



The International Soroptimist – December 2007 edition

Project Sierra gets underway!

Martha was a young child when rebels attacked her home town in Sierra Leone, and she ran with her family to the forest. After days of hunger, Martha and her brothers started to venture out in search of food and on one occasion she was captured by rebels. She was forced to live with one of them through the war and only escaped after he was killed soon before the war ended (2002). Martha discovered she was pregnant. She was just 13 years old, and wanted to return to her family. After searching for her parents Martha learned that they had died during the conflict.

She went to stay with a sister. "I had my baby in my sister's house, but she was poor and so was I and there was nothing to eat. Sometimes kind neighbours would feed me. Life was almost impossible, but I thank God for a friend who encouraged me not to abandon my baby. I had to depend on other people for survival. My sister also had nothing to live on - she was barely surviving with her children."

Martha went to HANCI-SL (Hope and Homes for Children's in-country partner) in desperation having heard of their work with young mothers. "I was immediately enrolled in school. While I'm in school, I know that my baby is being looked after, so I can concentrate on my studies. They helped me with school materials, uniform and fees, and I always have a meal when I come to pick up my child. When I'm sick, the clinic helps me with drugs and my child gets free medical treatment. When I finish school I want to learn a trade. I am already quite good at sewing and I am going to join their tailoring course and gain my certificate.

"My son and I now live with my aunt. We are part of a family. I want him to be educated and one thing I'm very happy about is that - thanks to the help I am receiving - he is being brought up in a proper way and has a chance of a good future."

Tenneh too was held in sex slavery and was just 12 years old when her daughter was born. After the war Tenneh didn't feel able to return to school. She was interested in auto mechanics, and the Project found her a place on a course. "I can now dismantle and rebuild an engine without any assistance. When I graduate I plan to set up my own business" Tenneh said with pride.

“Counselling has helped me to come to terms with what happened during the war - I feel more positive about my future. My child attends a Day Care Centre and will soon be going to school. I really want her to be educated as she has to help rebuild our country.”

Sia is sole carer for her young son and two granddaughters. Her husband was killed by rebels. Sia escaped, carrying her young son Hamidu, and they both sustained gunshot injuries as they fled. One of Sia’s daughters was abducted and became pregnant while she was held captive. She found it difficult to cope and abandoned her baby girl at birth by leaving her with Sia and running away from home. Around the same time, Sia’s other daughter also found out she was pregnant. Her partner did not want to support her and she felt she had no choice but to run away. She too left her baby with Sia soon after she was born. Sia was left alone to raise the three children with no one to turn to.

Through their in-country partner, HANCI-SL, Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) helped Sia to care for the three children. With a micro credit loan from HHC, Sia has been able to start a small business selling palm oil and soap at a market stall near her home in a suburb of Freetown. HHC also paid the children’s school expenses until Sia’s business was established and she could cover the cost of the children’s education and provide for their basic needs.

Through Project Sierra, your support for young mothers such as Martha and Tenneh will enable them to gain confidence, self esteem, go to school, learn skills to become independent and to care for their young children whilst knowing they too are cared for. Your support will enable women such as Sia to provide a secure and sustainable family environment.

Do take opportunities in your club to learn about the Project. Use resources available on the web-sites www.projectsierra.org and www.soroptimistinternational.org and in the SI Club Protocol as a launch pad to raise our awareness as Soroptimists of the harshness of life for thousands of mothers like Sia, Tenneh and Martha, and of the very real stability that we can help such women to achieve for themselves and the children in their care. We can then take our own awareness out into our own families and communities to advocate on their behalf. Through our action we will make a lasting positive difference to their lives.

We are now three months into Project Sierra. Soroptimist members around the world are already showing wonderful support for the Project, and becoming involved. Thank you! Remember to report your activity on the new SI on-line programme focus reporting form. Please let me and your Federation Liaison know of your successes, or any questions.

Over the coming months TIS and the web-site www.projectsierra.org will feature UP TO DATE news of how Soroptimists worldwide are getting involved. Our partner Hope and Homes for Children will report regularly to SI on the impact of your commitment on the lives of the women, young mothers and children who will be supported through Project Sierra.

Working together we will be giving confidence, security and opportunity to women such as Sia, Tenneh, Martha and their children. They need our help and our confidence in them.