

Foreword



Shirley Gbujama, Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs at May National Consultation, Freetown

Shirley Gbujama

Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, Sierra Leone

I was delighted and privileged to host the very important National Consultation on 'Women and Men in Partnership for Post-Conflict Reconstruction'. The consultation exemplified the partnership between the Gender and Youth Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Gender Division of my Ministry. It also had the support of the United Nations Development Programme and was facilitated in various ways by other friends and partners like the British Council, UNICEF and others.

During 1999, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs developed the National Policy on Gender Mainstreaming that provides a framework for systematic integration of gender as a fundamental component for all policy and programme development processes within government, the private sector and civil society. In addition the Ministry developed the National Policy on the Advancement of Women in Sierra Leone, which highlights the particularly disadvantaged position of women and proposes how this is to be addressed. Both documents were adopted by Cabinet in August 2000. These two documents seek to meet Sierra Leone's national development objectives from a gender perspective.

Having successfully conducted sensitisation workshops to popularise the two policies and advocate for their acceptance nationwide, the next logical step for the Ministry as the National Gender Machinery was to develop our staff capacity to undertake a comprehensive national implementation programme that would indicate who will be doing what in national development activities, that truly reflects effective partnership. This consultation has been the vehicle for putting together such a programme.

The major objectives of the consultation were:

- ◆ To learn from the experiences of post-conflict reconstruction in other Commonwealth African countries in the aftermath of their own conflicts.
- ◆ To develop a National Plan of Action for follow-up, based on concrete initiatives to ensure that women and men participate and benefit equally in all post-conflict reconstruction activities including the political, legal, economic and social.

The timing of the consultation was most appropriate. It came at a very important stage of our long road to peace. Only a few days before the consultation we learnt with some relief that disarmament was eagerly progressing, and we hope that this time the guns are really going to be silent. This means that peace is not just in sight but finally at hand and that the way has been paved for post-conflict reconstruction. In addition, the indications from our various sensitisation workshops have been that most participants now accept the fact that gender is about women and men working together for development; and sharing the benefits of such development. We expect that follow-up activities to this consultation will give everyone the opportunity to share this experience.

Focusing on post-conflict reconstruction from a gender perspective entails examining post-conflict reconstruction against differing gender roles and impacts and deriving best practices for fostering gender-balanced sustainable development, on platforms that mobilise both men and women to play their parts. The full participation of both sexes is important to sustainable peace and to the efficient use of all human resources for rebuilding a war-torn society. Despite the tragedy, trauma and destructiveness of conflict, out of the waste and debris and broken lives can emerge a positive opportunity to reconstruct a more functional, flexible and inclusive society with enhanced political, economic and social roles, values and structures changed for the better by bitter experience.

In post-conflict reconstruction women and men face daunting challenges within the parameters of available resources and opportunities to meet their basic needs and concerns. Women's coping mechanisms during and after conflicts have been found to be resourceful and innovative—with necessity, not tradition, being the mother of invention. Their contribution is both different and complementary to the efforts of men. Thus reconstruction can change and influence the value of gender roles and the positioning of the sexes in society.

One can say that Women in Sierra Leone have not been passive sufferers but have been strong cornerstone forces that have anchored society. In groups and individually, formally and informally, they have contributed more than government or international agencies to reconciliation, reviving local economies and rebuilding social networks.

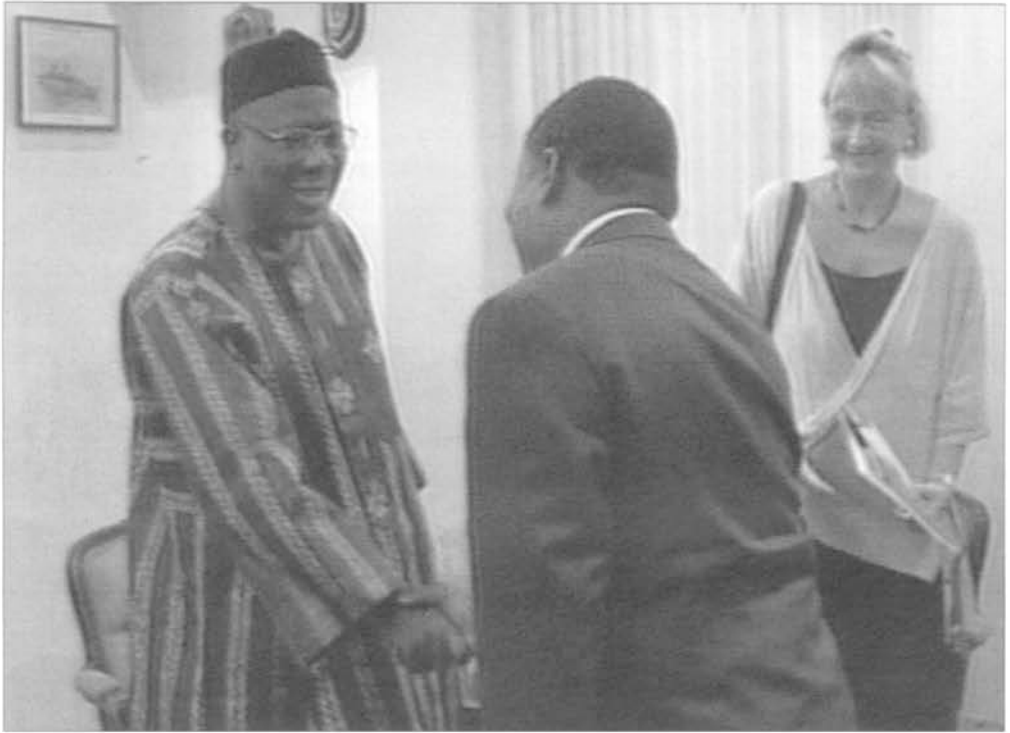
They have been forced by necessity to carry out previously male-dominated activities, and in the process have acquired skills and experiences that can be applied in post-conflict society. Skills training must provide women with the tools necessary to play their part in reconstruction; women on their part can use their positioning for new opportunities to challenge gender stereotyping of appropriate work for women which often turn out to be unrewarding and low status with little chance of advancement.

Bringing women into a largely male-dominated post-conflict reconstruction process means maximising Sierra Leone's use of its human resources in pursuing reconciliation, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development. The framework for a successful post-conflict reconstruction is one that can bring combatant sides and other stakeholders together, build common ground and gradually heal the massive breaches and wounds in the society. Only then is it possible to form a new future in equality and justice. Gender roles and equality in the way forward is a crosscutting issue in all sectors of development and in policies and institutions of good governance.

This period offers government, civil society and the private sector a chance to institutionalise a gender-responsive policy that can actively tap the contribution of both women and men. Such a policy would lead to the mainstreaming of gender-based analysis and planning that cannot avoid special programmes to enhance women's involvement. This implies institutionalisation of a larger role for women in various sectors of reconstruction and development.

Gender roles are not immutable and must never be confused with biological roles. In a post-conflict situation such as ours, divisions of labour need to be functional and flexible—not rigid and ritualistic, but realistic.

For women and men in Sierra Leone today, partnership for post-conflict reconstruction should be our watchword. True partnership strengthens; it facilitates planning and consensus building around shared goals.



President Kabbah, Professor Ade Adefuye and Nancy Spence, May 2001
