

# When you are a woman alone, no one will help you

By Helen Fallon



*Sr. Celia Doyle MSHR, at the sewing and weaving centre, Grafton, Sierra Leone*

Sister Celia Doyle MSHR and the convent driver, Saidu, collected me as agreed outside the public library in Freetown. It was only nine o'clock on a May morning and already very hot.

We were going to Grafton, a town about ten miles from Freetown. We were not going to visit the town itself, rather the camp for displaced people where Sr. Celia has set up a small weaving and sewing project for women. The women manage the project themselves and Sister Celia usually goes out two days a week to teach macramé and to see how things are going.

"What I am doing is very small," the modest and unassuming Sr. Celia from Gorey, Co. Wexford, told me. She started the project in 2000 with a small grant from Trócaire and some personal funding. So far over 30 women have participated.

Initially a teacher, Sr. Celia diverged into skills-training for women. Among those she has provided training for, are some of the women who are ex-combatants of the rebel army, a force that, calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), went through the country killing, raping and maiming people during a ten-year civil war.

"The women were girlfriends of the men. So they just went along with them. There wasn't any formal enlisting," Sister explained. "After the war they came in from the bush.

"There were 16 women on my training programme. I worked with them for six months. It was still a tense time and one day a group of men stopped and surrounded my vehicle. I was sure I was going to be robbed at the very least. One of the rebel commandos on a nearby hill saw

what was happening. He recognised me from the training programme for the ex-combatants. He came rushing down shouting at them to stop. When the boss says 'stop' they stop. When the boss says 'shoot' they shoot," she said matter-of-factly.

The women were busy at work when we arrived at the camp.

"This is just a small part of it," Sr. Celia explained. "There are over 13,000 people here. A lot of them are women and children. Many lost their husbands during the war."

## **Country cloth of high value**

The working area is open, except for wooden poles topped with tarpaulin that provide shelter from the sun and the rains that begin in May and last until September.

Six or seven women sat working handmade wooden looms,



weaving thread into long strips of country cloth, a material not unlike linen but coarser. Country cloth is held in high value in Sierra Leone. It was traditionally used in ceremonial robes and also as a method of bartering. The women make dresses and other clothes from the country cloth. They also crochet bags and tablemats, and make tapestry hangings, macramé bags and flower pot hangers. There is a zig-zag sewing machine nearby that Sr.Celia acquired for the project for sewing the country cloth together. On the ground, beside it, rests a charcoal iron.

"I wanted the women to have a skill that isn't common in Sierra Leone, so that they would have something unique to market to shops and tourists. I know how to do macramé so I started with that. Then I engaged people with other skills to do training."

Sister introduced me to Obi Saidu, a weaver cum tailor from Makeni. He is the current trainer. As well as being an expert in his field, Obi has experience of training. He taught weaving in the school for children who are deaf, run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny in Makeni.

"The women need skills now if they are to survive," Obi says. "Even if they have husbands they need to work and to make money. Before they just stayed at home."

Sr. Celia added good-humouredly that the women have always worked -farming, tending the children and looking after the household. Chastened, Obi agreed.

### **You don't walk away without being torn apart**

Among the weavers is Kumba, the leader or chairperson of the camp. Her husband is dead from natural causes, her older children dispersed and caring for themselves. She has two children with her in the camp. One is at secondary school. Until the war Kumba lived in Kono, a diamond district in the eastern province of Sierra Leone. It was in Kono that the fighting was the most intense. The control of the Kono and other diamond mines gave Foday Sankoh the leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a very valuable commodity that could be exchanged for arms.

"When you are a woman alone with children, when you go back home you will have nobody to help

you," Kumba says. She wants to stay in Grafton now, to continue learning the weaving and other sewing skills so that she can provide for herself and her two children.

Sr. Celia ran a similar project with a class of about thirty in the National Workshop Camp, which has now closed. She also ran a micro credit project that gave women small, interest-free loans to help them set up small businesses.

"One woman started soap making. She was so enthusiastic and people liked her soap. After she established her soap business she started building a house. She was making the mud blocks and building the house herself. Sadly she died before she could enjoy her new home."

Sr. Celia is one of six Holy Rosary sisters currently in Sierra Leone. She has been here, with some breaks, since 1968. On leaving school she spent a few years as a clerical officer in the Dublin Board of Assistance. After entering the Holy Rosary order in Ireland, she completed a science degree at University College Cork and a Higher Diploma in Education at University College Dublin. From 1968 until 1983 she was a science teacher in the Holy Rosary Secondary School in Kenema.

After progressing to principal in the Holy Rosary Secondary School in Pujehan, Sr. Celia's career took a change when she moved to Serabu Hospital to work in administration. In January 1995 she left, with much sadness, a war-torn Sierra Leone for neighbouring Guinea, where she was involved in a women's skills training programme.

"You don't walk away without being torn apart," she said, talking about the first of her three forced departures from Sierra Leone

What does she do on the days she doesn't go out to Grafton?

"I go to funerals, meet people, help people look for jobs, attend local sports days and lots of other things in the community. You get involved in people's lives."

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*Country cloth woven at the centre*



*Woman weaving country cloth at the Grafton centre*



*Woman sewing at the Grafton centre, country cloth hanging in the background*

**The women  
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