



**Defence for
Children International
Sierra Leone**

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DCI – Sierra Leone
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Gender Sensitive approach is key to the fight against the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD)

From the outset of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, Defence for Children International Sierra Leone (DCI-SL) has observed that women and girls are at greater risk of contracting the disease than men and boys. Though the official statistics released to the public are not usually disaggregated by age and sex, these observations have been echoed by UN bodies, humanitarian and human rights organisations monitoring the crisis, as well as health workers. UNICEF in particular has reported that women across the three most affected countries account for 55 to 60 percent of deaths in the epidemic.¹ DCI-SL believes that this heightened risk is the result of traditional gender roles, wherein women – both formally, as first line health care workers, and informally, within the family and community - are often intimately involved in the care of the sick and dying, and in the handling of the bodies of those who have passed away. Women also tend to have domestic responsibilities within the community that involve high contact with others, putting them at an increased risk of exposure. Despite this involvement, Sierra Leone's official response to the Ebola crisis is in desperate need of an integrated gender perspective and the voices of women.

Firstly, nurses in Sierra Leone – the majority of whom are women – have borne the brunt of the crisis thus far. Of over 50 health workers who have lost their lives to the EVD, the vast majority have been nurses, over 65% of whom were women. Two of the key sites of EVD transmission are hospitals and health centers. Women tend to be some of the most frequent visitors to hospitals and health centres, as they are often accompanying children or being monitored during pregnancy.

Secondly, the domestic roles that women and girls play can increase their exposure to Ebola and other contagious infections. Women tend to be the primary caregivers of the sick, the aged, and children. They are also usually the ones that stay at home to receive and attend to visitors including strangers. In addition, many of the domestic chores undertaken

¹ Human Rights Watch release - Respect rights in Ebola response – 15 September 2014



by women cause them to interact more frequently with neighbours and other members of the community. For example, women are often the ones going to the market to buy food items for the home and/or selling these food items. Market places, particularly in the cities and big towns, are usually over-crowded and people who go there cannot avoid touching because of congestion. Women are the ones taking care of the many children orphaned by

Ebola and this also puts them at risk. For example, a frontline officer of the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police died after she volunteered to foster an Ebola orphan who ended up infecting her. Both the child and the FSU officer died in this month of October 2014 from Ebola infection.

Traditionally, women are also responsible for the washing of dead bodies of deceased women and children. The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) has reported that 70 - 80% of all new cases nationally are caused by people having contact with the bodies of those who have died from Ebola, and this percentage is increasing. Since women engage in washing more dead bodies than men, they are at a higher risk of Ebola infection. Additionally, after a death, relations and friends often come to sympathise and are expected to stay with the deceased family until the 40th day ceremony is done. Women are typically the ones to stay at these funeral homes to sympathise, provide support, and help the deceased family to organise all the funeral ceremonies required. Other traditional practices such as female genital mutilation are not only gender-based violence, but also put women at risk of Ebola and other infections.

Despite all of the above, men are still the ones in charge of the government's response programme to end Ebola in Sierra Leone. Men are at the helm of all initiatives, controlling resources and determining how they should be distributed - even though they are less affected overall than women. Even at the time that a woman was heading the Health Ministry, the actual decision makers and vault controllers were men. The endemic corruption in the Ministry and an entrenched patriarchal system of governance undermined the success of the female Minister. Following criticisms of inefficiency, the President replaced her with a man; however, the situation has not improved. As a result, the President has now reconfigured the management mechanism of the Ebola response programme and removed it from the ministry of Health and Sanitation. The transformation from the Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) into a National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) is now a separate entity due to the diversity of resources being provided and the intensity



of the activities to be undertaken.² The President should note that this laudable transformation should not only be reflected in structure and functions but also take gender representation into consideration, as well as paying key attention to addressing particular vulnerabilities of women and girls, if it is to succeed and leave behind sound legacies.

In response to this gendered dimension of the Ebola crisis, the young women of the “Defence for Girls, Girl Power Programme” have been offering support to girls and young women in vulnerable situations, particularly those now affected by Ebola. Their plan is to provide them with important information and life building skills that increase their resilience, develop their coping mechanisms, and above all, give them hope. As such, the newly formed organisation has been named HOPE GIRLS SIERRA LEONE. Despite lacking funding, the group is playing an important role in sharing information with the government on how girls and women are affected, what can be done to address the problem, and how the government can improve its interventions. Through the support of Defence for Children International, they have taken up the challenge to reach out to girls and young women in the communities to give them information on how to deal with the Ebola crisis, and also give them hope and support, particularly to those that have lost their parents. They talk to girls and young women living under difficult conditions in quarantined homes, some without their parents on mobile phones every day (because they cannot have direct access to them), in order to listen to their problems and provide necessary information that can help keep them safe and also build their resilience. With the support of Defence for Children International, they look at ways to draw the attention of the government and the NGO community to the plight of girls and women within the broader Ebola crisis. They are encouraging young women to tackle the barriers and pursue careers that limit our vulnerability to diseases and keep women out of decision making. At the same time, they are calling on the government and other authorities to address the institutional barriers and sexism that holds women back. This means challenging the chain of patriarchal succession of governance as one aspect of breaking the chain of Ebola transmission.

Defence for Children International – Sierra Leone strongly urges the government and international partners to rebuild the entire health system of Sierra Leone as an integral part of the Ebola fight. This includes ensuring that the system has trained health personnel, protection for health workers and essential services. DCI-SL strongly recommends that any opportunity for future training of health personnel, including scholarships, must give equal

² Press Release from the Office of the President (State House) of Sierra Leone - 17 October 2014



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opportunity to men and women, boys and girls. Finally, the NERC should have specific programmes targeting women, and provide them with sufficient information on prevention and response. Women must be involved at all levels – from the community to the national level - in shaping the country’s response to this crisis.

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