebuilding

The research indicated that the work of local NGOs and women's rights organisations is highly recognised and valued by the people in the communities. These organisations become the focal point of support for excluded and marginalised grassroots women, who struggle to get attention and support of formal state institutions. Women highlighted the real changes to their lives after they received support to access justice systems, in particular related to property rights of assets they are entitled to by law.

**"Women have greater difficulties as they face increased barriers in both local and magistrate courts due to discrimination, lack of information and lower educational levels. To engage women in peacebuilding we need to promote access to justice".**

– Sama Sandy, COME-SL, Bo District

Another example is a case supported by Womankind's partner WAVES during their work in Community B. A man in the village with two wives died. After his death, his brother took over the estate but the women challenged him and took the case to the chief:

**“They decided the case in favour of the women but the brother did not accept it. The women referred the case [to WAVES], they came and ruled also in favour of the women. The brother has now agreed to give back the house, but still hasn't given over the other assets**

**back to the wives, such as the mobile phone, personal items and the loan book (the husband had been a lender and many owed him money). We are calling WAVES back to deal with this case.”**

– Older women's focus group, Community B

The research in Bo District revealed a wide network of organisations working on peacebuilding and women's issues at the district and national level. This includes state organisations such as the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children Affairs (MSWGCA) and the Family Support Unit (FSU) and several civil society

## **Supporting women in Sierra Leone**

### **Community Organization for Mobilization Empowerment–Sierra Leone (COME-SL)**

COME-SL is a civil society organisation working to end violence against women and support women's property rights in Bo District. Their DFID-funded work in partnership with ActionAid promotes poor and excluded women's access to formal and informal justice systems. They also conduct research on negative traditional laws and advocate on national policies related to women's rights. In Community A activities have involved: the provision of a legal retainer for women survivors of violence; community-based legal aid clinics; sensitisation using social drama; training of women and traditional authorities on key women's human rights instruments; economic empowerment initiatives for women; and research on customary laws and their effects on women's access to justice. Their impact in the community was evident when speaking with different members, who considered COME-SL and ActionAid as the main – and sometimes only – institutions promoting peaceful relations in the community.

### **Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (WAVES)**

WAVES is a grassroots women's rights organisation based in Bo District, working in rural, marginalised communities supporting women and girl survivors of violence. Supported by Womankind, they promote access to justice for women in three Chiefdoms, reaching ten communities in each, including Community B. They have implemented activities related to education and awareness-raising on women's rights, training on gender laws, support (counselling, accompaniment to report) to women and girl survivors of violence, and advocacy for women's rights issues such as forced marriage, women's land rights and domestic violence. They also work with men and male leaders in each community, so that they listen to women's issues and themselves become 'ambassadors' of their cause. Future planned work include livelihoods support activities as WAVES has realised that economic hardship is a key obstacle for women's participation within communities.

### **Graceland Sierra Leone (GSL)**

GSL has been providing counselling, psychological support and life skills training for women and girl survivors of violence and conflict, to promote their successful re-integration in communities. After the war ended, they focused on physical care services and support for sexual and gender-based violence survivors. Through their activities during the years they have directly reached more than 4,000 young women and girls in different parts of Sierra Leone. In partnership with Womankind, they recently started implementing a project aimed at increasing protection, empowerment and support to women survivors of violence.

organisations.<sup>10</sup> Their activities include awareness raising, legal education, economic empowerment, monitoring of court processes, promoting inclusion of women in security affairs and investigation of cases of violence against women. In addition, they have periodic meetings to share and discuss each other's work and promote collaboration.

### **Barriers to women and women's rights organisations building peace**

Despite women's actions, they still face numerous barriers to achieving peace. First, gendered norms and roles continue to limit women's participation in decision-making. During the research men spoke about the importance of women's rights. However, when male participants were asked about groups or institutions that contribute to peace they rarely mentioned women or women's groups, or would assign them a less significant role. Younger men however did attribute more importance to women's involvement, as they themselves described having problems with traditional figures of authority. For women, particularly young women, the power within communities still rests firmly with men.

Second economic hardship, for both women and men, hinders women's involvement and threatens peace at family and community level. Women are often denied control of assets or the income they produce, which increases women's dependency on men to sustain their children and pay school fees. The personal histories narrated by the women in the communities included several cases of husbands abandoning their wives and neglecting children, or the precarious situation of widows and wives of disabled husbands. Women emphasised that they need to know that they can be involved in leadership and at the same time know that their family is going to be secure and provided for.

**"If [women] have means to make money, they can use the profits to solve problems in their community. For example, if a sister [meaning one of the women] gets sick, they can take her to the hospital."**

– Older women's focus group, Community A

Third, even though women and men recognise that sexual assaults and rapes have decreased since the end of the conflict and its direct aftermath, violence against women has not been eradicated. Men continue to beat their wives, subject them to emotional abuse and neglect their responsibilities with respect to their children, according to the personal histories provided. Too often, community members mentioned availability of food as a 'prerequisite' for peace within households. Men seem to advocate for women's economic empowerment, as long as this creates an observable positive economic change in the home. This, however, underplays the overloaded share of work that women have taking care of children, their houses and income-generating activities.

**"When there is high poverty at home, there is no respect for women or children"**

– Older men's focus group, Community B

Fourth, access to justice remains a significant challenge. Even though women now understand that domestic violence cases can be taken to the formal justice system, they often prefer to resolve conflicts within the community. Women face discrimination and high financial demands when they try to reach police and local courts, and if they don't have the resources it is very difficult to access other institutions. Therefore, the promotion of women's participation both in formal and informal systems within communities is very important. This has been recognised and implemented by local organisations such as

**"Women emphasised that they need to know that they can be involved in leadership and at the same time know that their family is going to be secure and provided for"**

10. Local organisations working in Bo District include: Bo District Civil Society Justice Network, Network Movement for Justice and Development, HELP Sierra Leone, and the Human Rights Commission.

COME-SL and WAVES, who conduct training and workshops with traditional leaders as well as provide support and monitor cases brought to the police and justice courts.

Finally, low self-esteem, coupled with intimidation by men, limits women's involvement in peacebuilding. Illiteracy and a lack of education are often cited as the main reasons for their low confidence. As a result of this, women do not stand for leadership positions at the local level, and during elections they reported often voting for men. This was evident in Community B, where women still do not speak out about their own concerns.

**"[A main obstacle is] lack of education and a low literacy rate among women. They might have competencies but lack the confidence to come forward."**

– Key informant, Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs

Local NGOs, including women's rights organisations, also face several challenges, particularly in terms of lack of capacity and resources. According to representatives of local organisations, the limited access to funding is in part due to increased direct budgetary support to central and local government. Funding is never enough, for instance, to combine training and awareness activities with livelihood support initiatives. Inadequate infrastructure in the country also hinders their work, particularly when it comes to reaching remote communities which are very difficult to access and often remain outside projects' target populations.

### **Local to national links**

The women in Bo District did not see any link between their own peacebuilding activities at the community level and national-level activities. Furthermore, they saw big differences between themselves and urban women, particularly in terms of education, causing the rural women to feel inadequate and unable to contribute.

They did however mention the links that they were building with neighbouring communities. For instance, as the hospital in Community A is used by members of nearby communities, the women take the opportunity to transfer their knowledge of women's rights, access to justice for cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and teenage pregnancy, to other women; as a result they considered their work to have regional effects.

Despite national-level organisations and networks increasingly collaborating with each other in advocacy work, there is often a disconnection with the concerns of women at the grassroots; this was noted by women activists and leaders of national organisations interviewed during the research. Even if changes in practices and legislation are achieved at the national level, their effectiveness depends on implementation at the local level - an important factor which is often forgotten.

The absence of clear links between local and national activities might be also related to the lack of recognition of the role of women, which can in turn be associated with patriarchal attitudes that limit their involvement in decision-making. There was a sense among some respondents that women that have achieved leadership positions do not adequately represent women's issues, because they have to fulfil certain other obligations imposed as political party members first. Finally, there is evidence that introducing a mechanism at the national level does not mean it is implemented at the local level.

**"People talk about the 30% quota as if it were happening but is not. We need to think first about issues like girl[s] leaving school early due to forced marriage or teenage pregnancy."**

– Bondu Manyeh, Graceland Sierra Leone (GSL) National Coordinator

**"People talk about the 30% quota as if it were happening but is not"**

## Conclusion

**“Local NGOs, including women’s rights organisations, provide vital support to excluded and marginalised grassroots women”**

This research has demonstrated that despite the absence of national-level conflict, many women in Sierra Leone do not consider themselves to be living in ‘peace’, as a result of the continued high incidence of poverty and violence against women. Since the end of the conflict, women have been to a large extent excluded from formal decision-making spaces at both national and local levels. However, women in the communities have challenged this by creating informal spaces for collective organisation and peacebuilding.

The existence of spaces to discuss their issues and support each other has had significant impacts on the daily lives of women, particularly in terms of increased awareness of gender-based violence, women’s rights monitoring and the education of girls. However, despite women’s actions, gendered norms and roles, economic hardship, violence against women, access to justice and women’s low self-esteem remain significant barriers to women’s involvement in formal peacebuilding and decision-making.

There is often a disconnection between the peacebuilding actions of women at the grassroots level and the formal processes

and institutions located at the national level; the women participating in this research did not identify any link between their own peacebuilding activities at the community level and national-level activities. The absence of clear links between local and national activities can be attributed to a lack of recognition within formal institutions of the role of women in peacebuilding, as well as persistent patriarchal attitudes that limit their involvement in decision-making at all levels. In this context, local NGOs, including women’s rights organisations, provide vital support to excluded and marginalised grassroots women, who struggle to get attention and support of formal state institutions.

Given these findings, a gender-responsive approach to peacebuilding in Sierra Leone should recognise the importance of gender equality for sustainable peace and the important roles that women undertake within their communities as peacebuilders. Finally, an enabling environment should be promoted, in which women are supported to bring their skills, experiences and priorities to the regional, national and international levels.

## Recommendations

---

<b>Develop and implement concrete, coherent policy commitments</b>	<p>Just and sustainable peace, which includes meaningful participation of women and inclusion of women's rights, begins with coherent policy. All development, defence and diplomatic policy should have clear, strategic commitment to women's rights and gender equality including measures to promote women's participation. Women's rights and gender equality should be recognised in all peace processes, agreements and transitional governance structures, and national and local policy should incorporate views and lessons from women building peace at local level.</p> <p><i>To achieve this, more consolidated support from the UN and other development partners is needed to strengthen national machineries and to facilitate the timely implementation of Sierra Leone's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 and UNSCR 1820. An increased focus on protection is essential, which should ensure that justice is fairly dispensed in favour of survivors.</i></p>
<b>Ensure women's participation in peace processes</b>	<p>To ensure a durable and just peace, national and international peace processes must include women as decision-makers, and reflect the priorities and views of women building peace at local levels including the views of women from ethnic minority groups, widows, ex-combatants, survivors of sexual violence, displaced women, women with HIV/AIDS and disabled women. Further, all communiqués, declarations and agreements resulting from national or international peace processes should have dedicated commitments to women's rights and gender equality.</p> <p><i>As a starting point to achieve this, the Government of Sierra Leone must enact the proposed Gender Equality Bill which would mandate political parties and the Government to nominate and appoint a minimum 30% of women in politics and public decision-making spaces.</i></p>
<b>Provide long term support and funding to women's peacebuilding</b>	<p>Women's rights organisations are at the forefront of innovative peacebuilding work at a local level. For them to reach their potential, this work needs to be adequately and sustainably funded. Furthermore, all funding to peacebuilding initiatives should demand demonstrable women's rights outcomes, including support for women's economic empowerment which enables their participation in peacebuilding processes.</p> <p><i>In line with the United Nations target, a minimum of 15% of all funds in support of peacebuilding should be dedicated to activities whose principal objective is to address women's specific needs, advance gender equality or empower women.</i></p>
<b>Tackle violence against women and girls</b>	<p>Violence against women and girls is a pervasive element of conflict, and continues long after the laying down of arms. It is both a gross violation of women's human rights, a key barrier to their participation in peacebuilding and public life, and to building sustainable peace. Women need law enforcement and formal judicial mechanisms to be accessible and fair. In addition, no peace process, whether at the national or the community level, should result in impunity for serious violations of human rights such as violence against women.</p> <p><i>All peacebuilding policy, funding or activity should contain a gendered risk analysis, and include targeted action and ring-fenced finance, to tackle violence against women and girls as a key barrier to peace.</i></p>
<b>Build an enabling environment for women's peacebuilding</b>	<p>In order for women's efforts in local peacebuilding to be effective, national policies and infrastructure must ensure women's rights and participation. Gender discrimination must be eliminated and women's rights promoted and protected in all public infrastructure and institutions including those in the legal and justice, healthcare, transport and education systems. Collaboration between women's rights organisations and women in political parties, parliament and government should be promoted. Gender discrimination must be addressed at each stage of the political process including in citizenship, electoral registration and election processes. Targeted voter registration drives and political education campaigns should be targeted at women, particularly those in remote communities.</p> <p><i>In order to achieve this, the government must fully implement the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, and must also ratify the Optional Protocol to CEDAW and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).</i></p> <p><i>The government and its development partners must ensure that the three "Gender Bills" enacted in 2007 (The Domestic Violence Act; the Registration of Customary Marriages and Divorces Act; and the Devolution of Estates Act) and the Sexual Offences Act (2012) are fully resourced and implemented. In addition, the Government must provide appropriate opportunities for women to participate in consultations during the upcoming Constitutional Review process and ensure that their input is included in the draft Constitution.</i></p>

---



Above: Mothers' group meeting, Sierra Leone

Des Willie/ActionAid

**act:onaid**

**ActionAid**

International Secretariat  
4th Floor, West Wing,  
158 Jan Smuts Avenue Building  
Rosebank  
Johannesburg  
South Africa  
Tel: +44 (0)20 3122 0561  
Email: [emergencies@actionaid.org](mailto:emergencies@actionaid.org)  
[www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)  
Registration number: 27264198

**IDS** Institute of  
Development Studies

**Institute of Development Studies**

Institute of Development Studies  
University of Sussex  
Brighton  
BN1 9RE,  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0) 1273 915637  
Email: [ids@ids.ac.uk](mailto:ids@ids.ac.uk)  
[www.ids.ac.uk](http://www.ids.ac.uk)  
Charity number: 306371  
Company number: 877338

**WOMANKIND**  
WORLDWIDE EQUAL RESPECTED PROUD

**Womankind Worldwide**

Development House  
56-64 Leonard Street  
London  
EC2A 4LT  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7549 0360  
Email: [info@womankind.org.uk](mailto:info@womankind.org.uk)  
[www.womankind.org.uk](http://www.womankind.org.uk)  
Charity Number: 328206  
Company Number: 2404121

Most of the research contained within this publication was carried out in 2012. Additional desk research took place in November 2013. Published January 2014.