

In the wake of war: Aisha's story¹

Commercial sexual exploitation does not always involve money. Some children are forced to trade sexual favours for food, water, or sometimes even their life. Nowhere is this more obvious than in situations of conflict when children may be coerced by militias into fighting, cleaning, cooking or providing sex.

This was what happened during the civil war in Sierra Leone, which raged until November 2000, when a ceasefire was signed between the government and the rebels -- principally the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The peace agreement calls for the return of children who were abducted by rebels during the war. No-one knows exactly how many children were abducted, but the practice was widespread. When the rebels invaded the capital Freetown in 1999, more than 4,500 children were abducted -- half of them girls. Some of them were raped, sexually abused and, in many cases, had babies by rebel fighters. Their return has wide public backing, but it is not as simple as that.

The girls are handed over to UNAMSIL, the United Nations force in Sierra Leone. Many of them have babies by soldiers in the RUF who controlled them as spoils of war. The girls have little to show for their years under RUF 'tutelage' except the psychological scars of repeated sexual abuse. Many were gang raped. Some were married off to a commander, gaining protection, but subject to his every whim.

Aisha is from Freetown and is 16 now, but was just 12 when she was abducted and taken to Makeni. She was paired with a captain in the RUF. He began his exploitation by threatening Aisha at gunpoint. As the relationship continued, though, she became attached to him. It is not uncommon for children to develop a bond with their captors. In the end, shortly before her baby was born, the captain abandoned Aisha.

Aisha was not made to fight but was made to witness killings. To protest about this, or to refuse to do anything her captors demanded, including giving sex, would have put her life in danger. "If you were caught crying, you would be roughly interrogated," Aisha says. "I always told them that I loved and missed my family which is why I cried. They always told me to stop crying and promised to take me with them wherever they went."

Aisha, like many of the girls handed over to UNAMSIL, was transferred to an interim care centre run by a leading Italian NGO, COOPI (Cooperation International). The centre is supported by UNICEF. Since 1998 three COOPI-run centres have been working with children abducted by rebels. Family mediation is key to the girls' successful return to their communities, and social workers develop strong links with the families, encouraging them to welcome the girls and their babies back into their homes.

A key part of UNICEF's work is 'sensitization', making families and communities aware of what the children have been through, and the children aware of the family environment they're re-entering. UNICEF Child Protection Officer, Roisin De Burca, knows that this can be a challenging task for girl and family. "The upbringing she's had, the major years of development, have not been what normal children go through," she says. "She has not learned the social skills of a young girl. She has learned to kill, she has learned to give sex when it is demanded, and she has learned to survive. So she's coming home into a family unit. She's coming home where there's parents, aunts, brothers and sisters. And she has to adapt and that is very, very hard. She has to learn how to fit into that family again."

Despite the suffering endured by this population during the war and the stigma attached to involvement with the RUF, many people seem remarkably tolerant and ready to accept the girls and their babies.

In the end Aisha did not have to stay long at the COOPI care centre. After a few days she left with two other girls and made her own way home. Now she is living with her mother, brothers

and sisters. Before she was abducted, she wanted to do well at school and had ambitions to travel. Now her sights are set closer to home: on an office job, with enough money to support her and her baby.

¹ This story was gathered by an Insight TV film crew commissioned by UNICEF to help prepare footage for the 2nd World Congress (see above). Sierra Leonean filmmaker Sorious Samura conducted the interviews; the children's names have been changed for their protection.