

**FAWE Best Practices**

**Ensuring the Education of Girls  
during Conflict  
Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone

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# The FAWE Sierra Leone Experience in Ensuring the Education of Girls during Conflict

## **Introduction**

The history of FAWE in Sierra Leone is relatively short, but the dynamism with which it has made its impact on the educational stage of the country has guaranteed it a place in the history text. The resilience of its members is the backbone behind their success. From 1995 to 1998, at the height of the conflict situation in the country, the chapter's role in educating displaced children both within (the Emergency Camp School Programme) and outside (the Conakry Experience) the country cannot be ignored. These two are a testimony of best practice. For the purpose of this study the emphasis is on the former intervention.

## **BACKGROUND**

The rebel war in Sierra Leone began on 23 March 1991. Coincidentally, the FAWE Sierra Leone Chapter was established on 23 March 1995. Barely three months after the launch of the chapter, the organization faced its first big challenge. The streets of Freetown, the capital, were awash with homeless children and displaced people from the provinces. The four-year rebel war plaguing the country had forced thousands of women and children to flee their homes and schools in the provincial towns to Freetown, distressed, forlorn, and traumatized.

By April 1995, over 7,000 displaced children had registered with the Department of Education. Some 4,000 were placed in schools in Freetown, which soon became overpopulated. In May, the Department of Education had to stop the exercise with over 3,500 students still displaced. It was at this juncture that FAWE Sierra Leone Chapter offered its assistance. But could this young organization with little more than a noble mandate, but no secretariat and only membership dues as their source of funding, meet with the challenge? The 35 women-strong group indeed showed commitment to its mandate and resolved to take up the challenge. They demonstrated the adage of "where there's a will there's a way" and with caps in hand established the Emergency Camp Schools Programme for Displaced Children at the abandoned Sierra Leone Produce Marketing Board – Palm Kernel Oil Mill complex.

This was the first ever exercise of its kind in the history of education in Sierra Leone. Members of FAWE Sierra Leone in 1995 became the gadfly in championing the education of the young throughout the country. They contributed immensely towards Education For All and in particular to the promotion of female education in a conflict situation. They especially showed that if you educate a woman you educate a nation.

## **ABOUT THE INTERVENTION**

The main objective was to get children under 15 years of age off the streets of Freetown and into some form of schooling. To accomplish this, FAWE galvanized the support of various international NGOs, government department and sympathizers to assist them in the rehabilitation of the oil mill complex at Wellington, in the eastern part of the city. A management committee comprising eight members of FAWE was formed to monitor the activities at the Camp school. Other partners took on other tasks:

- UNICEF supplied toilets and water to the centre, assisted with staff remuneration for some teachers and provided the children with school materials.
- Plan International provided cooking and eating utensils for 3,500 children and helped fund the teachers' remunerations.
- World Food Programme supplied dry rations of oil and rice for the feeding programme.
- UNHCR donated furniture to the palm kernel oil mill complex.
- Sierra Leone Association of Retired Teachers rose to the occasion and rendered their services to the emergency programme
- The road transport authority provided bus services for children staying at a distance.
- The Ministry of Education provided monitoring and teaching/learning materials.
- The local Old Wharf community supplied firewood and vegetables.

The result was phenomenal. On Friday, 16 June 1995, the Deputy Chair of the then National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) formally launched the first Emergency Camp School for 4,371 children aged 3–18 years. In launching the Camp School Programme, the Deputy Chair had this to say

The education of thousands of children less than 15 years of age has been disrupted. Their condition is desperate because of their dependence on an impoverished generation of elders. Their basic right to education will become a vanishing dream, until and unless we act quickly. A year lost in the education of a child can mean not only back-peddling two years in school achievement; it also means loss of motivation for school education, boredom, and exposure to unhealthy and unwholesome practices. This condition is certainly not befitting our future generation of citizens.

### ***Retired Teachers***

During July–September 1995, retired teachers volunteered to assist the Camp School and were tasked with providing remedial schooling to the students to equip them to access formal schooling at the beginning of the academic year. By the end of September when the programme ended, the retired teachers in the Camp School were phased out.

### ***Curriculum***

FAWE members (being educationists themselves) developed a hybrid curriculum – a cut between formal and non-formal education – to suit the needs of these students. The curriculum included guidance counselling and trauma healing.

### ***Guidance Counselling, Trauma Healing Sessions***

At the Camp School guidance counselling and trauma healing sessions were considered very important and formed part of the curriculum. Two counselling sessions a week were held. From the beginning these sessions were very open. The idea was to encourage the children to come out and talk. Also, by listening to the much more gruesome stories of others they would be consoled in knowing that they were not alone. Those who were not that open were encouraged by their teachers to stay after school for one-on-one counselling sessions. The retired teachers were “parents” at school to these children. Because most of the children were highly traumatized, it was important that they be detraumatized. Regular talks with the children were held. **Income** games were very popular. Songs in various local languages were composed. For many of the children, music was the best medium of healing.

Members of FAWE’s Emergency Camp School Programme Committee designed a report card completely different from that used in the regular schools. It was felt the psychological state of the child must be monitored. The students’ relationships with teachers and peers were regularly assessed

and recorded. The counselling sessions became a great success. As the programme entered its middle phase, it was realized that more and more of the children were significantly benefiting from the counselling and trauma healing sessions. This was evident in their relationships with each other in and around school.

### ***Feeding Programmes***

Taking into consideration that these students were displaced, living mainly in camps with parents who had no income-generating jobs, FAWE members thought it fitting to implement a school feeding system. With support from the World Food Programme (WFP), which donated dry food items (such as bulgur, fat, beans and maize), plus a small amount of subsidy, FAWE was able to carry out its goal. A meal a day was given to the students free of charge. FAWE members supervised the lunch break session to ensure proper feeding took place. These women had to leave their offices during their lunch period to carry out these duties.

## **COST OF THE INTERVENTION**

Donation to the Emergency Camp School Programme was both in cash and in kind. We can only itemize what was received.

### ***International Support***

- European Union: 10 furnished five classroom blocks, costing approximately \$60.000.
- Plan International:

Water kettles	16 pieces
Serving trays	18 pieces
Food bowls	18 pieces
Cooking spoons	18 pieces
Frying pans	12 pieces
Frying spoons	18 pieces

Food plates	1,000 pieces
Table spoons	1,000 pieces
Drinking cups (rubber)	1,000 pieces

- World Food Programme (WFP): Food for 12 months for 5,000 children
- UNICEF: 20 toilets and water supply; teaching /learning materials for entire programme.

### ***Local Community Input***

- Displaced Children Endowment Fund (DICEF): 5,485,000 leones (approximately US\$2,563)
- Sierra Leone Association of Retired Teachers: Voluntary teaching
- FAWE members: Administration of programme; non-formal curriculum development
- Old Wharf local community: Supply of firewood and vegetables

## **FROM EMERGENCY TO FORMAL SCHOOLING**

Once the Emergency Programme got under way successfully, FAWE's attention focused on working out the transitional phase into formal schooling for the new school year of September 1995.

### ***Displaced Children's School Endowment Fund (DICEF)***

On 28 July 1995, FAWE Sierra Leone once again called on the local and international community for help. The Department of Education in collaboration with FAWE, with the support of international partners, had taken the bold step of establishing ten new five-classroom blocks for displaced children in the western area. As the Vice Chair of FAWE pointed out at the launching ceremony of the Displaced Children's School Endowment Fund:

By the end of the emergency period in September most of the support which has been provided will cease and the displaced children will face the prospect of losing all hope of continuing their education in the formal system. For Sierra Leone, this means losing half of our future, and adding to the already high rate of illiteracy, which is an embarrassment for all who care about the country.

### ***Transition to Formal Schooling***

The needs identified were great and urgent. By the end of September when children would be preparing to return to school, the displaced children in nine schools would need:

- Tuition fees
- Uniform
- Footwear
- Regular assistance for lunch and transport
- Exercise books
- Textbooks, in the case of the secondary schools

The minimum amount requested per child then was approximately US\$15 for primary school and approximately US\$35 for secondary school. Donors were asked to pay their contributions into a bank account set up for that purpose.

The call was well received. Donations were received from individuals (some of whom wanted to remain anonymous), churches, mosques, business houses, local and international NGOs, and foreign embassies. The money collected (5,485,000 leones) was used to pay stipends to the retired teachers, to pay tuition, stationery and other charges for the displaced children in secondary schools, and to meet the running cost of the operation. By October, the fund had served its purpose: all the students had been given placement in formal schools. The DICEF account was formally closed on 18 October 1995.

FAWE Sierra Leone Chapter had since May 1995 collaborated with the Department of Education to monitor and supervise the Emergency Camp School Programme. Not surprisingly, 2,608 of these displaced children were girls. The women of FAWE Sierra Leone had succeeded in enabling over 2,000 girls to access education in a conflict situation. This number amounted to about 60% of displaced children. Even under normal situations, only 25% of girls accessed schooling in the country.

At the beginning of the new school year in September 1995, all displaced students were asked to report to the Ministry of Education, where they were registered and sent to the ten new schools. Out of this programme emerged two of FAWE's present regular education programmes:

- FAWE National Skills Training Centre for Pregnant Girls and Girl Mothers
- FAWE Primary School for (Displaced/Disadvantaged) Girls

### ***Skills Training Centre***

While registering students for placements into the Emergency Camp School, attention was drawn to the fact that 15 of the girls aged 12–13 years were already pregnant. These girls were not (because of the rigid educational system operating in the country at that time) accepted into any of the schools. The FAWE management committee decided to keep them back from school until they had delivered. In July 1996 a functional literacy programme for pregnant girls and girl mothers was started in the displaced camp in Grafton. More matured and experienced girls, or girls who felt that they had missed out on education for too long and were ashamed to be in class with much younger children, were sent to this centre. There were 80 girls between the ages of 11 and 25 years on the roll.

The programme's curriculum was centred on four subject areas: English, arithmetic, agricultural science and family life education. Apart from formal education these young women

are also taught to acquire skills to help make them self-employed: catering, tailoring, soap making, agriculture, crèche management, and Gara tie-dyeing and other arts and crafts.

This centre, which has now been transferred to a 10.3-acre plot leased by FAWE from the government at Grafton, houses a crèche (with 20 babies for trainees), a kindergarten (with 50 children aged 3–6 years), and a non-formal primary school for girls (with 220 girls aged 6–12 years).

### ***FAWE Girls Primary School***

All except one of the European Union donated schools was located within compounds of existing schools. The last building, constructed on a rubbish dump on Fort Street in the centre of Freetown, was without a proprietor so FAWE seized the opportunity and allowed only girls to access this school. In August 1995, the first batch of 350 girls with ages ranging from 4 ½ to 16 years was registered in the school. This school, later named FAWE Girls Primary School, would serve as the vanguard of the organization's mandate in the country.

FAWE started a personal relationship with this school. By January 1996, the organization set up a seven-person management committee to specially administer the school. The committee comprised the founding chair, the school manager, the FAWE executive secretary, two FAWE members, the PTA chair and the head teacher.

The management committee embarked on a two-way educational system, formal and non-formal, to meet the demands of the students. The established subjects in the formal school curriculum were taught. Trauma counselling programmes became a must. Apart from twice-weekly class counselling sessions, pupils were always encouraged to have one-on-one sessions with the teachers. The policy of referring to their instructors as "aunts" and "uncles" at the initial Camp

School had a much deeper meaning in this school. The girls felt at one with their teachers.

The medium for trauma counselling varied to suit the needs of the students. Class and school drama concerts were organized. Very soon the students in this school became noted for their performance and were on several occasions awarded prizes. Singing competitions and regular radio talk shows organized by the Talking Drums were held. In all these activities, pupils were encouraged to speak out and release their pain and thoughts. A prominent local TV journalist set up a drama club at the school in 1996. The school took part in drama competitions organized by various NGOs and religious bodies in the country such as the Council of Churches Sierra Leone (CCSL), the Evangelical Fellowship Sierra Leone (EFSL), and the Roman Catholic mission in the 1995/96 school year.

To give the students a sense of belonging, Operation Christmas Child was launched in December 1996. The FAWE Freetown chapter gave out Christmas boxes to all the girls. Members also contributed towards a party for these children.

From 1995 to 1998, the school benefited from donor agencies such as UNICEF, United Nations, International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent (ICRC), Plan International and the World Food Programme in terms of teaching and learning materials, relief food, and National Primary School Examination fees. Other demands have been met from subscription from FAWE members. In the 1998 school year, the Ministry of Education closed down all displaced schools. The Fort Street School was then approved as a government assisted school. FAWE, still wanting to meet its aims and objectives of educating the girl-child, decided to ask permission to officially take over the running of the school. Permission granted, the school became known as FAWE School for Girls.

## **AFTER-SHOCKS – FREETOWN**

Meantime, 1997/98 was marked by the rebel takeover of Sierra Leone. The period of military rule brought with it untold hardship in the country. Thousands of people fled the country. Those who remained were in a desperate situation. Young girls were abducted or raped at an alarming rate in the city. The country literally came to a halt. Ten FAWE members discovered themselves in neighbouring Guinea seeking refuge, along with some thousands of Sierra Leonean children. In conjunction with FAWE Guinea, an educational programme was established for the Sierra Leonean children resident in Conakry.

When sanity returned and the official government came back from exile in 1998, it was discovered that the roll at FAWE Girls School had dropped considerably, to a little above 200 pupils. A lot of girls had been abducted. Among those who returned, many reported they had been raped. FAWE addressed this issue and in partnership with *Medicins sans Frontières* (MSF Holland) assisted the affected girls in Freetown and facilitated their return to school. The victims were given medical assistance and counselling sessions. After they were declared fit by a professional medical official they were then given financial assistance to continue schooling.

### ***The Rape Victims Programme***

In 1999, this programme assumed a much wider dimension. In February of that year, immediately after ECOMOG regained control of Freetown from the rebels, some of our displaced students from both the primary school at Fort Street and the Skills Centre at Grafton reported being raped while the rebels were retreating. As some of these victims had already been subjected to rape in their areas of origin, FAWE decided to address the issue of rape once and for all, break the silence and create a culture that says **“no to violence against women”**.

The invasion of January 6 necessitated an intervention that included medical and counselling services for abducted girls and later boys too. FAWE's mandate of helping the girl-child to be educated to her full potential compelled the intervention. Other collaborating agencies such as the Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW), the Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children's Affairs, and MSF Holland joined the programme.

The first step of the intervention was public sensitization on radio and television. During the first three months, April to June 1999, FAWE International, with MSF Holland providing the drugs, supported the programme. By the end of June, some 129 victims had been treated medically and counselled. The need to continue the programme became evident as abductees escaped or were released from rebel strongholds in batches. MSF Holland agreed to continue funding.

In collaboration with the other agencies, a number of teams were set up: sensitization team, medical team, counselling team, skills training team and coordinating team. Reporting sessions were held fortnightly for a period of three months, then monthly as the programme stabilized and other agencies began to address the issue as well.

### ***Community Sensitization Programme***

To begin with, it could be said that the sensitization work of FAWE together with SLAUW was very successful as most of the counsellors reported that a big portion of their clients learned about the programme from radio and TV announcements. Beginning in March 1999, FAWE had started a media campaign to provide information about rebel atrocities as well as the situation of rape victims on radio and TV. Programmes were broadcast on average once a week in various local languages. The messages were meant to break the stigma of rape,

increase the responsibility of the communities to care for rape victims and above all give information about the services of FAWE.

As FAWE's entry point to their work is education, they joined with SLAUW to minimize the adverse effect on girls' education. A joint committee visited secondary schools and informed pupils and teachers about the rape and abduction issue and the available assistance. A collaboration of school guidance counsellors (SGC) and the parent-teacher associations (PTAs) was initiated as an effective way to reach the communities and a subcommittee of school guidance counsellors for rape victims was formed.

Leaflets, handouts and posters were distributed in schools, public places, supermarkets, hospitals and pubs to sensitize different target groups. The sensitization through schools into the communities obviously reached its goal, as community members began bringing children to FAWE.

### ***Process***

When the victims reported, they were registered and given initial counselling and then transferred to an appropriate doctor on the team. The doctors assessed and treated them until they were certified fit. Records were kept of patients. For those who were pregnant, the service of a doctor was available until their confinement. They also benefited from postnatal care by the doctors, from Marie Stopes and ICRC.

Both males and females, ranging in age from 6 to 60, were seen once a week individually by trained counsellors. Counsellors did one- to three-hour sessions twice a week according to their prearranged schedule. When it was evident that clients were beginning to be less stressed and gaining confidence, they were asked to visit on alternate weeks. A few of those victims who came after July had to have two sessions

regularly and benefited from the healing process. Group experience sharing was undertaken and clients who were very particular about confidentiality learned to feel relaxed about recounting some of their experiences, which initially they had been reluctant to share.

Usually, the sessions included prayers (Muslim/Christian) and a discussion of educational activities, family members or self before the invasion. Clients were also encouraged to talk about their aspirations, during which times it became evident that the programme, as it was, was only the beginning. They expressed needs such as shelter, clothing, food, educational support and seed money to restart businesses. As a number of the under-18's were pregnant, they were worried about the possibility of continuing their education, providing for their babies or what to do with them. Their fears were usually allayed.

On the whole, over 2,000 victims were counselled, both at the FAWE secretariat and at the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA).

### ***Achievements***

- All of the girl mothers counselled were able to accept their babies and decided to keep them. Those who could went back to school willingly without fear of castigation.
- More than 100 school going victims went back to school, including some who had had their babies. Some also benefited from scholarships for a year.
- Baby kits were provided to the mothers.
- Some of the non-school going clients began to rebuild their lives. Many got involved in petty trading and some went to skills training centres.
- Girls who met only during counselling sessions became friends.

- Clients became advocates for the programme and began sending or bringing fellow victims to benefit from the services.
- Seven doctors, 30 counsellors, a drama group, 20 awareness raisers including a drama group and 10 skills trainers participated in the programme.
- As reflected in the doctors' reports, surgical operations were successfully carried out. Antenatal and postnatal services were successfully provided.
- 2,110 abductees benefited from this programme in the Western Area, of whom 1,168 were rape victims.

## **OUTCOMES AND INDICATORS**

### ***Emergency Camp School Programme***

The Emergency Camp School was a novel idea that assisted the government with the education of displaced children, so as to prepare them for entry into formal schooling. From this programme mushroomed all subsequent programmes in place during the war years, besides the following immediate benefits:

- The national education system acquired 60 classrooms. Eight (8) secondary schools gained five fully furnished classrooms and two primary schools each gained five fully furnished classrooms.
- Milton Margai College of Education can now boast of a practising school.
- The University College of Njala, which is still displaced, was immediately housed at the original camp school site at Wellington with ten fully furnished classrooms used as lecture rooms until its relocation to New England in 2002.

### ***FAWE Girls School***

By 1997, the pupil population of the Fort Street School had risen to 415. From 1995 to 1997, the school successfully sent a total of 46 pupils to the National Primary School Examination (NPSC). These proud pupils have now all gained admittance

into secondary schools. FAWE did not say goodbye to their first set of babies, however, but offered them scholarships to continue their secondary school education. At that time, taking into consideration the desperate economic situation of the nation as a whole, this was a welcome intervention. It also served as an incentive to young girls who for one reason or another were unable to continue their schooling.

## **LESSONS LEARNT**

- ✓ **Commitment to one's cause, honesty, integrity and sincerity** are perhaps the greatest yardstick in measuring the success of any programme, more so one mounted in wartime. Despite the risk involved, members acted on their commitment to the values of the organization.

Members of FAWE Sierra Leone gave of themselves selflessly. The fact that at every stage of their operation they showed transparency and accountability placed them at par with the standards of other international NGOs and encouraged more and more donors not only to assist them but also to seek their help in carrying out projects within the country. Of course, no right thinking person plans for war, therefore the chapter cannot be blamed for not having a war contingency plan, but even in normal situations foresight demands having a plan "B".

- ✓ **Cooperation with the local community** was another lesson learnt. By involving the local community in all stages of the programmes, members of the organization highlighted the human dignity of each and every individual regardless of their socio-economic situation.
- ✓ **Collaborative partnership** with government departments, local and international NGOs, and the

communities pays great dividends in a conflict situation. It optimizes the strength of all stakeholders and gives greater results to the beneficiaries. It becomes a “win-win” situation for all concerned.

## **RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT SITUATIONS**

- The assessment of what can be done is the first major step. Those involved must be able to look at the issues and come up with possible solutions.
- During a conflict situation the biggest resource is Human resources which are readily available which can form a focal group. This must be made the most of.
- The focal group must communicate care rather than fear to beneficiaries, despite the fact that they themselves are caught in the same situation. Communication can be done through the use of radio and TV programmes (Talking Drums radio programme), leaflets, handouts and posters, teachers, and market women.
- After deciding on a plan of action, focal group must divide tasks and form ad hoc groups to work in communities.
- In a conflict situation, time is of the utmost importance. Time can mean life or death and as such it is imperative that it be used well.
- All partners must be involved immediately. The organization must be open and ready to adopt and adapt throughout the process, because it is necessary to implement, monitor and evaluate simultaneously in response to issues as they unfold.
- Ministries of Education should consider ensuring that peace education is part of their curricula as a way of building tolerance in the education community

- Teachers can be a very effective resource and could be equipped through training to handle emergency situations (where conflict or other)
- The military should be put in measures to deter rape of women and girls in time of conflict, and punish offenders
- Education must be considered as an Emergency service which must be continued during conflict situations. The Basic minimum standards should be adhered to.

## **CONCLUSION**

From its humble beginnings on 25 March 1995, FAWE Sierra Leone has done a lot to advance the education of women and girls in the country. They are, it sometimes seems, the main players in the field of girls' education. If in the thick of the war they educated girls even in the face of bullets, it is not surprising that at the end of the war they now manage 3 formal primary schools, 56 non-formal primary schools, 9 early childhood centres and 14 skills training centres throughout the country.

Anyone who has lived in a conflict region will appreciate the magnitude of the task FAWE members undertook. The time they spent formulating and executing their plans in such a climate of fear is enough to be commended. How many people in a war situation think of donating to others as members of FAWE did under the proud leadership of its founding members? The testimony of individuals in the society who benefited from FAWE's intervention during that period is a tribute to these women and their actions. Can it be a coincidence that the membership of the organization now stands at 586 women in all regions of the country?