

Introduction

Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen and Linda Etchart

Gender and Youth Affairs Division (GYAD)

Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 54 independent sovereign states bound by common historical experiences, common values and principles. These were first formulated in Singapore in 1971, reaffirmed in Harare in 1991 and strengthened in Millbrook in 1995. They include among others:

- ◆ Democracy and democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and just and honest government;
- ◆ Commitment to sustainable economic and social development for all people;
- ◆ Reduction of poverty and redressing the imbalance between rich and poor nations; and
- ◆ Equality between women and men, and the empowerment of young people.

The above principles are more likely to be realised in an enabling environment in which peace and stability thrive. The Commonwealth has thus been involved in preventing and resolving conflicts. In addition to contributing to the resolution of conflicts, the Commonwealth undertakes reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction so that the issues that gave rise to the conflict do not recur.

The Commonwealth has been involved in efforts to restore peace in Sierra Leone since the early 1990s. This has included helping to negotiate the holding of elections in February 1996, condemning the overthrow of democratically elected governments and involvement in all the efforts at reaching agreement to end hostilities. The Commonwealth endorsed the efforts of the Economic Community of West Africa Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to restore the democratically elected government. In the aftermath of a rebel attack on Freetown that began in December 1998 and which was driven back by ECOMOG troops, the Commonwealth took an active part in the discussions that led to the Lomé Agreement signed in July 1999 between the government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The Commonwealth is a Moral Guarantor of the Agreement.

Subsequently, Commonwealth member countries convinced the UN Security Council to establish the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to keep the peace. In addition the British government committed troops to assist the peace effort. When it became clear that stronger measures were needed to tackle the RUF, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) held a meeting on 2 May 2000 to review the Lomé Agreement as well as Commonwealth assistance to the reconstruction efforts. It was decided that more robust peacekeeping efforts were required. A meeting of ECOWAS held in Abuja on 28-29 May 2000 pledged additional ECOWAS troops to UNAMSIL. Commonwealth countries were instrumental in changing UNAMSIL's mandate from peacekeeping to peace enforcement on 4 August 2000. CMAG was later involved in galvanising international action against some West African leaders suspected of having supported the activities of the Sierra Leone rebels.

Currently, Commonwealth member governments and the Secretariat are assisting in the post-conflict reconstruction effort in various ways, including retraining the Sierra Leone police under the Commonwealth Police Development Task Force in cooperation with the British Government Department for International Development (DFID). Other areas of support include technical expertise to the National Electoral Commission, a low-cost building materials project, and debt management advice and other assistance to the Ministry of Finance. An interdivisional taskforce has been established in the Commonwealth Secretariat to contribute to post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Sierra Leone.

This national consultation on 'Women and Men in Partnership for Post-conflict Reconstruction' has thus been part of the Commonwealth's ongoing support to rebuilding peace and democracy in Sierra Leone.

Importantly, this consultation also forms part of Commonwealth and international mandates to address the impacts of armed conflict on women, men and young people. As Sierra Leone's experience testifies, war is no longer fought mainly across international borders between professional soldiers in battlefields. Most of today's conflicts in the Commonwealth and globally are fought within countries, between different ethnic and social groups, and with civilians being the main combatants and targets. Armed conflict has moved into the village, the community, the street, and the home, resulting in a gendered distribution of suffering among women and girls, and men and boys. Deaths due to political violence tend to be overwhelmingly among men. Yet, civilians are the main victims of war, with women and children targeted for special forms of attack. Women and children are also increasingly participants in war, particularly as child soldiers who are both boys and girls.

The papers contained in this report focus attention on the fact that a decade of armed conflict and political unrest in Sierra Leone has affected women and girls, men and boys in different ways. The devastating human cost, in terms of suffering and death, loss of livelihoods, rape, torture and mutilation, the use of child soldiers, the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and refugees and displaced persons, has been borne in different ways by women, men and children. In the same vein, the destruction of basic infrastructure such as housing, water and sanitation, health services, schools and agriculture, has affected women and girls, men and boys differently.

In Sierra Leone the conflict has damaged the entire social, economic, legal and political fabric of the country. The post-conflict recovery programme has to be very broad of necessity, since the conflict has undermined the boundaries between the sectors.

The papers, recommendations and national plan of action in this consultation report identify the following gender equality objectives as essential for the reconstruction of the economy and development of society:

- ◆ Increasing access to education and skills training for women;
- ◆ Raising gender awareness and gender sensitivity among men;
- ◆ The creation of new social values through public awareness and education that will improve the status of women;
- ◆ Effective education, counselling and information campaigns to enable women to have control over their own lives and bodies and to enable them to assist in the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS and STIs;
- ◆ Zero tolerance of violence against women and children and support for programmes in this area, including changes in the law;
- ◆ Training and sensitisation of the police in the area of sexual violence;
- ◆ Regulatory frameworks and social security to protect women who are especially vulnerable to war;
- ◆ Young people—women and men—must be consulted and engaged in the development of their communities, for whom they are a key resource.

The consultation demonstrates the importance of women, men and young people engaging in dialogue together. Changing the beliefs and practices which prevent women's equal entry and participation into political, peace and development processes at all levels can only come about through women and men creating alliances.

The recommendations and priority areas for action, which we can use in our various institutions and capacities, make an important contribution to the achievement of gender equality in every aspect of the post-conflict reconstruction process in Sierra Leone.

The papers in this volume and the views expressed in the working group reports represent a spectrum of opinion from government and opposition, women, men, and young people. They demonstrate a unity of purpose and a determination to succeed in the most challenging of tasks, the creation of a new society and sense of identification and support for a unified and democratic state.

Women, men, and young people expressed a frustration at past failures: the failure of the colonial administration, inadequacy and corruption of post-independence governments, ineffectiveness of the legislature and judicial systems. Harsh criticisms are made, with sincerity and passion. It is clear that the war represented a disjuncture between widely held social values and the political, economic and social structures that should uphold them, and there is a desire to create systems that are more equitable and accountable than in the past.

While there is an emphasis on partnership and community, there is at the same time a questioning of some traditional practices that are harmful to women, and an endorsement of international human rights conventions designed to protect women and young people and enhance their status in society. Women are encouraged to continue to come forward, to gain confidence and speak out, to contribute to promoting women's, and therefore the whole society's, wellbeing.

Building lasting peace in Sierra Leone requires the full participation of all citizens. Yet, because the challenges are so huge and the resources so limited, it is possible that priority will be given to issues considered urgent and related to security such as rebuilding of infrastructure, or demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants, while not paying adequate attention to other areas that are equally vital.

Such critical issues include the disproportionate negative impacts of the war on women and children, and women's lack of those skills necessary to contribute to the reconstruction of Sierra Leone. This can be traced back to their traditionally disadvantaged position in society, especially in education and the higher rungs of the employment ladder. It is important that gender equality is seen as a critical aspect of the work of the humanitarian agencies in areas including repatriating refugees and displaced persons, child protection, human rights, health and nutrition, water and sanitation, education and agriculture.

A key issue in the reconstruction of Sierra Leone is increasing women's representation in decision-making, linked to Commonwealth and global mandates. The Commonwealth Secretariat was mandated by the Heads of Government Meeting (Durban, 1999) and the fifth and sixth Women's Affairs Ministers Meetings (Port of Spain, 1996; and New Delhi, 2000), to promote women's participation in political decision-making and peace processes.

At this time of rebuilding democracy and peace in Sierra Leone, there is a window of opportunity to ensure that women and men are represented at all levels of political and public decision-making. This will make a big difference in ensuring women and men contribute and benefit equally in the reconstruction process.

If a critical mass of women are represented in parliament, the district councils, and the chiefdoms, they will be able to influence decisions so that higher priority is given to gender-related issues associated with malnutrition and disease, water and sanitation, housing, health and HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, rebuilding agricultural production and entrepreneurship. This is not about excluding men but including women.

Organisations in Sierra Leone, including the 50/50 Group and the Task Force for Women in Politics, have seized this opportunity and have been campaigning vigorously for the selection of women candidates by the political parties leading up to the elections in May 2002. As part of their efforts they have been engaged in training potential candidates and developing their political skills. A three-day workshop entitled 'Women in Parliament' is being held in Freetown on 5-7 February 2002, aimed at increasing the percentage of women candidates elected to parliament to at least 30 per cent, supported by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning, the British Council, National Democratic Institute, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Women's equal participation in the democratic process has until now been resisted. Now is the time for women to come forward and be counted, to advocate for changes to existing laws and the establishment of new laws that affect women, to bring about the kinds of policy changes recommended by the consultation on 'Women and Men in Partnership for Post-Conflict Reconstruction'. For this to happen, women must be represented in parliament. The 'Women in Parliament' workshop is a timely contribution to this objective, one which will benefit the whole of society, women, men and young people.

R.B.S. & L.E.,
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