

Sierra Leone

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Sierra Leone has an area of 72,325 km² and is bordered in the northeast by the Republic of Guinea, in the south and southeast by the Republic of Liberia, and in the west by the North Atlantic Ocean.

Sierra Leone

women

group

1. Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone (Figure 1) is divided into five main geographical regions: the coast, interior lowland plains, interior plateau, mountains, and Freetown Peninsula. The coastline is part of the general coastline of the West and Central Africa region, which has a low plain, is sandy and surf beaten.



Figure 1. Map of Sierra Leone showing the location of Bo (circled). Source: Composite figure put together using files from Wikimedia Commons.

Sierra Leone became independent from Britain on 27 April 1961 and attained Republic status on 19 April 1971. There are 18 ethnic groups, of which, the Teme, Mende and Limba account for 35%, 31% and 9%, respectively ^[1]. Sierra Leone has a predominantly Muslim population (77% of the population), with Christians comprising 23% ^[1]. The state is officially secular but Islamic and Christian FBDOs operate freely in the country as, indeed, they do in much of West Africa ^[2]. This is even if Christian FBDOs sometimes face significant challenges when promoting 'holistic development' within a predominantly Muslim community ^[3].

The population of Sierra Leone was 4.8 million in 2004 and is predicted to have almost doubled to approximately 8.7 million by 2022, with an estimated population growth rate in 2022 of 2.49% ^[1]. Approximately 60% of the population is under the age of 25 and approximately 56% of the population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture for food and income ^[1]. Sierra Leone is one of the world's poorest countries ^[4]. Indeed, 70% of the population lives in absolute poverty, especially in the Kailahun and Bombali districts. Life expectancy at birth is estimated to be 58.76 years, and in 2022, the adult literacy level was 51.6% for men and 39.8% for women ^[1]. The country also has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates during childbirth (1120 deaths/100,000 live births estimated in 2017), and there is much gender inequality, as men typically make the key decisions surrounding the health of their wives and children, including the use of health services ^[5]. Indeed, the past decade has seen something of an emphasis on women's empowerment by development agencies, both secular and faith-based, in Sierra Leone ^[5].

Sierra Leone is no stranger to environmental, social, and economic shocks. As the first sentences of the foreword to the 2019 'National Human Development Report', penned by Dr. Francis M. Kai-Kai who was, at the time, the Minister of Planning and Economic Development, note:

"The people of Sierra Leone are aware of the consequences of fragility and vulnerability. Our country's history is riddled with shocks from across sectors, such as the civil war, natural disasters, macroeconomic shocks, and governance shocks. The journey towards resilience and our development aspirations begins with the people." ^[6] (p. i)

Sierra Leone experienced five military coups between 1967 and 1991, and an 11-year civil war between 1991 and 2002, which left over 50,000 people dead and devastated many communities ^{[7][8]}. A two-decade-long decline in the economy from 1980 to 2000 can be attributed to a combination of factors, including weak internal management policies, the poor performance of economic recovery programs, and weak export prices combined with rising import prices. The Structural Adjustment Program, which was mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in June 1986, followed the usual pattern of trade liberalization, the stabilization of the exchange rate, and the removal of subsidies on petroleum products and staple foods ^[9]; however, this has had mixed results for the overall economy, and the escalating price of staple foods has arguably reversed whatever gains these policies may have achieved ^{[10][11]}. Strategies such as the privatization of public enterprises and the restructuring of

the civil service are in the planning and implementation stages, but signs of any positive impact are yet to be identified.

More recently, in 2014, the country suffered from an outbreak of Ebola that was caused by the Zaire ebolavirus. The first reported cases of Ebola were in Kenema, and the outbreak lasted until 2016. Sierra Leone was one of the countries most affected by the outbreak, with 14,122 declared cases and 3955 deaths. In addition, healthcare systems, especially in rural areas, were poorly equipped to deal with the crisis [4]. While both men and women in poor communities suffered from the outbreak, the women were especially impacted in terms of their obligation to take care of victims and orphans [12]. The responses of the Sierra Leone national government to the outbreak (quarantine of sick patients, the banning of markets and trade, banning of public gatherings) also impacted women more [12].

Along with much of the world, as of late March 2020, Sierra Leone also experienced the COVID-19 epidemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus [13]. While the Ebola outbreak was geographically restricted, predominantly, to three states in West Africa (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) and elicited strong support from national and international aid agencies, the COVID-19 outbreak was global and the Sierra Leone government had to fight it largely with its own resources [13]. The two diseases do differ in terms of their mortality rates; the Ebola mortality rate is about 70% of those who catch the disease, while the mortality rate of COVID-19 is estimated to be 1% [13]. However, the experience the country gained during the Ebola epidemic in terms of limiting contact, etc., served it well during COVID-19; inevitably, however, the two outbreaks occurring within a few years of each other exacerbated the shock.

2. The Intervention: Women's Groups and a Communal Farm

Bo is the second largest city in Sierra Leone by population (~240,000 based on an estimate for 2017) and is located in the south of the country, not far from the border with Liberia (**Figure 1**). The population is equally divided into Muslims and Christians. Their first foundation in Sierra Leone was in Bo and they helped establish secondary schools in both Bo and the nearby town of Kenema. Bo is home to a number of international development agencies, including Catholic Relief Services (CRS), CONCERN Worldwide and TROCAIRE.

The CMO leader, a female religious, was approached by women from the Catholic Women's Association (CWA) in the area to help with the planning and community development of an 8-hectare (approximately 20 acres; 'acre' is the unit of area more commonly used in rural areas of Sierra Leone) farm. The proposal was for the farm to be managed by 6 groups of women (linked to parishes) with 25 women per group, 150 women in total. The farm was located on good-quality land, near to a river between Bo town and Kpetime village and had been handed to the women by the paramount chief of the area. The chief was a scientist who had taught in a secondary school established by the CMO in Bo for many years.

CWAs are popular in almost every parish in Africa and originated in around 1970 as a follow-up to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965), which emphasised the role of the laity in the Catholic Church. Each

CWA was typically headed (at parish level) by a woman appointed by a bishop, and initially, these tended to be women religious, as lay women were only beginning to emerge as leaders. In their early days, CWAs were mostly self-supporting, but as time advanced, there was a drive to have meetings at inter-parish or diocesan levels in order to encourage a sharing of ideas and help women to become more aware of their own potential. The involvement of CWAs in agriculture came later and raised all kinds of challenges in the African context. Most notably, women often have little control over agricultural decision making or, indeed, access to agricultural training in much of sub-Saharan Africa ^{[14][15]}; however, they do often provide much of the workforce especially for household production and marketing ^{[15][16][17][18]}. The nature and extent of female involvement in agriculture in West Africa can vary depending upon a range of factors, including cultural differences between ethnic groups, as well as access to finance ^[14]. Care does need to be taken not to generalize; indeed, the following quotation from Safilios-Rothschild ^[19] (p. 307) may be nearly 40 years old but still resonates today: “*Despite the role that women play in agriculture in Sierra Leone, agencies still view them primarily as unpaid only for time-consuming and unskilled tasks such as weeding*”. Indeed, one reads repeated calls for the government and others in Sierra Leone to place greater emphasis on women’s engagement in agriculture in the country, especially when it comes to the production of food crops ^[20].

While the success of farmer groups in Sierra Leone has been questioned ^[21], the approach of the CWA women’s groups to engage in farming was nonetheless an intriguing opportunity that the CWO was keen to support and encourage as a part of its community, especially women’s, engagement. As noted above, this had become something of a priority for development agencies in Sierra Leone, and as Cornish et al. ^[5] (p. 33) have noted with their study on health care in the country: “*female respondents frequently described power as relating to women’s income generation and financial independence, as well as in terms of women being listened to generally in their social relationships and by their husbands. Whilst women’s financial independence was reported to ease marital relationship tensions and supported their ability to undertake responsibilities, men remained the authority figures in households, often regarding health care decision-making*”.

However, that is not to say that women’s groups in rural Sierra Leone are without agency. As Dick and Gao ^[22] (p. 493) conclude according to the results of their study on women’s groups in the Bo and Moyamba districts “*the rural women of Sierra Leone are aggressively transforming themselves from a dormant to dominant force of society*”. Despite the challenges, the CMO agreed to help the women with their farm initiative, and as part of this, they arranged a series of participatory workshops to take place between the 2nd and 12th June 2014, to help the women identify their priorities (i.e., what they wished to achieve with the farm) and develop a business plan. These workshops were followed up with a series of interviews with key personnel in the area and in Freetown to see how they could help support the priorities of the women.

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