

# Gender-Based Violence and Biblical Equality: Case Studies in Sierra Leone

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**W**E STOOD IN THE MIDST OF 1,200 INTERNALLY displaced people living in a makeshift camp of Sierra Leone, all trying desperately to tell their stories. The majority of the people were amputees. This is a sanitized word to describe people of all ages, both male and female, who were brutally chopped with machetes by rebel soldiers. I was in Sierra Leone on an assessment trip with World Hope International and connected with a *Washington Post* reporter. We traveled together to various parts of the country—he was researching stories while I was doing assessments. We both had heard of the brutalities and both had great compassion for the victims, but the stories became reality as I touched, smelled, listened, and cried with the women, children, and men.

In the midst of the chaos a very slight woman made her way to the front of the crowd. Suddenly the noise ceased as she began talking. “I was out planting my groundnuts,” she stated rather calmly. “The rebels came and grabbed my 5-year-old daughter. I grabbed her back. Then they took my daughter and put her arm on the root of the cotton tree and with a machete they chopped it off. Then they took me and laid my arm on the root of the cotton tree and they chopped it off. We were bleeding,” she said with a bit more emotion. “I had a baby, and I put her on my back; and we went to look for my husband for some rags to stop the bleeding,” she frankly stated. “He bound up our arms and the bleeding stopped.” There she and her 5-year-old daughter stood with no arms below their left elbows.

I was stunned and so was the reporter. He began to ask her more questions, and she willingly cooperated. As we walked back to the car he said, “What are you going to do about this?” I frankly could not see that World Hope International could do anything. This was far beyond what our agency could begin to tackle. The reporter went back to the States, and the story with the picture of Mrs. Kamara and her daughter was on the front page of *The Washington Post*. The following day *The International Herald Tribune* ran the story and picture. People began writing to the

reporter, and he sent the responses on to us at World Hope International. A family from London offered to give prosthetics to Mrs. Kamara and her daughter. The reporter sent this information on to us, and soon we found ourselves involved in rehabilitation—emotionally, spiritually, physically, and financially with the amputees of Sierra Leone.

As our staff listened to more stories, reports of rape accompanied many of the accounts. However, for women to tell their stories of rape brought much more shame than talking about amputations.

Historically, gender-based violence appears from the earliest accounts of war.<sup>1</sup> Susan Brownmiller has observed that the opportunity to rape was even a motivating factor for

enlisting soldiers: “In medieval times, opportunities to rape and loot were among the few advantages open to soldiers who were paid irregularly by their leaders. Triumph over women by rape became a way to measure victory, part of a soldier’s proof of masculinity and success, and a tangible reward for services rendered.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1623-24, Hugo Grotius wrote *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* where his discussion of just war

included the defense of sovereignty and the recovery of property. However, within his arguments he noted that the rights of noncombatants should be protected and that rape “should not go unpunished anymore in a war than in peace.”<sup>3</sup>

Eighteenth-century enlightenment thinkers continued the discussion regarding non-combatants and the rules of war. Rousseau noted that “war confers no right that is not necessary to its end.”<sup>4</sup> This idea is reflected in the modern humanitarian law principles supporting limits on the means and methods of warfare. However during the enlightenment, rape was viewed only as impermissible conduct, not as a strategy to win a war.

When rape of women was viewed as a crime, in wartime or peacetime, it was most commonly seen as a crime against the man: the husband, father and/or other male relatives, and against family honor. By the close of the nineteenth century, rape was viewed as a theft of chastity



**World Hope International works with amputees in Sierra Leone. According to Lyon, “Amputee is a sanitized word to describe people of all ages, both male and female, who were brutally chopped with machetes by rebel soldiers.”**

ARTWORK BY RINI TEMPLETON

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and virtue, “but even then the crime was against the man or family who was entitled to the woman’s chastity and virtue, not against the woman herself as an independent individual. The idea that human rights were women’s rights, and vice versa, had yet to take shape.”<sup>5</sup>

Systematic rape during World War I became the first effort to document violence against women in armed conflict. The War Crimes Commission was established in 1919 to examine offenses against innocent civilians, both men and women. However as the rules were established, the behavior on the battlefield did not change.

Gender violence was rampant during World War II. Rape, forced prostitution, forced sterilization, forced abortion, sexual mutilation and other forms of sexual violence were rampant. Julie Mertus notes:

Nazi collaborators forcibly sterilized Jewish women as part of their attempt to exterminate the entire Jewish population and as a component of medical experimentation. Japan enslaved between 100,000 and 200,000 Korean Filipino women as prostitutes for their warring armies. The women were known as the “comfort women.” Japanese soldiers raped Chinese women in Nanking en masse; Moroccan soldiers raped Italian women before killing them; Nazi forces raped Jewish, Polish, Russian, and other women in countries they invaded and occupied; and Russian soldiers systematically raped German women. These and other forces committed sexual atrocities against women and girls in conflict areas.<sup>6</sup>

Following World War II, military tribunals were established, which included prosecution for gender-based violence. These laws were in effect in the prosecution of rape before the international criminal tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, some fifty years later. Humanitarian and refugee law, and human rights law are the two interrelated legal regimes in which the problems of women in conflict are addressed.

In 1993, the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. While this declaration is not

legally binding, it recognizes violence against women as a human rights issue. This document spells out gender-based violence as something that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, which also includes threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty both in public and private life. Examples of gender-based violence include:

- Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring in the family; including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, and other traditional practices harmful to women, and nonspousal violence related to exploitation.
- Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, and trafficking in women and forced prostitution.
- Physical, sexual, and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Kamara is an illiterate village woman. She has never heard of the United Nations and all these laws. The young boys who did the amputations are also illiterate. They have no idea there are any rules in war. All they know is they were conscripted into an army of rebel forces known as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and told what to do. They too were bitterly punished if they did not obey their leaders. On that fateful day, Mrs. Kamara and her daughter were at the mercy of young boys with guns and machetes who were usually high on cocaine. She and her daughter were innocent victims of a rebel army claiming their territory and marking it by the people they amputated.

The life of a village woman is very difficult. She is responsible for raising food by farming as well as preparing food. This means her day starts at sunrise and does not end until well after sunset. She will eat last, after her husband and children have been fed. This also means that many times she does not eat at all because there may be no food left over for her. Her children will assist in getting the water and her older female children will care for the younger children.

The lack of a left arm changed some of the cultural patterns of life for Mrs. Kamara and her daughter as well. Her 5-year-old daughter was her helper in getting water, assisting in the planting of peanuts, cultivation of the peanuts and ultimately playing a role in the harvesting. Mr. Kamara now found himself doing things that he had never done before—things that were culturally unacceptable for him to do. His wife could no longer cut or peel the cassava root, or cut off the greens from the tops to prepare the favored cas-

sava leaf dish. She could not pound the rice to get the grain for cooking. In fact, it was nearly impossible for her to prepare food for her family. Increasingly, it became more difficult to care for her small baby. Just getting the baby on her back was impossible without help. But life had to go on. Not only did they need to survive, but the rebels returned to their village several times. This then meant running to the bush to hide from the rebels for days at a time. Many men soon found themselves assisting in preparing food, taking care of babies and children, and doing farm work, which traditionally they had never done. Somehow, survival trumped tradition and pride.

Mrs. Kamara and her daughter were the first to receive limbs from our “Limbs of Hope” program. The day of her fitting her eyes were bright with hope. In a short time, her work with the physical therapist resulted in being able to peel vegetables and prepare an entire dinner for her family. She faithfully continued physical therapy as well as trauma and pastoral counseling.

I visited the World Hope Center in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa, several months after hundreds of amputees were fitted for limbs, received physical therapy, psychosocial therapy, and pastoral care. To my delight the receptionist was Mrs. Kamara. Yes, a paid employee. She greeted all visitors and gave them tours of the center. Her English was limited, but her smile and sense of dignity needed no translation.

I heard so many anecdotal stories regarding the life-changing effects from the ministry of “Limbs of Hope” that we decided to collect hard data to develop a report. It was a chance to try to measure the effects of the “cup of cold water” given in Jesus’ name. Paul’s words that we “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12: 21) can sound so trite in times of immense struggle: does it really work in the midst of chaos, evil, and twenty-first century wars?

At the end of the first year we began to formally assess our program. Our evaluator came to me and said, “I almost have the report finished, but I think you are not going to be ready for the results.”

My first response was, “Oh no, what have we done wrong?”

He smiled and then countered, “I myself was not prepared for the themes of forgiveness that run through this evaluation.” World Hope International did not emphasize forgiveness in our “Limbs of Hope” program. Our goal was simply to assist the amputees in gaining back their dignity and beginning to have control over their own lives.

Our research involved a mixed method design consisting both of qualitative and quantitative assessments. Care was taken to ensure data were collected from multiple sources and processes to provide a level of triangulation necessary to ensure quality accurate information. Five specific methods made up this design: focus groups, individual interviews, content analysis of existing “Limbs of Hope”

documentation, psychosocial surveys, and occupational/physical assessments.

This resulted in the central thesis:

Empathetic genuine caring and concern, backed up by action, has provided a level of encouragement to the amputee that is beginning to spur a transformational thought process, rooted in spirituality, that has begun to foster an attitude of: acceptance of what has happened and improved self-worth; decreased anger and hostility; detraumatization and sense of hope and an initial willingness to forgive those responsible. This thought process has been acted on through isolated examples of self-change and personal accountability demonstrating progress toward total recovery. This transformation, however, is grounded in the realization of misery and dependency brought by the environment in which they live creating a level of competing tensions between desire for positive growth and a victim/beggar mentality.<sup>8</sup>

Many comments regarding forgiveness were noted in the report, and it is important to recognize the transformational thought processes. But despite the desire to attach conditions toward reconciliation, there was also a very pragmatic side to the issue that was a surprise. *The amputees (both men and women) saw themselves as the essential players toward restoration of peace in the country.* This statement in the report is a culmination of thoughts by many amputees but summed up by one: “Let them come out of the bush I will receive them, and we will eat together. . . . If we don’t forgive, they will never leave the bush, and the atrocities will continue. . . . Who will help me then?”

One day one of our amputees reported that he was walking down the streets of Freetown and came face-to-face with the man who had cut off his arm. He stated that he grew fearful inside, and then he felt God just come over him with strength. He said, “I walked up straight to that man (my perpetrator), put out my prosthetic arm to shake

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his hand and said, ‘Before World Hope and Jesus gave me this limb I would have sought vengeance, but today I can forgive you.’” To his surprise tears welled up in the rebel soldier’s eyes, and began to fall down on his war-weary, weather-beaten cheeks. The rebel soldier held onto the prosthetic hand of the amputee and with faltering speech said, “I never thought I could know forgiveness.”

War crimes tribunals are currently being held in Sierra Leone. In conjunction, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission—based on the model in South Africa—is currently in progress throughout the country. Here victims and perpetrators alike come to tell their stories. One of the “scribes” for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recently said, “I am personally writing so these atrocities will never again happen in our country.”

There is no future without forgiveness, but at the same time perpetrators of crimes must face consequences. Likewise, victims—particularly women—must know their rights and their value both in the courts and in the eyes of a loving God.

I regret that we as God’s people have not led the way in seeking justice for women, particularly in areas of gender-based violence. The secular world has spoken more loudly regarding these issues than the people of God. Jesus modeled the leadership of justice for women in the midst of a culture that valued gender violence. May we have the courage to speak from a biblical perspective on justice with the power of the Holy Spirit and end these dastardly crimes against women.

Mrs. Kamara and her family have now returned to the village from which they fled. They received a house and a plot of land. But life will not be as they knew it before. Mrs. Kamara is now semi-literate. She has received a micro-credit loan to do business. She now has more control of her life, even without her natural left arm below her elbow.

Mrs. Kamara’s persistence and courage in the midst of

violence has challenged me to speak up for justice and women who face all forms of gender-based violence. 



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### Notes

1. Julie A. Mertus, *War’s Offensive on Women* (Bloomfield, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2000), p. 72.
2. Susan Brownmiller, *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), p. 33.
3. Hugo Grotius, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis Libri Tres 2*, trans. Francis W. Kiesel (New York: Oceana Press, 1995), 656-57.
4. Kelly Dawn Askin, *War Crimes Against Women: Prosecution in War Crimes Tribunals* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1997), 28.
5. Julie A. Mertus *War’s Offensive on Women*, p. 73.
6. Julie A. Mertus *War’s Offensive on Women*, p. 75.
7. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, UN ESCOR, Commission on the Status of Women, Annex I, UN Doc. E/CN.6/WG.2/1992/L.3 (1992) adopted July 27, 1993, UN ESCOR, UN Doc. A/C 3/48/L.5 (1993).
8. *Limbs of Hope Program Evaluation*, World Hope International Amputee Care Center, Sierra Leone, West Africa. October 2000.

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