



Educating Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers



FOR MOST OF US IN THE DEVELOPED WORLD, IT IS DIFFICULT TO COMPREHEND THE IDEA OF BASIC SCHOOLING BEING A PRIVILEGE AVAILABLE ONLY TO A WEALTHY FEW. YET IN SIERRA LEONE, A COUNTRY ONLY RECENTLY EMERGED FROM SEVERAL YEARS OF BLOODY CIVIL WAR, THERE ARE MANY BARRIERS TO EDUCATION. THERE IS NO GOVERNMENT PROVISION FOR FREE SECONDARY SCHOOLS, AND STUDENTS MUST PAY FOR THEIR UNIFORMS, TEXT BOOKS AND EXAMS. AS A RESULT, THE ADULT LITERACY RATE IS A STAGGERINGLY LOW 29.6%.

MIRIAM MASON HOPES ACCESS TO EDUCATION WILL PROVIDE MUCH-NEEDED DIGNITY AND EMPOWERMENT TO A GENERATION THAT HAS BEEN RAISED IN A CLIMATE OF CORRUPTION, FEAR AND VIOLENCE.

Thanks to British teacher Miriam Mason, hundreds of young Sierra Leoneans now have access to free education at the schools which she has established in the northern and western areas of the country. Her students are young people whose lives have been seriously affected by the war. They are aged between 11 and 30 and some have been out of school for anything up to 13 years. They include former child soldiers, girl mothers, refugees and orphans – most of whom would formerly have had little hope of going back to school.

Until 1999, Mason was working as head of modern languages at a school in south London. Committed since 1994 to helping children financially in Sierra Leone following an educational exchange visit made by her younger brother, Mason found herself increasingly disillusioned with what she calls the “political correctness and hidden agendas” of the UK education system. In 1996, she began to travel to Sierra Leone during her school holidays, making plans to relocate and start a school.

Delayed by the ongoing war, which saw UN staff evacuated from Freetown in January 1999, she finally arrived in July 2000,

where at first she established a classroom for 20 children on the veranda of her rented house. “I was very naïve,” she recalls with a wry smile. “I thought just encouraging people to do things would be enough, but nothing was as simple as that.”

As an example, she cites her uphill struggle to get more female students into her schools. Not only has she encountered considerable resistance from families, many of whom still believe it unnecessary to educate girls, but the girls themselves often retain the view that a husband and child confer higher social status than a high school diploma.

Even today, three schools and six years of persuasion later, only 20% of students in her Freetown school and 10% in the other two, situated upcountry, are girls. In early 2007, Mason recruited two women to front a “getting girls into school” project – first to research the barriers which remain, then to pilot the schemes needed to break them down.

Official statistics for Sierra Leone make grim reading. Situated in tropical West Africa, bordering the north Atlantic, the country is listed on the United Nations Human Development Index as the



- ▲ SERVING LUNCH IN THE KITCHEN AT MAGBENI SCHOOL
 - ▶ GIRLS PAINTING A MURAL DURING WOMEN'S WEEK, AT THE START OF MIRIAM'S INITIATIVE TO GET GIRLS INTO SCHOOL AND KEEP THEM THERE
 - ◀ SCIENCE LAB WITH EX-EDUCAID STUDENT, AUGUSTINE BUNDOR, NOW A JUNIOR MEMBER OF STAFF
 - ◀ (OPPOSITE PAGE)
- A SECONDARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM



world's second poorest. Life expectancy is just 42 years for women and 38 for men, and the CIA estimates per capita GDP for 2006 at just US\$900 (the estimate for the US is \$43,500). The average Sierra Leonean monthly income would barely cover the cost of half a dozen cappuccinos in London or New York.

The use during the civil war by both government and rebel forces of child soldiers has been well documented. Many were separated from their homes and families at a very young age and forced to fight. Many were forced to commit acts of tremendous brutality under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or simple fear. A number of these former combatants have found their way to Mason's schools. Inevitably, some of them are deeply traumatized by the abuses they have both suffered and been forced to perpetrate, and find it hard to settle into the disciplined routine of school life.

"We recognize our limitations," says Mason, "and we just try to do for them what we do well. I'm not trained as a trauma counselor. My job is to provide the students with normality. I don't want to know that Moses is an ex-combatant; I want to know whether Moses has done his maths homework."

The three schools have a rigorous entrance policy, insisting on summer school attendance followed by an examination, but, as is to be expected, the only free secondary schools in the country are massively over-subscribed. "It's horrible turning kids away," Mason admits. "Last year we turned away about 400 on 1st September, and for days and days afterwards."

Mason's charity, EducAid, covers all educational costs for her 700 or so students, providing free tuition, materials, exams and – crucially – a hot meal every day. The charity is funded by voluntary donations and by the occasional small grant from the UK Government's Department for International Development, and has grown from two members of staff in 2000 to 20 today, covering the

full range of junior and secondary subjects in arts, science and commercial faculties. Many of the local staff continue with their own studies alongside their teaching.

The EducAid students consistently obtain significantly better exam results than the national average. Mason is particularly proud of the youngsters who have gone on to study engineering, economics, political science and accounting at Fourah Bay College, and medicine at the College of Medicine and Health Science, which form part of the University of Sierra Leone. Without her help, these bright and dedicated students would have faced a bleak future.

Mason believes that access to education will provide much-needed dignity and empowerment to a generation that has been raised in a climate of corruption, fear and violence. "Since the war," she says, "it's as if people have found new ways of being poor – not just materially but also in terms of integrity and ambition. They have a right to understand that it's possible for them to achieve, and to be given the means to achieve it."

As well as professional satisfaction, Mason has found personal happiness in Sierra Leone, marrying her neighbor, Alhassan, with whom she now has a 2-year-old son, Kofi. When not teaching, she spends time in the UK, tirelessly raising funds for the charity and awareness of the social, economic and political issues which Sierra Leone continues to face.

"I don't think I'm doing anything remarkable," she says, with characteristic humility. "When I look back, I am conscious of how extremely lucky I was in receiving a western education. I now feel that it has left me with certain responsibilities to pass that same opportunity on to as many as I can." ■

For further information, visit www.educaid.org.uk