

Helen Fallon, retired Maynooth University librarian meets African people living in Ireland. Through sharing stories we can reach a better understanding of each other and our hopes and dreams.

Sharing Our Stories

From Sierra Leone to Maynooth: Victoria Ballah shares her story...

Early Days

I'm from Hastings – a town about 16 kilometres from Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. I was born in 1997. My mother died when I was seven, leaving me and my two sisters, Olive and Catherine, and my brother Maclean, in the care of my father. Because I was the youngest, I was sent to live with my aunt nearby. Much later, when I was in first year at University, I moved back to live with my father, but sadly he died in 2019, when I was in my final year. My father was from the Limba, one of the oldest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. They live in the north and north west. My mother was a Krio. The Krio are descendants of freed slaves and some of her ancestors were Nigerian. My dad was an Anglican, my mother a Methodist. I grew up Methodist and went to a local non-denominational primary school in Hastings and attended the Annie Walsh Secondary School from 2010.

Aftermath of the War

While the ten year civil war was over when I was growing up, the effects were all about us. There were a lot of burned out buildings in Hastings. People were trying to settle down again, to rebuild their homes, schools and churches. There was still a lot of fear around. I remember one afternoon, a rumour going around that the rebels were coming back, and

the terror it caused. During this time people were gardening again, growing potato leaves, cassava, spinach, groundnuts. There were a lot of relief programmes. Families had to register at the local community centre to receive rice and vegetable oil and containers of clothing and other goods that were arriving in the village.

Ebola Breakout

In 2014, the first case of Ebola in Sierra Leone was reported. Pretty soon it was a major emergency. Schools closed, public gatherings were banned and funerals restricted. Hospitals could not deal with the number of cases, and holding centres for Ebola victims were set up in different communities, including in the local police training centre in Hastings. My brother Maclean was working in the holding centre and he had to stay away from us because of the risk of infection transmission. I missed a full year of school at that time.

University

I went to the University of Sierra Leone to study social work. It was a relatively new subject. My father had never heard of it and wanted me to study science, which he understood. The course was broad and we discussed social issues in the context of community and that was very meaningful for me. I could see a lot of



Taking precautions against Ebola in Sierra Leone during the epidemic in 2014.
(Photo credit: ©EC/ECHO/Cyprien Fabre)

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the problems we learned about in my own community, for example, the very high school dropout rate. We also studied organisational behaviour in the context of our culture, and strategy and planning.

On the morning of August 14th, 2017, I woke up and saw all the social media coverage of the mudslide. There had been three days of very heavy rain. This, and large scale deforestation around Freetown led to the mudslide which killed over 1,000 people. I was volunteering with a group called Social Workers Sierra Leone, as were other students. We went to the area and helped people and sorted donations of blankets and clothes.

Working in the Community

When I graduated in 2020, I got an internship with Purposeful. It's an NGO that works with women and girls, advocating law reform and implementing projects. It gets funding from Irish Aid and other bodies. I got a permanent post after six months. My favourite project was called Safe Space. This involved setting up mentoring programmes for girls in rural areas with approximately 25 girls and a mentor to a group. The mentors were older girls in the community, and they received training and led discussions on issues of concern such as safety, bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health, relationships, rights and responsibilities and many more. When COVID broke out people couldn't meet so we circulated recordings, and also distributed posters showing how to wear face masks, wash hands and make reusable period pads, via the mentors' WhatsApp groups.

Journey to Ireland

After three and a half years with Purposeful, I wanted to undertake more formal education. Our organisation was getting funding from Irish Aid and they circulated information about scholarships for postgraduate study in Ireland under the Irish Aid Fellows Programme. Under the scheme, students from Africa, Asia and the Pacific receive scholarships to come to Ireland. In 2024, 208 people were awarded scholarships. The year I came, 2023, I was one of ten Sierra Leoneans who received the award from Irish Aid. Nine were from government departments. I was the only one from an NGO. I was

also the only person going to Maynooth University from the group. When I arrived in Ireland on the 19th of September 2023 the first thing I noticed was how cold it was.

The MA in Development Studies is a really good programme. It addresses social issues. Experience matters a lot for this course but it is good to learn the theory now, especially in the African context. Modules include gender, identity and inclusion, global food systems, climate change, managing developmental organisations and research methods. There are over 14 different nationalities on the programme. Some of my lecturers have worked in Sierra Leone, so there was an immediate connection there.



Victoria Ballah from Sierra Leone was awarded a scholarship to study in National University of Ireland Maynooth. (Photo: V. Ballah)

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My thesis topic involves investigating the effectiveness of the policy on Radical Inclusion. The background to the policy was that four to five thousand girls had to leave school each year because they became pregnant. Initially the government refused to lift the ban on them remaining at school while pregnant. A number of groups including Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (WAVES), Purposeful and Amnesty International took a case to Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2018: they ruled the ban should be lifted. As a result, the Sierra Leonean National Policy on Radical Inclusion was developed in 2021 by the government in consultation with various other organisations working on rights to education. I'm enjoying my research, but at times it is challenging to get statistics and data relating to Sierra Leone.

Moving on

I return to Sierra Leone shortly with high hopes to contribute to national development. This was my first time away from family and home for an extended period. It's been a fulfilling year with a bittersweet experience. Ireland has become another home for me. I cannot easily forget the warm support I received from everyone who made Maynooth a home away from home for me. It's been a really interesting year. ■

Helen Fallon worked in libraries in Sierra Leone, Namibia, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and Ireland. She is now retired and focuses on writing.