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# The Silent Forces of Agency: War as Experience and Girls in Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front

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This paper looks at young female soldiers in Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in order to study Christine Sylvester's concept of *war as experience.* The common narratives of females who engage in political violence often detail their status as either victims or perpetrators. These frames essentialize women's experiences of conflict, violence, and politics. Applying the idea of war as experience, the girl soldiers of the RUF can be understood as both victims and perpetrators of violence during times of conflict. This paper identifies how experiences of war can be perceived through the lens of physical experience, emotions of fear and self-security, and the further, ongoing implications of victimization. The RUF case helps explain how one can begin to understand why a girl would engage in violent acts and not just be a powerless victim. Through analyzing

interviews conducted by Myriam Denov, it is discovered that victimization can be an opportunity for agency to some degree. There are significant consequences for essentializing women as victims since post-conflict programs often exclude women because they are not seen as ex-soldiers or ex-combatants.

## Introduction

Women who engage in political violence are viewed in many different ways by the public, media and scholars. Prevalent frames of victim or perpetrator, end up essentializing these women's experiences. A pertinent example of the imbalanced views regarding female participation in violence is girl soldiers in Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Using Christine Sylvester's theory of *war as experience*, (particularly looking at physical and emotional experience) the RUF conflict can be understood as the different ways in which individual human bodies are affected. How can examining this type of experience inform a different and more accurate understanding of the girls who engage in violent acts within the RUF? In this paper, I will argue that an approach of war as experience can help us understand how a girl in the RUF can be both a perpetrator of violence and a victim of it. While considering their victimization as a chance for agency, it is important to understand that war is about harming bodies and girls' experiences cannot be separated from their roles as direct targets of injury. One also needs to be careful to not let victimization define an entire story of an individual's experience. This paper will begin with background information on Sierra Leone and the rise and nature of the RUF. Sylvester's war as experience approach will be analyzed through her writing and applied to Myriam Denov's studies and interviews with former RUF child soldiers. Finally, these findings will be compared to some conceptions of female political violence found in literature.

## Sierra Leone and RUF Conflict

As a civil war, the RUF conflict was marked by violence (of various kinds) from civilians against other civilians.[1] Many factors contributed to the rise of the RUF. In the early 1990s, over half of the population of Sierra Leone was under the age of eighteen, many of whom were disillusioned and angry.[2] The RUF started recruiting with the rhetoric of "freedom, justice and democracy to all Sierra Leoneans."[3] This message did not gain traction and the RUF's political goals were deserted for wealth, power, and control of the diamond mines. Ultimately, they went on to devastate institutions and commit extreme violence against the very people the movement was claiming to liberate.[4] The majority of the RUF was made up of abducted children who were turned into soldiers. Denov describes

[1] Denov, Myriam, "Girl Soldiers and Human Rights: Lessons from Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 12, no. 5 (2008): 814.
[2] Myriam Denov and Christine Gervais, "Negotiating (In)Security: Agency, Resistance, and Resourcefulness Among Girls Formerly Associated with Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front," *Signs* 32, no. 4 (2016): 887-8.
[3] Denov and Gervais, "Negotiating (In)Security," 888.
[4] Myriam Denov, *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) 63.

how child soldiers are either seen as "extreme victims, extreme perpetrators or extreme heroes."[5]Almost all of the women interviewed in an article by Chris Coulter state that they were raped, and many were "bush wives."[6] Many authors who write about female perpetrators of violence argue that we need to stop viewing them as victims in order to really understand their personal motivations.[7] There are certainly tensions between these two situations as victimization can be a motivation to engage in violence against others. The experience of war cannot be separated from the way that humans are always the targets of harm. Everyone deals with this differently and in the case of the RUF, some will even actively participate destructive activities. The RUF case is a bit different than other topics authors write about in relation to women and political violence as the subject of focus is on young girls, many of whom were abducted and forced into their situation. These girls may not have had agency in a conventional sense (for example, voluntarily joining and actively fighting for a political purpose). However, in a personal sense, literature shows that these girls were often pursuing to secure power and protection for their own sake. The actions of the RUF members were shaped by the reality of their everyday lives, where violence became a normal daily feature that instilled a fear and compliance.[8] Girls played a crucial role in the RUF, with training and role allocation, they helped fuel and support the conflicts.[9] Whether or not they chose to participate in violence, they were a part of a violent organization. For boys, the violence introduced to their lives eventually became normal and sometimes even seen as exciting or a skill.[10] The same could occur for girls, but frequently, violence was used for self-security in response to damages inflicted upon them, most commonly sexual abuse. Girls are typically seen to be victims, which tends to denote a lack of agency, but actually, being a victim does not have to mean that no agency is possible.[11] The word "victim" does not have to be perceived as something *happening* to the body, but also something that initiates feelings that can be put into action. To further clarify this idea, Sylvester's concepts can be applied to the case of girls in the RUF.

## War as Physical Experience

Sylvester provides an approach to view war as an experienced event in which ordinary people "observe and suffer physically and emotionally depending on their locations."[12] She argues that one of the key elements of war is the "mission of injuring human bodies and destroying normal patterns of social relations."[13] Human bodies are brought into focus as the main units of war. Sylvester's argument is important as it brings neglected ideas into focus, such as the diversity in an individual experience, the possibility

[5] Denov, *Child Soldiers,* 2.
[6] Chris Coulter, "Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone War: Challenging the Assumptions?," *Feminist Review* no. 88 (2016): 58.
[7] Shirin S. Deylami, "Saving the Enemy," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15, no. 2 (2013): 180.
[8] Richard Maclure and Myriam Denov, "'I Didn't Want to Die So I Joined Them': Structuration and the Process of Becoming Boy Soldiers in Sierra Leone," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 126.
[9] Denov, "Girl Soldiers," 821.
[10] Maclure and Denov, "'I Didn't Want," 127.
[11] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 68.
[12] Christine Sylvester, "War Experiences / War Practices / War Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 40, no. 3 (2012): 483.
[13] Sylvester, "War Experiences," 484.

of being a victim at one point and then a villain in another.[14] Scholars make the same assumptions of gender roles when writing about war (men are the soldiers while women and children are victims), despite how war is a time when regular laws and norms are suspended.[15] This is especially relevant to the RUF case as the normal application of a "victim" does not apply. A child soldier in a civil war does not exist in normal conditions. Perhaps in a non-conflict context, the position of children in the RUF are clearly seen as victims, but during this war, victimization and efforts to avoid victimization have unique circumstances. Viewing anyone as only a victim or combatant is inaccurate, especially for children as, they often have flexible roles and experiences changes that can socialize them into "a culture of violence."[16] To acknowledge the locality of every war, it should be stated that in rural Sierra Leone traditional culture, women are not believed to be inherently peaceful, they are "by nature wild and dangerous… need to be controlled and domesticated."[17] This could help explain the overwhelming amount of girls who were targets of a specific and gendered type of harm. As many girls were stuck in this position, many used violence to get out of it. This violence could be used to a greater extent, in terms of personal power, than for boys as it highly contrasted from their initial positions. Coulter points out how female fighters were considered to be "more wicked" or more brave than some men.[18] During a conflict, girls have the ability to adopt violent behaviour in order to gain a sense of power over others.[19] The stringent categorizations of victim and perpetrator are insufficient because in reality, they can cross over and intersect with one another. While being a victim to the everyday workings of the RUF is sad and tragic, agency does not have to be an insurmountable force as some may perceive. When girls are physically victimized, they can also put their consequential feelings into action.

## Emotions of Fear and Self-Security

Evidently, war is a physical experience, but Sylvester also describes how it is an emotional one, especially when these feelings regard one's own safety. Sylvester states that "emotions intertwine with the body and create suffering."[20] There are a lot of competing theories about what a body even is and what emotions are, but to put it simply, people can experience war through the loss of people, grief, trauma, or even exhilaration.[21] Girls in the RUF are applicable to this idea as they were seen to redirect their feelings of hurt and anger onto civilians.[22] There were many different reasons in which a girl felt like she needed to use violence, but they are all related to feelings resulting from a war context. As Coulter

[14] Sylvester, "War Experiences," 493.
[15] Christine Sylvester, W*ar as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 70.
[16] Susan McKay, "Girls as 'Weapons of Terror' in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leonean Rebel Fighting Forces," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 391.
[17] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 65.
[18] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 59.
[19] Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, "Engaging the Voices of Girls in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone's Conflict: Experiences and Perspectives in a Culture of Violence," *Anthropologica* 48, no. 1 (2014): 81.
[20] Sylvester, "War Experiences," 497.
[21] Christine Sylvester, "War, Sense, and Security," in *Gender and International Security: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Laura Sjoberg (New York: Routledge, 2010) 24-5.
[22] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 62.

summarizes, when engaging in violence, "survival and control was an issue for some; for many others it was fear, anger, and even resignation" while few were interested in "prestige and resources involved in being a fighter."[23] There are various instances in which a girl would use violence to protect herself. For example, the use of guns often brought a sense of "power, authority, and supremacy" over civilians.[24] Gradually, guns were seen as a tool for increasing self-security, still this rests in the frame of being a victim to those that hurt them.[25] One girl describes her experience as feeling empowered with a gun, feeling strong and fearless when firing it, although the actual killing of people was not attributed with positive feelings.[26] It is crucial to view this story through a victim frame as these skills were taught through being terrorized and desensitized with militaristic training, in which they had no chance to refuse participation.[27] Some girls embraced this training, such as those who were promoted to a commander recall it with nostalgia and pride. For these girls, violent acts became an accessible launch to power. McKay describes a paradox, in which, victims become "allies with individuals who were responsible for abducting and victimizing them and who continue to sexually abuse them."[28] In this example, girls gained power through their victimization. They take advantage of the only opportunity they have to improve their situation, by building connections with the very same people who caused them harm. In some cases, this can get to a point where they can reverse their position of vulnerability and turn it into a higher position within the RUF hierarchy, which "in a sense empowered them and rendered them some sense of authority in the trajectory of their own lives."[29] While this is an unconventional portrait of female agency, it has significance. To be precise, engaging in violent acts can make one feel as though they are no longer the victim.[30] Initially, girls did not have much power within this situation but recognizing their ability to turn a victimized position into power offers insight into the lived experience of war. War as experience offers an effective way to understand the possible motivations of girls and contrasts from some existing works.

## Further Implications of "Victimization"

Sylvester's approach to looking at war is extremely useful in acknowledging all the different roles a girl can play and how they operate within constrained spheres. Accordingly, the dichotomy of victim or perpetrator is not enough to explain the full experience of war.[31] In reality, girls in the RUF are "neither ill-fated victims with no agency, nor ferocious perpetrators in command of their own destiny."[32] Nonetheless, the frames of victim or perpetrator are used quite often. When authors discuss child soldiers, they are

[23] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 61.
[24] Denov and Gervais, "Negotiating (In)Security," 896.
[25] Denov and Gervais, "Negotiating (In)Security," 895.
[26] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 60.
[27] Denov and Gervais, "Negotiating (In)Security," 896.
[28] McKay, "Girls as 'Weapons," 391.
[29] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 61.
[30] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 61.
[31] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 67-8.
[32] Coulter, "Female Fighters," 69.

denied any agency, turned into either an innocent victim or inherently wicked.[33] It is not a false claim to say that children are often victims, but using their encounters of harm to define their entire experience of conflict is unfair. In particular, girls are portrayed as "silent victims" which does not accurately represent their lived experiences.[34] Denov argues that, while it is important to illustrate that girls' bodies are often targets, it also risks the danger of girls becoming "personified as voiceless victims, often devoid of agency, moral conscience."[35] An appropriate way to counter this effect is by using Sylvester's approach. Any position that a child held in the RUF could involve some agency. Specifically, girls (although most of them were evidently victims) had agency in the ways they chose to belong in their groups. However, Denov and Gervais state that, acts of agency and resistance can only be perceived as "small victories in light of the circumstances of ongoing victimization and terror within the RUF."[36] This statement poses some concerns. While Denov has written a great deal highlighting the diverse experiences of children in the RUF, the above quote seems to essentialize them as victims by diminishing their feelings of success. A victory of feeling safe in their given situation can be a big victory. As girls climbed their way up the ranks in response to feelings of fear and lack of security, the significance of their newfound force should not be dismissed. It is tricky to talk about this subject without completely falling into the common frames. However, it is paramount to recognize how personal victories are perceived by the individual, no matter how insignificant they appear to be. A small victory for an individual experiencing a war, where they are essentially powerless, can be considered an instrumental and special victory. Deylami further illuminates this issue. She criticizes how authors use various narratives to make women's political violence solely about their victimization by men, and thus, about men. It produces ideas of men as the protectors of society and women as those to be protected.[37] Although she does not discuss Sierra Leone in particular, she emphasizes the authors who tend to make victimization focus on the acts of men, when this is not necessarily the case. Even though girls' victimization is primarily because of men, their use of violence is about protecting their own bodies and feelings (and in some cases, other girls too), rather than *about* men. Discussing girls' status as victims does not have to result in a discussion about men. As much as authors talk about men in relation to women's political violence, for the most part, being a perpetrator is about protecting oneself, and there is a sense of agency in that, no matter how limited it may appear.

## Conclusion

Sierra Leone's RUF is a thought-provoking subject to look at when studying political violence. As the RUF included a lot of children, it is vital to understand that they are easily socialized and influence, but also to be careful about falling into a "reductionist *cul de sac*

[33] Denov, *Child Soldiers*, 13.

[34] Denov, *Child Soldiers*, 13.

[35] Denov, *Child Soldiers*, 13.

[36] Denov and Gervais, "Negotiating (In)Security," 903.

[37] Deylami, "Saving the Enemy," 190.

that discounts youth capacity for reasoning and independence of action."[38] In viewing war as the experiences of individuals, one can begin to understand how a girl could engage in violent acts and not be completely powerless while being a victim. As this case has demonstrated, victimization can be an opportunity for agency to a degree. Looking forward, there are problems concerning post-conflict reconciliation. Today, many child soldiers involved in the RUF conflict still struggle with feelings of trauma, guilt, shame, etc. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission attempts to create a historical record of violations and abuses of human rights, there are still struggles in fully recovering.[39] Similar to any war torn state, former children of the RUF have lost their childhoods and were brought up in a society where violent acts became normal.[40] Furthermore, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs often exclude women as they are not seen as ex-combatants.[41] This is a very real consequence of only viewing women as victims, without recognizing the possibility for any other roles they may have played. The fact that a girl was victimized, does not mean she does not have the same fears a boy soldiers would have had in combat. Sylvester's work can inform an understanding of conflict that fully realizes the duality of women's roles without essentializing them and can also be beneficial when it comes to post-conflict healing programs.

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[39] Denov, *Child Soldiers,* 77.
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