

Looking through her eyes

Sierra Leonean women are participants in “Sierra Leone at 40 – Looking Through Her Eyes”, an audio documentary project that reflects on events since independence in April 1961. They reminisce about Independence Day and think about the way forward for their troubled country.

Text and photos: Cathy Aitchison*



“About midnight on the 26th of April we were hopeful that something good was going to happen when we saw the Union Jack lowered and the Sierra Leone flag hoisted. A gentle wind blew just then and we saw the flag floating in the air.” (Gladys Okoro-Cole)

“I was ten years old and at primary school. We had to study songs, marches and the national anthem. On Independence Day we went to the recreation ground. In the afternoon, after the formal ceremony, there was lots of food and drinks. It was all joy because our expectations were so high.” (Seray Kellay)

“It is absolutely essential that women, as well as men, be involved in the way the country is run. We know better today that some of those beliefs we had - that woman had her place in the kitchen or in the backyard somewhere - are no longer valid.” (Arabella Mutin)

The audio documentary was Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff’s idea, a lawyer, leading campaigner on women’s issues in Sierra Leone and West Africa and the daughter of a former vice-

▲ *Mother and daughter:*

Gladys Jusu-Sheriff interviews her daughter Yasmin. A lawyer and leading campaigner for women’s issues in Sierra Leone, the audio documentary was Yasmin’s brain-child.

Hannah Foullah interviewing at Radio Democracy



president of Sierra Leone. It is no accident that she chose the country’s 40th anniversary as the project’s launch date.

“Forty is a significant milestone for anyone, especially women,” she says. She was in Freetown in January 1999. “I spent my 40th birthday underneath the bed hiding with my children with a rebel attack going on thinking this is really appalling. At that point you think you have to try to take some control of the situation.”

Says Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff: “This anniversary should be a time for reflection. “We have just wasted 40 years of independence, so what are we going to do about it? We need to take control of our own destiny now.”

Her idea was to interview Sierra Leonean women living in Sierra Leone and around the world. “Women haven’t been given the opportunity to participate in public life over the past 40 years. We’ve tried every other solution so maybe now we should try listening to 51% of the population.”

Radio as a development tool

The recordings had to be broadcast quality for stations such as the BBC and Voice of America. Gladys Jusu-Sheriff, Yasmin’s mother and leader of the Sierra Leone Women’s Forum (UK), approached Women’s Radio Group (WRG), a London-based arts charity experienced in training women to use radio as a development tool.

“We are very committed to this kind of work. Radio can be a very effective tool for development, helping to empower women,” says WRG Director Julie Hill.



To interview Sierra Leonean women living in the US, Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff enlisted the help of Josephine Kamara, a Sierra Leonean journalist with Voice of America in Washington DC. Hannah Foullah at Radio Democracy (FM 98.4) in Freetown interviewed women across Sierra Leone and Gladys Jusu-Sheriff interviewed Sierra Leonean women living in London.

The edited material was sent to BBC producers, which resulted in Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff being interviewed on two programmes on the 27th April: Network Africa (a BBC World Service programme very popular in Sierra Leone) and Woman's Hour (an influential daily programme popular with women and men in the UK).



At the office of the Sierra Leone's women's forum (UK)

Reaching out to the grassroots

The documentary, produced on cassette and CD, will be available free to Sierra Leonean communities, women's organisations and other interested groups around the world. Next, more women will be interviewed, particularly younger women, illiterate women and those living in rural areas of Sierra Leone. The material will then be translated into local languages.

Another key tool is the website, where people can listen to excerpts of the interviews. It publicises the project and encourages more people to become involved.

A key effect of the project is its role in bringing together Sierra Leonean women across the country and around the world. "I think the force we are trying to create is a regenerated Sierra Leone Women's Movement," says Gladys Jusu-Sheriff. "Many women in Sierra Leone are demoralised. We need to change this and reach out to the grassroots."

Gracie Williams, a retired school principal, said in her interview: "People who live in urban areas and in top positions are okay. But our sisters in the provinces, villages and towns, are miserable. We need to enhance their lives so they don't kill themselves with work. We need to get together and close the gap."

There is enthusiasm for change among young people, says Frances Bendu, a young woman from Kono. "They

want to move the country forward. If women had the opportunity to go to school and university, we would see great developments in the country and a lot of things would change – if only their voices are heard."

**Cathy Aitchison is a freelance media consultant, researcher and trainer who specialises in radio and online communication, especially for use in development.*

Sierra Leone at 40 - Looking through her eyes

Listen to excerpts of the interviews at <http://www.slwf-uk.org>

To order a cassette or CD copy of the programme: sl.at40@refugeesonline.org.uk

To participate in the project, find out more about the women's movement in Sierra Leone or discuss ideas for radio training and online networking projects, please contact one of the addresses below:

Sierra Leone Women's Forum (UK)

UK charity supporting Sierra Leonean families, especially asylum seekers and refugees.

The Crypt, St Mary Magdelene's Church, Holloway Road, London N7 8LT, UK

Tel/Fax: +44 20 7700 0540

slwf@refugeesonline.org.uk

<http://www.refugeesonline.org.uk/slwf>

Women's Radio Group

UK arts charity offering training and networking for women interested in radio.

Unit 13, 111 Power Road, London W4 5PY, UK

Tel: +44 20 8742 7408

wrg@twiza.demon.co.uk

<http://www.twiza.demon.co.uk/wrg>

Refugees Online

UNHCR project set up with funds from the EU's Refugee Integration project. It offers training and support in using online communication for refugee journalists and refugee community organisations.

c/o Aitchison Media & Development, 21 Hilary Avenue, Mitcham CR4 2LA, UK

Tel: +44 20 8685 9928

info@refugeesonline.org.uk

<http://www.refugeesonline.org.uk>

Funding for this project has come from Sierra Leone Women's Forum (UK) and WRG and from the European Social Fund. Participants are seeking funding to take the project across Sierra Leone and translation into local languages.