

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Secret Societies and Women's Access to Justice in Sierra Leone: Bridging the Formal and Informal Divide

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In Sierra Leone, customary systems of governance have long been recognized as feasible alternatives to justice provision, particularly as formal institutions have yet to adequately address the barriers women face in accessing justice. However, the focus has often been on the chieftaincy, an institution largely dominated by men. In this paper, Women's Secret Societies are explored under the premise that such institutions might be better at providing access to justice for women. The paper shows that customary institutions, including Women's Secret Societies, by embracing cultural norms and values that undermine women, cannot necessarily serve as a better alternative for women to access justice. While these societies can be important sources of power, they are constrained in terms of what they do for women given their continued association with cultural practices like female genital mutilation and the shifting norms regarding the importance of their role in Sierra Leone society. Additionally, competition between formal and informal sources of power, particularly in the domain of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), provides some limitations regarding what they can do in this arena. At the same time, given that culture is not static, the paper explores the possibility of engaging with these organizations in ways that could help complement the justice services available to women.

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## Introduction

In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the wake of decades of civil conflict, security sector reform (SSR) assumed a prominent role in international and security development agendas as part of peace building and democratization priorities for many African states. Over time, however, SSR has been criticized for being overly state-centric. Reform takes as its starting point the archetypical Weberian State, which grants monopoly over

the legitimate use of violence to the state. Thus, reform agendas have focused principally on the formal systems of security, policing and justice (Albrecht and Burr 2009; Gbla 2006). In so doing, reform efforts have largely ignored the contested nature and practice of authority in many African contexts, where intersections of formality and informality dominate and a plurality of actors and institutions, both formal and informal, compete, cooperate and contend for power while the reach of the state remains underdeveloped.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition of the contested,

multi-levelled nature of authority in many African states. Correspondingly, there has been discussion around the need to recognize and include informal systems of security and justice in SSR initiatives, as non-state actors can and do play instrumental roles in security provision in various contexts (Baker 2008; Lund 2001). From this perspective, for reform to be successful, it must take on-the-ground realities into account (Grindle 2004). In this context, hybridity as a concept has received growing acceptance as a good way to counter liberal mainstream approaches to state building and to recognize locally grounded "more authentic" structures that in theory enjoy greater legitimacy where the reach of the state is minimal (MacGinty and Sanghera 2013). However, as Bagayoko, Hutchful and Luckham (2016: 2) write, "Whilst references to the informal security and justice sector have crept into the SSR and state-building toolkits, thus far they have been based upon incomplete empirical understanding of how this sector actually functions, and in particular of the complex interplay between formal and informal actors and institutions, which determine how policies play out on the ground and impact (or not) on the lives of citizens and communities as well as on the security of the state."

This paper offers a contribution to empirical studies on how hybridity functions in practice, particularly regarding widening access to justice for the most marginalized within society. It focuses on Women's Secret Societies and asks whether they are a better source for justice resolution, with a focus on SGBV crimes. Sierra Leone provides a good frame of reference, because unlike many other contexts, customary actors in Sierra Leone have long enjoyed legitimacy alongside the state; a legitimacy that has even been formally circumscribed within the law. However, discussions on hybridity often lack a gender lens (McLeod 2015) and many of the studies on customary justice in Sierra Leone have tended to focus on institutions largely dominated by men, namely, the paramount chieftaincy system (see, for example, Fanthorpe 2006 and Sawyer 2008), which has

been criticized for reflecting patriarchal values and perpetuating the constraints women face in accessing justice in Sierra Leone. However, there are other institutions that wield power outside of male institutional structures, such as Women's Secret Societies, of which less has been written. These societies form the basis of enquiry for this study as these institutions are arguably both perpetrators of violence against women, while at the same time, wielding a great deal of power to address crimes against women. In light of works that embrace the concept of hybridity and focusing on customary institutions as possible alternatives, it is surprising that there is little focus on these institutions. One would assume that they can and do play integral roles in administering justice for women and should also be a key avenue for interventions.

### **Approach and Overview**

The paper focuses on bodily integrity as the main area of insecurity for women, both during conflict and in the post war reconstruction period, particularly as it also has implications on other areas of women's welfare. Globally, one study estimates that 1 in 3 women will be raped or abused in her lifetime (Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller 1999). Other works have made links between high rates of violence against women and war (Stark 2011; Hossain, et al 2010). Sierra Leone has not been immune to these trends: during the war, violence against women was prevalent with women raped, kidnapped, forced to fight and serve as "bush" wives (Coulter 2008). Another study examining knowledge, attitudes and behaviors around HIV/AIDS, reported that 76.7 percent of 144 women surveyed reported either being beaten by their male partner or forced into sexual intercourse (Coker and Richter 1998). Such violence has continued in peacetime. Since 2009, Rainbo Centres<sup>1</sup> in Kono, Kenema and Freetown have supported over 14,616 women and girls, who have experienced both sexual and intimate partner violence. In this study, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus

group discussions (FGDs) reinforce this information.

Given the positive ways in which hybridity has increasingly been discussed, and the need for more empirical studies to assess whether indeed hybridity offers better access to justice for marginalized people, this research examined the following key questions: can organizations that are primarily female provide better alternatives for women to access justice? Are they perceived as more legitimate than security arrangements encapsulated by the state? Do they serve to strengthen national structures or undermine them? To what extent can these serve as a potential positive source for those that argue in favor of hybridity, and ultimately protect the welfare of citizens, especially women? Such a study is important because despite years of SSR in Sierra Leone, civil society activists, NGOs and scholars alike acknowledge that justice still does not work for women, suggesting the need for new interventions.

In examining the interplay between formal and customary institutions in Sierra Leone as it pertains to issues of gender and justice, the paper proceeds in five parts. I first define the key concepts employed in this paper and outline my methodology. Following this, processes of SSR in the formal sector in Sierra Leone are reviewed, looking at the components of reform and their limitations for women. I then review customary systems of justice currently operating in Sierra Leone and problematize the discussion of hybridity between formal and informal sources of justice. Within this frame, secret societies are examined, and their potential to serve as alternative sources of justice for women discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this for the notion of hybridity and whether and how this can benefit women in accessing justice in Sierra Leone.

### **Definitions**

In Sierra Leone, not only is there much overlap between what is considered the formal sector and the informal sector, institutions

that have historically been perceived as informal, such as the paramount chieftaincy, have had their roles formalized through laws and decrees that regulate their interaction with state institutions of security (Vincent 2012; Baker 2005). Thus, the line between what can be considered formal and informal is blurred in practice, in response to various pressures, including cultural change, rules of the state, and changes in the external conditions in which they operate. Nevertheless, for ease of reference, in this paper, justice institutions that are part of the state's organs are referred to as formal, while largely societal-based institutions including chieftaincy, secret societies and other similar groups are categorized as customary, with the understanding that in practice, the relationships are much more fluid than these terms imply.

Hybridity is used to denote the interrelationship between formal and customary organizations. Drawing on Bagayako, Hutchful and Luckham (2016: 6), hybridity is understood as 'the multiple sites of political authority and governance where security is enacted and negotiated' including 'the multiple ways traditional, personal, kin-based or clientelistic logics interact with modern, imported, or rational actor logics in the shifting historical conditions of particular national and local contexts'. While the concept of hybridity does a welcome job of problematizing simplistic understandings of justice and security provision in non-western states, the assumption that customary sources of justice are potentially better at providing security for the most marginalized must also be interrogated.

In this paper, justice primarily refers to access to formal mechanisms of redress, including the police and the courts, which are in line with dominant human rights norms. The focus is on receiving justice for SGBV crimes as they are among the foremost security threats faced by women. SGBV as defined here includes any form of physical violence committed against women and girls, including rape, domestic assault and other forms of physical violence. While SGBV crimes can

indeed be perpetrated against females as well as males, the focus in this paper is on violence against women and girls (VAWG) as they are disproportionately affected.

### Methodology

Data for this paper was collected from qualitative interviews and FGDs. Research was conducted over several missions to Sierra Leone from 2015 to 2018. FGDs and KIIs were conducted in all four regions in Sierra Leone: Freetown (Western Area), Bo and Bonthe (South) and Kambia (North). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with questions tailored to the different interview participants. Interviews were conducted with nearly 30 respondents from the following categories: participants affiliated with formal systems of justice, namely police, lawyers, and civil society activists, including women's rights actors and members of international and national NGOs; key elites within the relevant line ministries of Justice and Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs; as well as members of secret societies, including those in leadership roles like the *Soweis*. Seven FGDs<sup>2</sup> were held with women and men to understand their experiences with justice as meted out by secret society members and to see how they experience both the formal and informal avenues to security in their daily lives. While conducting field research, meetings on women's rights, justice, and policing issues were also observed.

### Approaches to Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone

As one of the countries emerging from civil war early in the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Sierra Leone along with countries like Liberia and the DRC underwent security sector reform as a means of ensuring greater peace for citizens in the country. These interventions were part of the approach to state reconstruction that surfaced in the late 1980s, with international actors focusing efforts on "state building," or strengthening governmental institutions as a central component of reconstructing states emerging out of war (Paris and Sisk

2009). This liberal peace-building model acknowledged that for peace to endure, the institutional foundations of fragile countries needed to be strengthened, or in some cases, reconstructed entirely. In addition, despite the tragedy of conflict, scholars have posited that post-war contexts offer potential space for the creation of new institutions and new ways of thinking (Mobekk 2010; Smet 2009; Duffield 2001), including altering patriarchal systems and attitudes that have disenfranchised and marginalized women, providing possibilities to promote greater incorporation of the needs of women in the security sector (Meintjes et al 2001; Koen 2006; Arostegui 2013).

Along these lines, reforms in Sierra Leone included initiatives to strengthen the ministry of justice; rebuild, train and equip the police; rebuild courts and train the judiciary; undertake legislative reform; provide paralegal assistance and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms; improve the quality of justice within local courts; and establish oversight mechanisms (Jackson and Albrecht 2010; Castillejo 2009; Gbla 2006; Fanthorpe 2001). Examples of reform efforts include the 2001 establishment of Family Support Units (FSUs) in the police sector to help address sexual and gender based violence through providing safe and receptive spaces that would encourage women to come forward; the establishment of policies within the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) toward making the institution more gender responsive, such as the 2008 Gender Mainstreaming and the Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment Policies; and the creation of Police Local Partnership Boards, introduced in 1999 as part of community policing geared toward facilitating communication between the police and local communities (Baker 2007). However, scholars have argued about the sense of focusing reforms on the formal institutions of the state, questioning attempts to reconstruct institutions that did not necessarily work well in the first place (Herbst 1996).

Smith-Hohn (2010) has criticized reform efforts in Sierra Leone for focusing primarily

on formal instruments, leaving out non-state actors with possibly greater legitimacy and support from citizens in rural areas. These actors could arguably be seen to dispense justice with more effectiveness and efficiency in addition to having greater legitimacy. For Smith-Hohn, where the state was not seen to be meeting the security needs of the population, there was a tendency to disengage (exit) and seek alternatives. It is within this context that she believed customary security mechanisms took on salience. In a 2006 perception survey, she found that 26.6 percent of respondents in Sierra Leone said that secret society members were an important source of justice and security, a finding that was further reinforced by FGDs where headmen and *Soweis* – initiators of Female Genital Cut (FGC) – were all listed as actors of whom respondents had a positive impression as dispensers of security and justice (Smith-Hohn, 2010: 103). She concludes that the role of traditional non-state actors, such as secret societies, in the security arena is a marked feature of the post-conflict environment and as such, it should be easier to acknowledge and integrate such actors into the reform process (Smith-Hohn, 2010).

However, it is unclear how these actors can contribute to gender justice given the concerns about culture and the role of masculinity. This raises the question of whether integration is necessarily easier or more desirable. Before addressing this question, the next section examines the challenges women face in accessing justice in the formal sector.

### **Experiencing Justice in Sierra Leone: Limitations of the Formal Sector**

Interviews with a variety of civil society activists, NGO workers and government personnel, noted a host of constraints women continue to face in accessing justice in the formal sector in Sierra Leone. Respondent interviews reveal that police still have difficulties pursuing SGBV crimes. Although FSUs have been a welcome addition, they face resource constraints, including low numbers of recruited

staff (CARL 2014) and the inability to pursue perpetrators as they either lack vehicles, the money to buy fuel if vehicles are available, or monies to pay for public transport to undertake investigations.<sup>3</sup> According to CARL's 2014 report, Sierra Leone allocated just \$400 a year to FSUs to fight SGBV crimes, compared to the nearly \$30,000 requested. There were only 82 FSUs in the country, many of which were based in Freetown, despite the high numbers of SGBV crimes in rural areas. This means that women sometimes travel great distances to access FSUs, costing them transport and/or lost income.<sup>4</sup>

Women police officers also documented the need for more sensitivity and counseling training as well as for more female officers. They found that women were still afraid to come forward due to fear their cases would not be handled with sensitivity, the lack of availability of female police officers with whom to speak, or concerns that police would be unsympathetic. According to the former Director of the Rainbo Centres, Tania Sheriff<sup>5</sup>, FSUs were still unable to properly document rape cases and have charged rape cases to court incorrectly, in certain instances possibly to ensure that cases were dismissed. She also noted that there was an inherent lack of clarity regarding the law, the role of the police and the role of the Centres, both on the part of the general population as well as the FSUs. Examples cited included cases where families would seek the assistance of the police in the event that their underage teenage daughter might have been abandoned with a baby, or cases where teenage fathers refused to support the mothers of their babies. In these situations, families went to the police to secure financial support for the baby, months or even years after the incident, rather than pursue charges of rape, especially where the girls in question were underage. She noted that, for families, the crime was not necessarily the rape but rather concern for financial compensation and child-care. FSUs would then refer these families to the Rainbo Centre for physical examination. However, given the time

passed and the evolution of the issue to one of abandonment, these crimes were no longer within the remit of the Centre.

Similar to the FSUs, there is a shortage of courts, particularly in the rural areas,<sup>6</sup> and some women have to travel long distances to access courts.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, because courts often have a backlog of cases, cases are often adjourned and women face repeated visits before their cases might be heard.<sup>8</sup> Other interview respondents noted that courts were often uncomfortable without air conditioning (AC), and lawyers did not have clerks to assist in taking notes, making it more likely they would adjourn cases because of fatigue or discomfort.<sup>9</sup> Despite financial support of Saturday courts as well as the installation of AC units to make the courts more comfortable,<sup>10</sup> pursuing one's case through the court system took time and money,<sup>11</sup> which for many poor victims were in short supply. The Legal Aid Board, convened by an act of parliament to increase access to justice for poor people as well as to facilitate the expeditious movement of cases through the system, was also overburdened and under-resourced.<sup>12</sup>

Another initiative to help women access justice was to provide transport for women to attend courts.<sup>13</sup> However, even with transportation provided, women still faced an intimidating and forbidding process: court sessions are conducted in English, which along with high illiteracy rates presents a significant language barrier; sessions are long and boring; and victims face the prospect of testifying in open court, often without a lawyer, on sensitive and painful topics.<sup>14</sup> This was compounded by cultural factors where women are raised to be docile and obedient and to protect the name of the family, leading women to be fearful about participation.<sup>15</sup> Castillejo (2009: 11) writes that women's organizations have talked about the stigmatization and ostracism faced by women who bring cases against male family members; these women are considered "bad women" and alienated from their families.

Underlying the constraints mentioned by respondents was the sentiment that there

was a culture of impunity and lack of concern when it came to SGBV crimes. Despite an increasing number of these crimes being reported, there was no corresponding increase in the number of convictions. Respondents appeared to agree that rape is yet to be taken seriously as a crime; the perception that rape and other acts of violence against women can be perpetrated with impunity is supported by the low number of convictions and lack of apparent consequences for these crimes.<sup>16</sup> Despite ongoing reforms in the justice sector, many of the underlying reasons behind violence against women remain unaddressed, as does the physical capacity for both the police and the law courts to deliver justice.

Respondents confirmed findings in the literature: it is difficult for women to access justice in the formal sector, suggesting a role, and even in some cases, a preference for informal actors. As Smith-Hohn (2010) has pointed out, where the state is unable to perform key duties such as securing justice for citizens, informal institutions for security and justice can pose an appropriate alternative. However, the feasibility as well as appropriateness of justice meted out by these institutions depend on the power relations inherent within these institutions. In terms of informal sources of justice, chiefs and native courts are often cited as an alternative. Less discussed have been secret societies, although several authors have acknowledged that they have a role to play in ensuring access to justice and security. The discussion turns now to customary alternatives to justice and reform efforts in Sierra Leone.

### **Mapping the Informal Justice and Security Sector in Sierra Leone**

Hybridity has long been a feature of justice and security sector provision in Sierra Leone (Albrecht 2017). For Albrecht, chieftaincy has both shaped and been shaped by the state, drawing its power and authority from a centrally governed authority as well as from sacred and other powers derived from localized membership within secret societies and

kinship ties among other sources. Emerging out of the system of indirect rule implemented by Britain, Sierra Leone has a dual governance system where constitutional rule co-exists with customary law, although the former ostensibly takes precedence when conflicts arise. Between 1896 and 1951, the so-called Protectorate, as the hinterlands beyond Freetown were called, was governed under indirect rule: chiefs were responsible for judging all civil and criminal cases between “natives” in their jurisdictions; natives defined as Africans that lived in the Protectorate as opposed to Freetown, the colony, who were governed under British (common) law.

Although a series of acts have attempted to bring the chieftaincy increasingly under the jurisdiction of the state, for the most part, it continues to function largely separate and independent of the state. Acts and ordinances like the Protectorate Courts Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1932, the 1937 Chieftom Councils Act, the 1963 Local Courts Act and the Local Courts Act of 2011 all reflect clear efforts to regulate the institution, providing distinct boundaries regarding jurisdiction and adjudication powers. In practice, however, the overstepping of boundaries is the norm.

Though excesses of the chieftaincy system have been blamed in part for the civil war (Richards 1998; Hanlon 2005), some of which continue in the post-war era (Fanthorpe 2006), they nevertheless remain an important source of authority, justice and policing in rural areas (Jackson 2007). Citizens are more familiar with their chief than elected public officials (M'Cormack-Hale 2015). Afrobarometer data from the most recent round administered in Sierra Leone in 2015, shows that citizens trust customary actors more than both the local council and central government officials: 34 percent of respondents stated they trusted traditional leaders “a lot” and 12.2 percent stated the same for local government. Citizens prefer chiefs to local courts and the police, citing timeliness and a fairer judgment (Fanthorpe and Gaima

2012).<sup>17</sup> Village residents often cite greater access to chiefs than state institutions as the latter simply lack the resources to effectively project force and security in significant ways beyond main urban centers. At least 70 percent of Sierra Leoneans do not have access to the formal justice system (Baker 2008a), and instead, access justice through the network of community-based local courts that have functioned under paramount and local chiefs. Chieftom governance is performed by 149 paramount chiefs and over 15,000 sub-chiefs (section chiefs and town chiefs (Fanthorpe and Gaima 2012). Thus, despite numerous abuses noted by chiefs, they are nevertheless a respected institution and rather than abolition, most people, when asked, would call for reform (Fanthorpe 2006).

While customary institutions are clearly recognized as justice providers in Sierra Leone, the emphasis of attention and reform are on chiefs, who are often the most visible and well-known authority structures in local communities. However, they are not the only actors.

### **An Introduction to Women's Secret Societies**

Much of the research on customary alternatives for justice have focused on chieftom structures as well as chiefs as the principal customary sources of authority. However, Women's Secret Societies have also been named as avenues of justice. Known as *Bondo* in the North and in Freetown and *Sande* in the South, most women in Sierra Leone are members (Bledsoe 1984) and they play instrumental roles in all aspects of community life. Their functions include education in practical skills-based crafts and cultural and historical traditions, the regulation of members and providing a source of mutual insurance for members. According to Carol MacCormack (1979: 27):

“Sande is a women's secret society that initiates girls into womanhood and makes them eligible for marriage. Since social grace, good health,

fertility, successful childbirth and nurturance are not matters to be left to nature but are conditions and events caused by Sande wisdom, rites and practical experience, it is an institution that continues to assist women throughout their adult life."

A primary function of Sande/Bondo is to inculcate girls with the values deemed necessary for a girl to be a good wife and mother, and to conform to culturally-prescribed gender norms. Outside of these functions, the Societies also are relevant political and social instruments; prominent politicians must often belong to a Society before they can be elected, and the Societies are seen as appropriate repositories for economic self-help (Fanthorpe 2007). The primary hallmark of initiation into Bondo Society is through seclusion in the Bondo 'Bush', undergoing female circumcision and what are considered other rites of passage into womanhood. In addition, Secret Societies have their own body of rules that regulate the behavior of both members and non-members alike. They articulate specific values about women and the roles they play in society, in addition to regulating and controlling their behavior.

Similar to Albrecht's (2017) points on hybridity embedded within the institution of chieftaincy, *Soweis* and the Secret Society institutions in which they are an integral part, play simultaneous roles in ordering society at local and national levels. Often *Soweis* juggle multiple roles as keeper of magic and secrets within their communities, while also serving as police officers or "Mammy Queens" (key women leaders in society). Moreover, these institutions are not static; they respond to societal pressures and put pressure on the state. While these Societies are ostensibly informal cultural systems regulating women's behavior, they also exhibit some level of formality and have mobilized to counter and advocate against policies they believe are detrimental to their existence. For instance, they have successfully resisted attempts to outlaw FGC. Although there have been

numerous calls to end the practice, some argue that this is being led by international donors with support from a co-opted civil society in search of donor monies (Kaboto 2018). The success of the first ever "female circumcision awareness week," February 5–10, 2018 spearheaded by pro-female cut activist, Dr. Sia Fuambai Sia Ahmadu, and her organization "Sierra Leone Women are Free to Choose" (SLWAFC), shows that FGC enjoys considerable support in Sierra Leone despite international campaigns and pressure from rights activists in the capital to put an end to the practice. Instead, many people, including politicians have continued to endorse the practice for fear of losing the support of its powerful champions who are able to deliver votes (Bosire 2012; Charley and MacCormack 2012).

Although Secret Societies straddle the formal and customary divide, unlike the chieftaincy system, there are few laws with direct implications on their practices, and they remain largely outside the domain of the state in terms of regulation. Interestingly, Women's Secret Societies are widely revered, if not feared, and rarely interfered with. Secret Societies have been able to challenge male forces as well as play a role in the security and justice sectors. Fanthorpe writes that rural men fear and respect the Societies, especially their putative power to punish them spiritually and physically if they mistreat their wives or transgress Sande/Bondo laws (2007: 19). Charley and MacCormack (2012) recount an example of this in their narration of the difficulty that male police officers had in assisting a mother accusing the Bondo of kidnapping her daughter and forcing her to undergo initiation because men are banned from the Bondo Bush. Secret Society members command enormous respect and fear to which even chiefs are subject. As Bosire (2012: 93) has commented, "not even the chief will go uncensored if they are perceived to act contrary to what is generally regarded as a breach of Bondo society 'laws.'" Part of the fear of Bondo is steeped in the ideology of secrecy, ritual and use of

magical power (Bosire 2012: 124–125); the transgression of laws and mores can lead to spiritual unbalance.

However, others have noted that there is a close relationship between chiefs and Secret Society; both are more commonly on the side of tradition as this is in the interests of both their sources of power. Bosire (2012) also notes that chiefs financially benefit from the Bondo and receive income from marriage levies and license fees. The chiefs are enmeshed in reciprocal ties: support of Bondo in exchange for material and cultural support. While Secret Societies wield considerable power in a society that is often described as deeply patriarchal and have been able to assert their power over formal institutions as embodied by structures like the police, their role begs the question of whether this power sits in line with traditional institutions as embodied by the chieftaincy or challenges them in ways that promote women's agency and power. It is to this question the paper now turns.

### **Secret Societies, Justice and Security Today**

Interviews conducted with *Soweis*, members of Secret Societies, CSO activists, and citizens reveal a mixed picture regarding their participation in security and justice. While the literature paints a picture of a very active presence, interviews reveal a more nuanced story. First, in practice it appeared that although Secret Societies can play a role in enabling women to access justice, theirs is not a very big role, and in fact, is constrained in part by the state. In interviews and FGDs, Secret Societies were not the first point of reference when asked about the possible role that informal institutions could provide for women's access to justice. Even a study on how women seek redress against SGBV does not mention Secret Societies among its discussion of informal justice mechanisms (Denney and Ibrahim 2012).

Participants across the FGDs, tended to outline the same approach taken by women regarding seeking help in the wake of an attack. The most common crimes committed

against women listed by Makeni<sup>18</sup> respondents were sexual harassment, domestic violence (physical and psychological) and rape. In Makeni, respondents listed seeking help at the FSU; from local authorities; human rights activists and institutions such as Access to Justice Law Centre or Timap for Justice; or community elders. In particular, they noted that area or section chiefs were often the first point of contact. However, they also noted that many times women found it difficult to access justice as perpetrators from wealthy families or local law enforcement would side with the perpetrators against the female victims. For the majority of respondents, the lack of political will explained ongoing high levels of abuse of women and girls. They found that local chiefs, for example, were more likely to protect the interest of perpetrators of the violence. While traditional by-laws were a customary mechanism that FGD respondents across all communities noted as one way in which chiefs help to address the issue of VAWG, the frequent mention of compromise and settlement negated the impact of these laws, with women also blaming culture and tradition for the difficulty women faced in accessing justice.<sup>19</sup> For example, women respondents in Makeni attributed the absence of women in leadership positions due to cultural bias and the expectation that they should be subservient to men as contributing to the lack of access to justice.<sup>20</sup>

Secret Societies also did not feature prominently in discussions on security; neither were they the first point of reference for women suffering from abuse. Instead the roles that were frequently mentioned regarding *Soweis* were largely related to the values and norms that form the basis of their power. These included magic, healing and the reproduction of social norms around women's domestic roles. Women pointed out that *Soweis* were instrumental in helping women with remedies for a range of pregnancy-related ailments, including provision of herbs for women who could not conceive as well as those used to reduce morning sickness, ease

delivery and expedite recovery after delivery. They provided herbs to cure fibroids, impotence, sexually-transmitted diseases and other reproductive-related ailments.<sup>21</sup> They were also instrumental in training girls on how to take care of the home and in etiquette.<sup>22</sup> Politically, Society members mobilized women to vote in elections, including marshaling support for Society member candidates.

For most respondents, there was consensus that Secret Society members could play a role in promoting justice for women. However, the types of justice issues over which Secret Societies had jurisdiction tended to be 'smaller' domestic disputes. These ranged from arbitrating cases between husbands and wives (including cases of domestic violence), resolving disputes between women and dealing with cases involving children. Regarding their work with abused women, a *Soweï* from Susan's Bay, one of the slum areas in Freetown said, "If we hear a woman crying, we go and knock on the door, or in some cases, we go and call the police. We warn those who are causing the problem." She added, in Krio, "*woman na bata den kin treat am anyhow* (women are like drums, they treat them anyhow)," indicative of the low regard with which women are held in society.

On child protection issues, *Soweis* helped broker reconciliation between parents and estranged pregnant youth by encouraging parents to take these children back. They also served as mentors for young mothers and provided child-minding functions for others.<sup>23</sup> They mediated in disputes between mothers and children, encouraged school attendance for girls, and for those adhering to the ban on under-age cutting, monitored cutting to prevent child initiation. The *Soweis* also advocated for improved services such as water to help lower the rates of teenage pregnancy arising from girls being vulnerable to attack when travelling long distances to fetch water.<sup>24</sup> They even helped in child labor and trafficking cases. As a *Soweï* from Freetown said, "Many times people go up country and bring kids promising to send them to school.

Instead, they make them work, washing clothes, selling fish, while they take their own children to school." In such cases, she would speak to the offending person and make her send the child to school.

In Freetown, regarding the first point of contact for abuse, respondents were more likely to make a distinction between rural communities and urban communities. Freetonians were more likely to say that rural community members would turn first to family members, who in turn might take them to traditional authorities such as paramount, town and section chiefs. They believed that social norms against reporting domestic violence were among the reasons women were more likely to turn to traditional authorities. However, they again raised concerns with these authorities, citing the greater likelihood of compromise through either advocating payment to a victim or suggesting that a child marry her rapist. On the other hand, they noted that urban dwellers would be more likely to turn to local government structures first, particularly councilors or council chair persons, before going to FSUs. Nevertheless, here too they cited problems of community and family intervention as the largest obstacle women faced in getting justice, followed by financial constraints. Also mentioned was police corruption and bribery by alleged perpetrators, with cases cited of police asking victims and their families for money in return for taking the matter/case forward.

Civil society organizations were also frequently mentioned in FGDs and KIs as important access pathways across target communities. These were the second most frequently mentioned, behind the FSU. They were cited as the principal intermediary bodies that mediated between citizens and formal institutions of the state, such as the police and law courts set up to protect women. Where victims had insufficient money to lodge complaints with the police, needed to travel long distances to attend a court case or required assistance in visiting a health center for rape kits, CSOs were also quick to note that they have been the main

actors to accompany them and help them navigate these systems. When respondents mentioned Secret Societies, it was often as an afterthought or in response to probing.

Although *Soweis* did not feature prominently in discussions on accessing justice for SGBV, they nevertheless play a role here also. However, while *Soweis* affirmed their standing as leaders and opinion shapers in their local communities as well as their role in maintaining access to justice in their communities, they were quick to comment that they tended to avoid more contentious cases, instead, working on smaller cases that involved minor domestic infractions<sup>25</sup>

In terms of activities, *Soweis* and women members indicated that they helped connect women with justice providers, including the police and FSU. *Soweis* assisted in examining victims for signs of rape prior to taking them to the Chief or the FSU, as well as performed virginity checks. They also assisted in domestic dispute cases, saying that they could invite men who had beaten their wives to the 'bush' for punishment.<sup>26</sup> When probed for details of what this punishment entailed, members intimated that it was about the exercise of their spiritual and medicinal powers, and it appeared to be more of a threat than a substantive punishment.

They gave several reasons for this. One recurring reason was that the state did not permit adjudication on cases of sexual violence and abuse by local authorities and had asked that all such cases be referred to the proper formal authority, including the police and then the courts. Another reason provided was that these cases were often frustrating due to compromise. Several *Soweis* mentioned that, in pursuing justice, they would spend time with a victim and act as a facilitator helping the victim navigate the formal system through assisting with transport to go to the police or accompanying them on court visits, only to find that victims could be persuaded to drop the case through financial incentives. When they would urge the victim not to comply, the victim would become upset with *Soweis* for encouraging

them not to drop the case. As one *Sowei* put it, "We run into families that want to compromise. We end up taking on a case, going to the police, but when the perpetrators give money, the wronged family ends up wanting to drop the case, and bad mouthing us for trying to help."<sup>27</sup>

Another challenge they raised was navigating the barriers inherent in the formal justice system. They were not equipped to handle the costs that came with this engagement, including frequent case adjournment that required multiple trips to the court, or the lack of forensic equipment that would help to strengthen cases of rape and other forms of violence against women. Finally, nearly all FGD members expressed some level of rancor about the current state of the law on cutting. Although it was repeatedly expressed that this topic was not a central issue in the research, *Soweis* frequently mentioned that they felt discriminated against, both by the state as well as those advocating against cutting. A ban was placed on cutting and Bondo activities during the Ebola crisis that has yet to be formally lifted by the government. *Sowei* members expressed that such attempts to stifle their work, as well as what they perceived to be constant attacks and disrespect, left them disinclined to assist in areas of securing justice for women. It must be noted that most women in Sierra Leone appear to be supportive of FGC and most women are Society members.

Clearly, then *Soweis* take on some security functions, mediating particularly on issues relating to women and children. In this way, they are reflective of hybrid justice arrangements that some have argued predominate in settings where the formal sector is absent or weak. Hybridity was further reinforced by the fact that *Soweis* played many roles in their communities, serving on the Local Police Partnership Boards (LPPB) and, in some cases, as working as police officers.<sup>28</sup> However, the fact that they were not an immediate reference for SGBV crimes shows that there is more emphasis on the formal sector and formal institutions for accessing justice, and is

also reflective of general trends in SSR where the emphasis is on addressing the limitations of the formal sector, despite the enduring limitations of such reform efforts.

### **Assessing the Role of Secret Societies in Justice Provision: A Viable Alternative?**

Interviews with CSO respondents seem to suggest that Secret Societies, while wielding much power, do not necessarily serve as a viable alternative for women to access improved justice. For many CSO respondents, these institutions do not dispense justice in line with human rights mandates. Instead, they believed that *Soweis* use tradition and culture to inform their decisions, and were not necessarily trained about available laws regarding some of the issues around which they adjudicated. Moreover, respondents believed their rulings often prioritized keeping community peace, even to the detriment of the female aggrieved member, as they were shaped more by concerns such as the importance of safeguarding the honor of a family name or ensuring that peace was maintained over "justice" as defined from a primarily western-legal perspective.

Prevalent cultural attitudes, which Secret Societies reinforce, suggest that despite their power, they do not behave in ways that challenge the behavior that contributes to violence against women or girls, nor would they be likely to encourage punitive justice mechanisms against perpetrators. As Denney and Ibrahim write, drawing on Bledsoe (1984) and Fanthorpe (2007): "Secret societies teach initiates that a good wife obeys her husband and looks after his needs, putting her interests secondary" (2009: 4). In practice, this meant that battered wives might be counseled to return to their husbands, while the husbands would be admonished to not beat their wives. Furthermore, as customary institutions, these organizations also serve as custodians of customs and traditions in their societies, customs and traditions that ultimately privilege men and maintain the status quo. The very act of cutting, central to the role and identity of

*Soweis*, has itself generally been understood as an act of violence against women and girls as evidenced by the term female genital mutilation. Moreover, as Fanthorpe and Gaima (2012) note, the skills and behavior taught to pubescent initiates are those that are sex-specific, thus reinforcing and reproducing new societal members that conform to conventional expectations and do little to challenge prevalent gender norms.

Moreover, Secret Societies are illustrative of the idea that institutional female representation is not a sufficient condition for transformation, and that cultural contexts must also be considered. Internal relationships among women within the Societies are also characterized by power differentials and the institution also can reinforce insider-outsider relations and perpetuate relations of inequality and exclusion even between women. For example, Bledsoe (1984) has argued that Sande elite women often side with elite men and exploit subordinate women. This means that "justice" is selectively applied. For example, girls discovered to have had sex prior to marriage could face heavy fines, which are then shared among leaders (Bledsoe 1984). As such this research illustrates that women are not homogenous and have diverse interests depending on their positionality in various frames.

A related question is how the society would deal with disputes between two women, one who was a 'native' and the other a 'stranger.' Although *Soweis* have said they adjudicate equally whether women were members or not, examples abound of women who are not members of Secret Societies being ostracized, or forced to join. For example, *Soweis* within Bondo Society, and other society members have at various points attacked women that have criticized their practices, with victims sometimes receiving little to no support from the police. For instance, in 2008, Manjia Balema Samba, a female journalist reporting for UN Radio, was stripped naked, beaten and paraded around town in Kenema District by Bondo Society members, following an interview that highlighted health and other concerns with cutting

practices. Despite police intervention, no arrests were ultimately made. The Societies also have their own laws against infraction of their codes, and can and do mete out punishments for perceived violations. For example, uninitiated women/girls who in some way trespass on Bondo boundaries can also be forcibly initiated or made to pay a fine. In May 2014, a 9-year-old girl who allegedly trespassed by climbing a tree near the Bondo Bush and witnessed goings on within was forcibly initiated after her father failed to come up with the fine levied by the Society for the violation (Fonti 2014). Three days after the initiation, the girl died, with post-mortem results revealing excessive bleeding as the cause. While arrests were made, and the matter was under investigation, the case has revealed some of the tensions between formal and informal modes of justice; police were loath to touch the case given perceptions about the power of these organizations.

Despite these salient concerns, the perception that Secret Societies adjudicate outside of western-centric human rights norms need not negate working with them in the interests of securing justice for women. After all, reform efforts have been aimed at the chieftaincy sector, who can be critiqued in the same way. In addition, the formal sector continues to be problematic despite reform interventions. Encouraging women to use formal channels of recourse when these channels are woefully inadequate in addressing these crimes points to the need for new approaches to complement efforts that focus on strengthening the judiciary and the police to investigate and successfully prosecute these crimes so that women will be encouraged to report them. Given the importance of the traditional sector in people's lives, and the weaknesses of the formal sector, it raises the question whether the state's attempts to move adjudication for these crimes into the formal sector is the most appropriate policy. For many people, customary arrangements can also deliver justice more swiftly than going through the formal court system. This suggests that rather than ignore customary

arrangements and focus reform on the formal sector, state and non-state actors should explore how they can work alongside and with these institutions, encouraging them to assist in disseminating justice but targeting them for reform as well. This could include training and sensitization on women's rights, and engaging with male and female leaders on sources of women's socio-economic and political marginalization as well as ways to engender justice provided.

Amid the calls from certain sectors, including international activists as well as human rights organizations operating within largely western frameworks, to ban FGC, there are conversations underway in Sierra Leone about how to make these women more relevant outside of their cutting roles, especially to encourage them to renounce cutting. Given their presence across all communities in Sierra Leone, the respect which they largely still command, and the awareness that they concern themselves with women's issues, their involvement might be one way to provide rural women with help in navigating very difficult processes. The Secret Societies could be mobilized and supported to increase the numbers of women with access to the service of mediators able to assist them in navigating formal justice channels.

Compensation schemes for their roles in justice provision should also be included. Interviews suggests that finding alternative sources of revenue is one way to decrease cutting, which serves as a primary means of income generation for *Soweis*. For example, Amnet<sup>29</sup> has found that involvement of *Soweis* in livelihood projects has led to a reduction in their involvement in FGC. According to Hawa Samai, *Soweis* that have participated in these projects "see their role [as *Soweis*] as more seasonal compared to their involvement in livelihood projects, which is more sustainable. They no longer have time for FGC activities."<sup>30</sup>

However, incorporating them in this role will not be easy. As Denney (2014) has pointed out, western donor agencies and institutions are reluctant to work with what

they believe are illiberal elements, preferring instead to work with state-centric development actors. Even when non-state actors, such as chiefs, have been targeted for reform, the shallow understanding of their nature and functioning has led to superficial intervention efforts and continued concerns about illiberal practices within these institutions. More research needs to be done to understand the best ways to incorporate *Soweis* in helping women access justice for SGBV, while at the same time strengthening the roles they already play in mediating smaller domestic disputes.

Scholars have pointed to the “uneasy co-existence” between formal and traditional sources of authority. This research shows that they can reinforce each other. Socio-cultural factors that lead to the hindrance of justice in the formal sector are also present in the informal sector, with the consequence that women ultimately face obstacles in accessing justice through both systems. While Secret Societies can and do challenge male figures, and have been able to secure justice for women, most rulings, including domestic abuse cases, are guided by a cultural framework that continues to privilege men and advocates a circumscribed understanding of the role of women. However, in the same way that these power relations must be questioned in order for women to enjoy justice in the formal sector, the same must be done in the informal sector. Bringing these institutions concretely into reform efforts is one step toward making sure this happens.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These Centres function as Sexual Assault Referral Centers providing medical, psychosocial and legal referral services to women affected by SGBV. They also help survivors plan their next steps, including advice, guidance and even some financial assistance if they want to pursue their case through the formal legal system. While nurses treat women, the Centre also provides a doctor, to facilitate the process for women who wish to take their

cases to court. They work closely with Family Support Units (FSUs), and other government agencies.

<sup>2</sup> Three of the FGDS, held in Makeni, Kenema and Freetown in 2016, had a balanced number of women and men (four of each), including representatives from the following groups: Ward Committees (local development groups), ‘Mammy Queens’, business women and men, CSOs, teachers, nurses, Family Support Unit representatives of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), chiefs, and Muslim and Christian Religious leaders. Two focus groups were conducted in Freetown with *Soweis*, also in 2016. An additional two focus group discussions were conducted with approximately twenty women leaders each in two villages in Bonthe in October 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mira Koroma, Head, Family Support Unit, and Jeneba Shyllon, Protocol Officer, Gender Unit February 1, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Tommy, Director, Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law, April 22, 2016; Interview with Mira Koroma, Head, Family Support Unit, February 1, 2016; Interview with Nicky Spencer Coker, Legal Aid Board, August 28, 2015; Interview with Baidu Massaquoi, Programme Specialist, UNWomen, August 23, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Tania Sheriff, Executive Director, Rainbo Centres, April 19, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> According to The Government of Sierra Leone Justice Reform Strategy 2008–2010, 70 percent of the population finds it difficult to access formal courts.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Nicky Spencer Coker, Legal Analyst, Legal Aid Board; Interview with Lois Kawa, lawyer, member of CSO, LAWYERS, Interview with Ibrahim Tommy, Executive Director, CARL; Interview with Tigidanke Bayoh, Woman Civil Society Leader, September 9, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Governance Advisor, Irish Aid, September 1, 2015.

- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Governance Advisor, Irish Aid, Interview with Tania Sheriff, Executive Director, Rainbo Centres, April 19, 2016.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with Governance Advisor, Irish Aid, September 1, 2015.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Nicky Spencer Coker, Legal Aid Board, August 28, 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Nicky Spencer Coker, Legal Aid Board, August 28, 2015.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Governance Advisor, Irish Aid, September 1, 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Christiana Davies Cole, Project Officer, LAWYERS, August 22, 2016; Ms Baidu Massaquoi, Programme Specialist, UNWomen, August 23, 2016.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Governance Advisor, Irish Aid.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with Honorable Rugiatu Neneh Turay, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Gender, Children and Women's Affairs, August 24, 2016; Nicky Spencer Coker, August 28, 2015; and Governance Advisor, IrishAid, September 1, 2015.
- <sup>17</sup> This section is heavily indebted to Fanthorpe and Gaima's 2012 review of informal justice in Sierra Leone for the Access to Security and Justice Programme.
- <sup>18</sup> Focus Group Discussion, Makeni, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2016.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Mr. Joseph Mansaray, Head of Family Support Unit, Makeni, August 2016.
- <sup>20</sup> Makeni FGD and Interview with Ya Sampa Nyadae, *Soweis* Head, Makeni, August 2016.
- <sup>21</sup> Bonthe Focus Group Discussion with *Soweis* and women leaders, (Sogbini Tihun and Imperi Mogbremo), October 6–7, 2017.
- <sup>22</sup> Bonthe Focus Group Discussion with *Soweis* and women leaders, (Sogbini Tihun and Imperi Mogbremo), October 6–7, 2017.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Ms. Hawa Samai, Head of Amnet, Freetown, March 16, 2018.
- <sup>24</sup> *Soweis* Focus Group Discussion, Freetown, April 18, 2016, Bonthe Focus Group Discussion with *Soweis* and Women Leaders, October 6–7, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> *Soweis* Focus group discussion, Freetown, April 19, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Bonthe Focus Group Discussion with *Soweis* and women leaders, (Sogbini Tihun and Imperi Mogbremo), October 6–7, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> *Soweis* Focus Group Discussion, April 18, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> *Soweis* Focus Group Discussion, April 18, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Hawa Samai, March 16, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Hawa Samai, March 16, 2018.

## Acknowledgement

This research was part of a project on Hybrid Security Governance in Africa spearheaded by the African Security Sector Network (ASSN), Ghana, and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). I am grateful to Seton Hall University for a sabbatical that provided time to conduct research as well as members of the ASSN research consortium, Aisha Fofana Ibrahim for invaluable assistance and three anonymous referees for helpful comments.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** M'Cormack-Hale, F. 2018. Secret Societies and Women's Access to Justice in Sierra Leone: Bridging the Formal and Informal Divide. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 7(1): 13, pp. 1–17, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.604>

**Submitted:** 01 December 2017 **Accepted:** 23 March 2018 **Published:** 26 June 2018

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