

Beyond The Law

Access to Justice After Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone

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Declaration

I, Suricia Yatiana Esther Conteh, the author of this research, do hereby declare that except for the references of the author's work, which were duly acknowledged, this dissertation was done solely by me under the supervision of Dr. Giti Chandra.

DEDICATION

To the woman who first taught me to read and write and speak up and dream and believe and challenge and love and forgive. This work is in your memory, Aunty Pat.

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I am grateful to God, who, in spite of the challenges and almost missing out on this program, made it possible for me to come here to Iceland and learn. My heartfelt thanks go to the GEST team for such a wonderful and life-changing initiative, even as the world is slowly regressing and rolling back on hard-won rights. To Dr. Giti Chandra, who has always believed in me since the very first day and has steered the ship as a wonderful supervisor, I am grateful.

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Abstract

While Sierra Leone can boast of comprehensive laws on sexual violence, the available data on reported cases of sexual violence do not show a notable decline in cases, nor is there any meaningful increase in the number of prosecutions. This research is an attempt to answer this paradox through narratives from survivors.

The research was built on three theoretical frameworks of Intersectionality, Embodiment Theory and African Decolonial Feminist Thought. This was to ensure that a survivor's story is not just analysed through her body but also through her society, family structure, financial capacity and the available legal institutions to uncover how power and control all intersect to give her or limit her access to justice.

Justice in this work was conceptualised as both a formal process and the lived experience of the survivor, largely because of the dual legal system of Sierra Leone that dictates the survivor's journey.

Four main themes emerged as barriers that survivors face in different ways across their journeys, which included (a) Silence & Shame: Did It Really Happen? (b) The Unspoken Rule: When Justice Depends on Men's Approval (c) Justice Cost: When Economics Meet Violence (d) Legal Frameworks as Invisible Barriers to Justice in Sierra Leone. As an answer to these findings, the research recommends the following: (a) Strengthen Community Social Support System (b) Community Ownership of the Laws (c) Engagement of Men and Boys (d) Robust institutional Accountability. If these recommendations are taken into consideration, the laws move to become a little bit more functional in Sierra Leone.

KEYWORDS: Sexual Violence, Access to Justice, Survivors, Legal Systems.

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Content Warning

This research work reflects the voices and stories of survivors of sexual violence. As such, there might be some explicit language and descriptions of this violence that could be emotionally distressing.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This is not a story to pass on.
— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

1.1 Overview

A phrase that gained popularity among Sierra Leoneans as we reconstructed our war-torn nation, trying to maintain our hard-won peace, is "ow fo do", which roughly translates into English as "what do you do?", narrating a deeply entrenched feeling of loss, hopelessness, and, in some cases, complicity. In wartime and in peace, the bodies of women in Sierra Leone go through the motions of 'ow fo do'. What else could they do after being used as sites for harm, violence, unpaid labour, objectification and economic depravity, regardless of the country's state of affairs? Women in Sierra Leone, by no choice of theirs, experienced an exponential growth of sexual violence added on to the harm already being done to their bodies during the civil war¹. It is estimated that "approximately 50,000 to 64,000 Sierra Leonean internally displaced women" may have experienced war-related sexual violence (Physicians for Human Rights, 2002, p. 17). This was not just an act of violence that was committed on the bodies of these women. One can argue that these acts were calculated and used as a tool to make sure these women remained subdued in those precarious times. Still today, this phenomenon rings true, as Kirby (2020) notes that "references to rape as a weapon, strategy, tactic, instrument or tool of war are today common to the point of ubiquity" (p. 214).

Even after the civil war ended in Sierra Leone, women's experiences of violence did not come to an end. Barnes et al. (2007) observed that "The legacy of the conflict in Sierra Leone, both in terms of widespread sexual violence and the changes in gender roles brought about by violence and displacement, has influenced the nature and extent of GBV² in the post-conflict phase" (p. 2). Just like many other societies that had experienced these traumatic events, the

¹ The civil war in Sierra Leone war which lasted for 11 years (1991-2002) created violence across the nation including mass killing, amputations and widespread sexual violence, leaving long-lasting social and psychological impacts even after the resolution.

² GBV= Gender-based violence.

relics of the war continued to shape the present-day society of Sierra Leone. As the nation strived to turn over a new leaf and rebuild after the war, what slowly started to happen was the relegation of women's issues to the back of the line. Other 'top' national priorities like job creation for the young people or the rehabilitation of the ex-combatants into society were top of the government's list.³ Our most recent national statistics show that "Overall, 62% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence" (Statistics Sierra Leone & ICF, 2020, p. 300). This national data signals a very high prevalence of sexual violence that still continues to affect the lives of women and girls in Sierra Leone. Another survey conducted by Purposeful, a non-governmental organization in Sierra Leone, found out that one in four girls aged 13–19 identified rape as a form of violence they experience within their communities. (Purposeful 2020). As high as these figures are, the truth is that these are not just numbers. They are a mirror that reflects the magnitude of the prevalence of sexual violence in Sierra Leone and how normalized it has become.

This feeling of normalcy in the social landscape of Sierra Leone was shaken in 2018. On the 4th of December 2018, a large crowd of young Sierra Leoneans marched in response to the prevalence of rape, particularly after the death of a 5-year-old girl.⁴ This movement persisted and evolved from activists and concerned citizens marching across Sierra Leone against rape to positively influencing a policy and political shift in Sierra Leone. In response to this movement and the stark numbers, our President, declared a state of emergency on rape, which ultimately led to the amendment of the Sexual Offences Act of 2012.⁵ The amended act especially strengthened penalties for convicted perpetrators, created specialized courts to quickly try cases of sexual violence and made provision for support services for survivors. Nonetheless, these reforms have sadly not fully moved back and integrated into our communities. Even with these robust laws, shame, stigma, economic constraints and institutional processes all collectively work

³ See (Rugumamu & Gbla, 2003, p.20) for the description of the government's priority areas and the establishment of the NCDDR and the NaCSA to oversee disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and community-level assistance.

⁴ See Purposeful 'Resourcing Movement Building' for a description of the feminist black tuesday movement.

⁵ Martin, Laura S, & Simeon Koroma. "Taking Stock one year after Sierra Leone's Gender Violence Emergency". The Conversation, January 30, 2020.

to limit a survivor's access to justice, keeping them in the same cycle of 'ow for do' that has shaped their lives from wartime into peace.

1.2 Background to the research

The issue of sexual violence is difficult to understand or make sense of without connecting historical, cultural and social contexts to get a full picture of what it means. D'Cruze notes that, "We cannot assume that behaviours which would now count as sexual violence were always considered as such" (p. 56). What is understood as 'sexual violence' evolves and changes with time in society. In the case of Sierra Leone, prior to the 2012 *Sexual Offences Act*, which was further amended to its current state in 2019, cases of sexual violence were prosecuted using the *Prevention of Cruelty to Children Ordinance* of 1926⁶ for those who were minors and a British colonial-era statute, which was the *Offences Against The Person Act 1861*⁷ for adult cases. The *Prevention of Cruelty to Children Ordinance* (PCCO, 1926, s. 2) defines a minor as "a person under the age of sixteen years". However, it sets different parameters for children violated below 13 and those violated between the ages of 13-16 and clearly states *that*:

No person shall be convicted of any offence under section 6, 7, 9 or 10 of this Ordinance upon the evidence of one witness, unless such witness be corroborated in some material particular by evidence implicating the accused. (PCCO s. 14).

This distinction is necessary to note down because the evidentiary need for a witness to corroborate a child's experience of sexual violation in the 1926 ordinance sets up the justice system in Sierra Leone to build a web of distrust in the survivor's narrative. A system wherein if there are no other witnesses to the crime, which is the reality for most cases of sexual violence, it automatically dismisses and delegitimises her experience. The result of this legal decree is that the accepted definition and scope of sexual violence rested on another witness to corroborate the story. Moving away from the PCCO ordinance, the 2012 Sexual Offences Act of Sierra Leone

⁶ See Government of Sierra Leone. "Prevention of Cruelty to Children Ordinance". Chapter 31, ordinance No 42 of 1926.

⁷ This act is a foundational piece of criminal legislation that was inherited from the British, which was formally adopted in Sierra Leone via the Court Act of 1965. Today, several parts of it have been amended, but it is still widely used.

firstly defines a minor as “a person under the age of 18” (s. 1), a shift from the previous age of sixteen. Additionally, it also does not convict perpetrators based on the corroboration of a witness to the crime but urges the court not to view a lack of injury or resistance as evidence of consent.⁸

As legal understandings of sexual violence continue to evolve, Sierra Leone’s 2019 amended *Sexual Offences Act* goes further to close another gap by criminalising compromise and settlement in issues of alleged sexual violence, which was missing in the previous acts.⁹ This strict measure is in contrast to what a Special Court for Sierra Leone (2009, as cited in John-Langba et al., 2013) report discussed about the legal system that Sierra Leonean women that were violated have to experience “Sierra Leone’s dual legal system, which embraces common law as well as statutory law and regulations which provides an additional complex web of legal loopholes.” The shift from the 1926 ordinance right up to the current 2019 amended Sexual Offences Act shows a governmental intention to narrow most of these loopholes, especially those loopholes through which compromise and settlement in sexual violence cases across Sierra Leone thrive.

There are several global institutions of authority that have also attempted to define what constitutes ‘sexual violence’ as well as feminist definitions and theories. The World Health Organization (W.H.O.), a global United Nations agency responsible for global health issues with a mandate to “promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable” (para. 1), has defined sexual violence as “... any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (p. 149). At the continental level, The African Union¹⁰, of which Sierra Leone is a member state, has also provided its own definition of sexual violence. The Union created a framework which encompasses acts that cause verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm across public and private spaces and throughout peace, conflict, and post-conflict conditions. (African Union [AU], 2025).

⁸ See Sexual Offences Act 2012 , section 2(3)

⁹ See The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, 2019 insert s. 43A, criminalising settlement and compromise into its framework.

¹⁰ The African Union is a continental body of the 55 member states of Africa, launched in 2002 to advance unity, cooperation and integration across the continent.

Although these definitions of sexual violence have provided a clear starting point for discussions around sexual violence, feminist writers and theorists have also challenged these definitions as being limited in their scope. D’Cruze (2011) observes when speaking about the definitions of sexual violence that "...a new generation of feminists challenged the blind spots about power and gender in these dominant perceptions both theoretically and politically..." (p. 57). That is because sexual violence cannot be adequately defined if the dynamics of power that determine whose experience of sexual violence is seen as harm, who is violated and whose matter is treated urgently are not mentioned. In these debates, the concept of sexual violence being read and understood as part of a continuum and not just a singular standalone act, as theorized by Liz Kelly, has been foundational. Kelly (1989) observed that sexual violence is not a singular issue but is part of a continuum of violence. The continuum of violence makes visible how power interacts in real time and in our everyday systems. The framing of the continuum of violence would challenge the 1926 ordinance that mandates a witness to corroborate the story of the child survivor. As such, analysis around sexual violence or conceptions and definitions created about it should move away from thinking about it as an isolated event to factoring in the everyday activities and decisions and legal systems that normalize harm. At the same time, it is really not that simple to get a standard definition of sexual assault across the board. As the National Research Council (1996) states, "Whether one uses a narrow definition confined to...sexual violence or one accepts a broader definition of violence against women, definitional debates also surround each of the individual components" (p. 24). These debates on properly defining sexual violence are quite necessary, as they hold the potential of influencing state laws and policies.

That is why it was not surprising when the Equality Now (2024) report found that comparatively across Africa, paying specific attention to legal definitions, scopes, and limitations of sexual violence, laws reveal significant variation, as several countries' sentencing structures fail to reflect the seriousness of the crime of rape. Sierra Leone's legal documents on sexual violence, in that pool of other nations, capture more structures and nuances. The *Sexual Offences Act* (2019) makes sure to expand the definition of rape, strengthen the boundaries within which these offences occur, and develop strong penalties for offenders. It is also important to include

that the act also further incorporates child perpetrators of sexual violence and clearly defines sexual harassment as follows:

A person who, being in a position of authority over another person, solicits sex from that person by threat, victimization, or offer of favor, commits the offence of solicitation by person in authority and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not less than 15 years” (Sexual Offences Act, 2019, s. 13(2).

So, unlike other African nations, Sierra Leone’s laws on sexual violence and its scope are comparatively strong. Added to the robust provisions within the law, the amended 2019 act also mandates free medical treatment for survivors, a first of its kind, demonstrating that indeed there is enough political drive to see that sexual violence is combatted in Sierra Leone. But these legal intents do not automatically convert into guaranteed implementations. The most recent Survivor Incident Report published by Rainbo Initiative (a non-governmental first response provider) revealed that in 2025, Rainbo Initiative received a caseload of **2,723** survivors who reported that they were assaulted. However, out of this number that reported to them, only **8** cases got to the magistrate level, **13** cases went directly to the High court, and **9** cases had a successful prosecution, with the perpetrators now jailed (Rainbo Initiative, 2025).¹¹ With these very low numbers of reported prosecutions in comparison to the already strong legal frameworks that Sierra Leone has designed, it is important to question the wide gap between those who report and those who get convicted.

Bryden & Lengnick (1997) describe the process of getting justice through the formal system as “...been likened to a giant sieve, filtering out cases at every stage of the process” (p. 1208). This simile helps one grasp how a total of **2,714** out of the **2,723** cases of sexual violence reported in 2025 are still awaiting conviction for the year 2025. The figure also signals that away from the amended *Sexual Offences Act* and all its progressive provisions, there are other factors which determine how justice is not only defined but also how a survivor can access justice after

¹¹ See <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://rainboinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/SGBV-SURVIVOR-INCIDENT-REPORT-2025-A5.pdf>

she has been harmed. For Sierra Leone, our shared national history, our culture and social norms are as equally important to analyze when thinking about the justice gap.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In 2019, after the declaration of rape as a national emergency¹², the *Sexual Offences Act* was amended into a comprehensive, survivor-centred legal tool to combat the prevalence of cases of sexual violence in Sierra Leone. However, as seen through the most recent Rainbo Initiative data, the presence of these legal provisions sometimes does not automatically convert into access for a survivor or even the enforcement of the law.

While laudable, recent data has shown that in the six years since its inception into the legal framework of Sierra Leone, this Sexual Offence Act, plus the host of other progressive acts like the Domestic Violence Act (2007) and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2024), has not fully affected the life of the everyday woman or girl across Sierra Leone or prevented violence. Nor has it helped tremendously even after she has spoken up after being violated. Reported cases of sexual violence in Sierra Leone are still high, while the prosecution rate remains extremely low. This huge gap existing between reporting and prosecution stages in Sierra Leone suggests that there are other barriers beyond having a comprehensive law in place.

Yet, there is very little literature, especially ones that center the voices and narratives of those survivors who have tried to access justice within these comprehensive legal frameworks. There is also limited research conducted on understanding why this contestation exists between these two parameters, how it shows up and how it is enforced in the everyday life of a survivor away from the provisions within the legal framework.

The reasoning is that if there is limited research or information in this area, it becomes difficult to tailor solutions designed specifically to help bridge these barriers so that survivors can safely and swiftly access justice in Sierra Leone. As a result, this research hopes to identify and

¹² For further information on the President declaring rape as a national emergency in Sierra Leone and the immediate policy proposals, see Kardas-Nelson and Inveen (2019).

understand how justice is decided and how a survivor can access it in a way that is safe and respectful of her as a person.

1.4 Research Questions

- How do survivors of sexual violence experience barriers that limit their access to justice in Sierra Leone?
- In what ways do formal and informal processes interact to determine how a survivor of sexual violence gets access to justice after harm?

Sub Questions

- How do survivors describe the response of the formal justice systems like police and courts after they reported the violation?
- How do informal actors, like family or community members, influence the survivor's decision to report, settle the case informally, or withdraw from the formal justice system?

1.5 Definition of Used Terms

Language is a political tool that is crucial for our collective social understanding and construction of different phenomena. As Bhat (2008) notes, "There is a difference between meaning of words in dictionary and meaning of words in discourse" (p. 6). Therefore, the purpose of this section is to clearly define keywords used within this work to create a lens through which identities are understood because, as Kelly (1998) points out, "Language is a further means to control women" (p. 156) and this research would rather not use language in a manner that demeans or oppresses women.

Sexual Violence vs Rape

In this research work, the term 'sexual violence' refers to any form of unwanted sexualised activity acted on another individual, in line with the definition provided earlier by the World Health Organization. It has also been the preferred term of discourse throughout this work, rather than 'rape'.

The primary reason for this choice is a bold political move to challenge the dominant narratives of what constitutes rape. It moves the discourse away from minimising other unwanted sexual acts that do not necessarily constitute a penile-vaginal encounter and centers any and every unwanted sexual act as a violation. The term 'rape' is defined as 'non-consensual vaginal penetration' (Young & Maguire, 2003, p. 41) and often negates any other form of sexual misconduct as not being 'real' since penetration did not occur. It is also often conceptualised as a situation in which a stranger attacks a woman with a weapon and threatens her life (Muehlenhard et al. 1992), normalising those rapes that are violent as the 'gold' standard. One where an enraged man attacks a helpless woman walking down a road. Mortimer et al. (2008) describe this situation as the "...dynamics of an 'active', aggressive man against a 'passive', victimised woman" (p. 340). Framings such as this support a gendered script that creates a template a woman who has been assaulted must follow before her story is legitimised.¹³

Those experiences of harm that do not follow this pattern are usually minimised and other women who were violated by friends, family or even their partners have a difficult time proving they were raped. The result of this social construct is that definitions of rape tend to "...reflect men's ideas and limit the range of male behaviour that is deemed unacceptable to the most extreme, gross and public forms" (Kelly, 1998, p. 138). These narrowly constructed social definitions, thereby, limit how women internalise the harm, judge themselves and speak up about it.

But silence does not mean it did not happen. A limited definition of the harm committed on the body of the woman does not erase her experience. As such, choosing to use sexual violence over the term 'rape' is, "thereby stressing the range of possible forms of abusive behaviour {and} provides women with a means of defining their specific experience as abuse" (Kelly, 1998, p. 157) as we continue to question and challenge these harmful dominant narratives.

Survivor vs. Victim

As we continue to challenge these harmful dominant narratives of what constitutes sexual violence, it is equally important that we distinguish between the labels placed on women who

¹³ Also see Schafran (2005) on how 'real rape' narratives work as credibility template in rape cases.

have been sexually assaulted. In this research, the word 'survivor' was used to refer to those women who have been sexually violated. This decision rests on the premise that "a survivor is someone who continues to live after or in spite of some incident" (Young and Maguire, 2003, p. 42).

After a woman is sexually violated, her self-identities are socially limited to just two: victim or survivor. The perpetrator, on the other hand, can have a myriad of names, like sexual predator, rapist, molester, perpetrator, or even a convict (if he is formally convicted of the crime). Out of the two labels a woman can have, the term 'victim' in its social definition captures a sense of weakness and loss of agency of the survivor. According to Young and Maguire (2003), "Victim is also associated with the word 'weakness', which focuses on the vulnerability of the individual" (p. 42). However, the stories and experiences of the survivors interviewed for this research were not ones of weakness and hopelessness even in the most difficult of times. Their stories showed how, in spite of the various barriers, they are still finding ways to speak up and fight to get justice. Therefore, I chose the term 'survivor' out of a very limited vocabulary made available to the assaulted woman and not with the aim of denying both the physical and emotional manifestations of the traumatic experience. Therefore, even though among some school of thought it is contentious to use the term survivor, I argue that choosing to use 'survivor' "seems to give power and control over her life" (Young and Maguire, 2003, p. 50) as she tries to make sense of the harm done to her body.

1.6 Why Female Survivors? The Rationale behind it

The entire scope of this research work focuses on the experiences and narratives of female survivors of sexual violence across Sierra Leone. Borumandnia et al. (2020) note that "globally, about 35.6% of women have experienced sexual violence" (p. 1), making this a widespread phenomenon to which Sierra Leone is not immune. Sierra Leone being a society where gender stereotypes persist and "domestic violence is perpetuated and men rape their wives because they think that it is their rights as husbands" (Fullah & Fanny-Davies, 2025, p. 23), it is important to properly analyze how women within various identities suffer from sexual violence in Sierra Leone.

This grounding was not the sole rationale for centering female survivors within this research. Working from the year 2020, one year after the *Sexual Offences Act* was passed into law in Sierra Leone, to 2025, the survivors' incident report from the Rainbo Initiative¹⁴, shows that the highest reported demographic for sexual violence across Sierra Leone are from women and girls. Their data shows that over the period of five years, 97-99% of survivors who reported to their facilities were women and girls, with male survivors being below 3%. As such, the research decided to focus on female survivors because of its nationally higher prevalence rate. Not just for the purpose of analyzing, but with the hopes of one day achieving a sexual violence-free society. Because, "ultimately, it is up to all of us – in our homes, our nations, our global community – to create a world that is safe for women and girls" (United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 1999).¹⁵

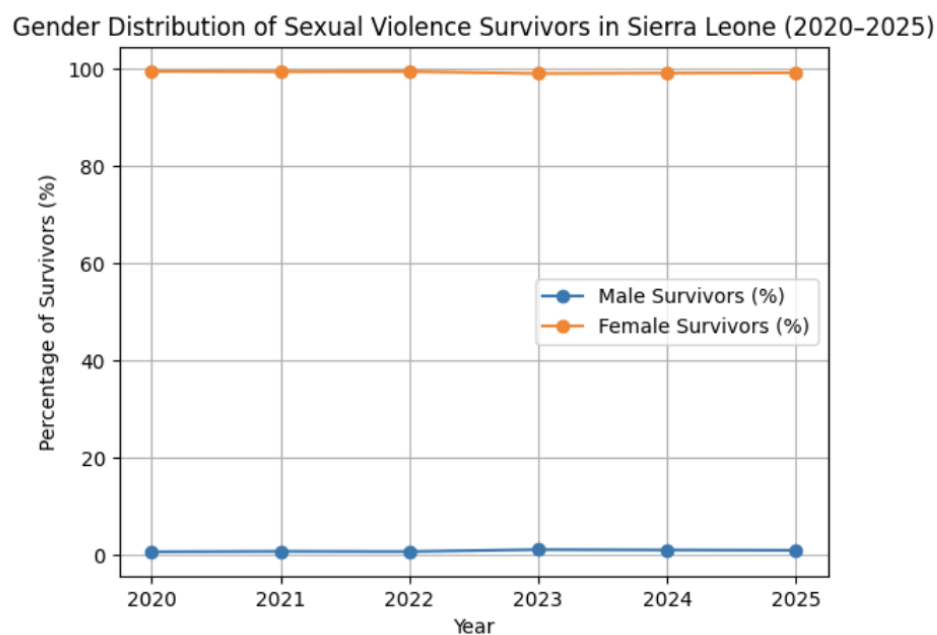


Figure 1 shows the reported sexual violence data disaggregated by gender from 2020 to 2025 which shows that female survivors continue to account for most reported cases. Source: Author's own.

¹⁴ Rainbo Initiative is currently the only non-governmental organization in Sierra Leone that provides a yearly comprehensive data on reported incidences of sexual violence across Sierra Leone.

¹⁵ Kofi Annan, the then secretary general of the United Nations says that sexual and gender-based violence is a fundamental human rights violation during his remarks on International Women's Day 1999

1.7 Conceptualizing 'Justice' in the Study

For the purpose of this research work, it is necessary to get an understanding of what 'meaningful' justice implies. Defining justice using Liz Kelly's assertion that sexual violence is part of a continuum, justice in this research work is also considered both a formal process and a lived experience which does not lean on just one side. This is as a result of the very complex reality women experience in Sierra Leone, both from within (families and communities) and outside (police or courts).

Legally in Sierra Leone, justice is only defined through a dedicated process of reporting, investigating, prosecuting and then convicting the perpetrator as is prescribed in the *Sexual Offences Act* 2012 and its 2019 amendment. The reality is different. An Afrobarometer report on sexual violence (2025) states that "...fewer than half of citizens are confident that ordinary people who are wronged can obtain justice in the courts" (p. 1). To support this sentiment, Binta (pseudonym), who is one of the survivors interviewed, shared her opinion on the officer assigned to her case. She stated, "I have to be honest, the police officer assigned to my case, who was taking information from me, did not show any signs of taking the allegations seriously" (personal communication, December 2025). With this contradictory reality of how Sierra Leone as a nation defines justice and how it is experienced by its citizens, it would be remiss for this study to define justice solely based on the legal process of the reported cases.

The idea behind the word 'justice' in this research is to additionally factor in the informal processes that survivors also navigate, sometimes even before they get to the police station, as well as the legally defined stipulations to ensure a holistic definition. As McGlyn et al., (2012) note, "...we must not limit the possibilities of securing some form of justice only to those who feel able or willing to report to the prosecuting authorities" (p. 237). So within the framework of this research, justice here refers to a mix of both the formal and informal systems that a woman who has been sexually violated has to endure and navigate to get some sort of redress.

1.8 Research Outline

The research begins with a clear introductory paragraph that situates the reader in the topic of sexual violence in Sierra Leone, covering the background of the research and stating the problem that the research seeks to address. Additionally, this chapter makes clear its used terms, distinguishing between sexual violence vs rape and victim vs survivor. It further goes on to conceptualise what justice means within the scope of this research work and also states the research questions guiding this study.

Chapter two is the theoretical framework section, which suggests that in order to get a clearer understanding of how barriers to justice show up for survivors of sexual violence, a combination of Intersectionality, Embodiment Theory & African Decolonial Feminist Thought should be used to explore how they operate. These theories are used to draw a map of intersecting strings that all connect to a survivor walking down the path towards justice in Sierra Leone.

The third chapter explores the methodological approach this research work is built on. It begins by clearly stating the research design used in this work and situating it within a feminist research methodology, which serves as the framework for all the processes of this research. This chapter also reflects on the researcher's positionality within the study and noting down the impact her own identity could potentially have on the research work.

The fourth chapter is the discussion of the findings, which are grouped thematically across the different interviews conducted to give a holistic picture of how barriers show up and the systems that keep them active. Here, the narratives of the survivors and key actors that participated in this research are centralised and used as the benchmark on which the themes were built and developed to understand how these barriers show up and how they work to limit or stop a survivor from accessing justice in Sierra Leone.

Finally, the concluding chapter is a reflection of the entire research and a restating of the main findings plus recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't live single-issue lives.
— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

2.1 Introduction to the theoretical framework

If the bodies of women and girls in Sierra Leone could tell a story, they would speak of the pervasive presence of sexual violence that continues to shape their lives and leave them feeling hopeless. At the same time, because of how deeply embedded violence, especially of a sexual nature, has become in our everyday lives, it is often treated as a standalone issue that needs a standalone solution. Audre Lorde reminds us that “there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we don’t live single-issue lives” (Lorde, 1982). The reality is that, beyond sexual violence, women and girls in Sierra Leone experience different forms of marginalization based on their social class, education, economic status, and sometimes religious identities, which compounds when they are sexually violated. Therefore, this chapter will use the framework of intersectionality, embodiment theory, and African feminist decolonial thought as connected frameworks to reflect and begin to understand how sexual violence is experienced, understood, and dealt with in the life of a survivor in Sierra Leone.

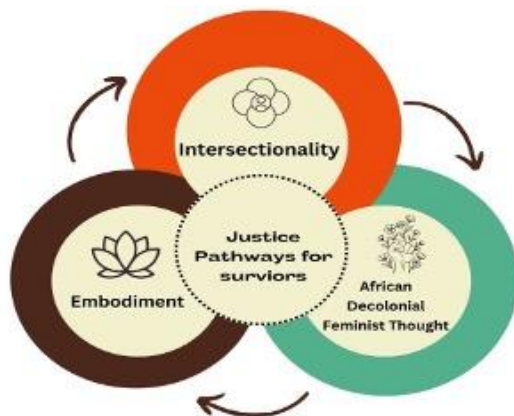


Figure 2 shows the interconnected cycle of Embodiment, Intersectionality & African Decolonial Feminist thought as a theoretical framework on which this research is grounded. Source: Author's own.

2.2 Intersectionality: Examining intersecting systems of power

When a woman is subjected to the horror of being sexually violated, the act in and of itself is thought to be used to reduce her power by causing trauma and pinning her down on a pipeline to seek redress. Sakar and Sakar (2005) observe that "Sexual assault on women...leaves a deep-rooted effect or stigma in the body and mind of a woman who has to live the rest of her life in society with the unpleasant shadow of this incident" (p. 407). There have been numerous studies on how this oppression works by various researchers.¹⁶ There are very many ways through which power can work to oppress a survivor, and they intersect at different points. Kelly (1988) observes in her book that "...sexual violence occurs in the context of men's power and women's resistance" (p. 1). Rennison (2018) further argues that "Because males in general are larger and more powerful than females, males are able to use aggression and power to subordinate and control females in every sphere of her life" (p. 1620). This display of power and control shows up from her body right to her mind when she is sexually violated. Heberle (2014) also argues that "...sexual violence is made possible by, and is implicated in perpetuating, unjust hierarchies of power" (p. 60). While these definitions all mention power and control because of the pervasiveness of sexual violence, it is important to identify how these powers intersect and at what points they show up

¹⁶ See Brownmiller, S (1975) *Against our will: Men, Women and Rape* & Herman J, (1992) *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence-From domestic Abuse to Political Terror*.

in the survivor's experience, as we have established that sexual violence is part of a continuum. McPhail (2016), in her Feminist Framework, notes that "...rape occurs due to multiple motives rather than the single motivation of power/control" (p. 321), because reducing it to just power limits the various other factors that work collaboratively with power to oppress the survivor. It is also important to note that this generalized or universal bracketing of issues in its own way further creates social hierarchies and still keeps certain survivors away from justice. As noted by Durfee, A. (2021), "Although the 'gendered crime frame' uses essentialized gendered language that equates women as 'victims' and men as 'perpetrators', individuals experience abuse and subsequently interact with institutions at the intersections of social identities and axes of structural inequality" (pp. 647-648). This points to the need for an inclusive lens to see what different factors or experiences enable power over a survivor. Because if there are multiple ways in which power intersects in relation to the survivor's social identity, then we cannot simply accept that she experiences this powerlessness because it is the norm when her body is violated.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a feminist lawyer and activist, made an argument against analyzing systems which discriminate against and oppress women one-dimensionally. Crenshaw (1989) describes this one-dimensional analysis as the "single-axis framework". This single-axis framework is a probable answer to why some definitions of sexual violence tend to focus mostly on power and control, universalising it as the survivor's experience. bell hooks (1984) proffers another angle that argues that "the idea of a universal female experience overlooks the diversity and complexity of women's lives, particularly for those whose experiences are also shaped by race, class, and other social hierarchies" (hooks, 1984). hooks assertion here is pointing to the limitation of examining gender inequality in a universal framework but calls for a more holistic framework that can capture how multiple systems of power work to determine the experience of a woman.

As applied to the issue of sexual violence in Sierra Leone and the barriers women face in accessing justice, a woman's financial capacity, her level of literacy, whether she is differently abled or not or even her religious background can all work together to further limit her from accessing justice. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term 'intersectionality', which argues that there are multiple systems of oppression that intersect to shape people's lives, often in very complex

ways. She notes that, "Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences amongst us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (p. 1299). Because, as Charusheela (2013) observes, "...we cannot analyze the effect of the axes of power if we examine them in isolation" (p. 33), so an intersectional analysis of not only the identities of the survivor but also exactly how they show up and enforce the barriers she might experience when she tries to seek justice becomes necessary to use.

Although the origin of this framework of intersectionality is rooted in the black woman's experience in the United States of America, it has proved to be very useful in understanding the realities of women in contexts such as Sierra Leone, where sexual violence unfolds alongside other forms of multiple marginalization and social systems. As Fullah et al. (2025) state, "Survivors, especially young women and girls, expressed cultural and familial pressures not to disclose SGBV¹⁷ incidents" (p. 271). Thus, we see how other research has discovered that there are multiple issues that intersect to form barriers for the survivor in Sierra Leone. Indeed, an intersectional lens is needed to understand these barriers and how they seem to be embedded in the social dynamics of Sierra Leone. Therefore, "ignoring the intersectional nature of these systems means we systematically overlook the experiences of many different groups of marginalised women..." (Weldon, 2008, p. 195). As a result, intersectionality as a theoretical and applicable framework invites us to see how, in the life of one woman, multiple identities and practices intersect and remove her far away from accessing justice. This process of removal steals whatever power she might have had and changes how both the society and the law perceive her.

2.2.1 Institutional and Legal Structures

In addition to intersectionality being used as a framework to understand how different powers work together to shape a survivor's journey towards justice, it is also useful in critiquing the institutions and legal systems a survivor experiences. Temkin and Krahé (2008) note that, "the law is significant not just for what it says but for what it doesn't." (p. 24) They also further reveal that "legal definitions provide the normative framework for judging sexual assault allegations,

¹⁷ SGBV here means Sexual and Gender-based Violence

specifying the criteria which need to be met to find a defendant guilty” (p. 24). This framing is particularly important to note, as Chandra (2020) highlights that, “Language determines the terms of the debate, and, of course, the language of choice is often determined by the medium in which it functions” (p. 183). This is precisely why when these legal systems have ambiguous or contradictory framings used in their frameworks, one can safely say that the survivor now also faces structural inequality. On this basis then, because this ambiguity further creates barriers that filter which survivors can access justice, we need to analyse this complexity through the lens of structural intersectionality.

A published report by the Sociology Institute (2025) defines 'structural intersectionality' as “how people are marginalised by the combined and reinforcing effects of multiple overlapping systems of power – legal, economic, institutional and social” (para 3). The police station, magistrate court, healthcare facilities, and One-Stop centers are all government-mandated institutions a survivor has to interact with as she seeks justice through the formal route and can all work together to limit a survivor’s access. In Sierra Leone, these systems have standalone policies that are important, but they sometimes pose some challenges when they intersect to provide complementary services to the survivors. Sierra Leone’s National Referral Protocol on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (2024) states that “Reports can be made to any person, official or not, e.g., teachers, head teachers, health workers, police officers, hotlines, etc.” (p. 29). On the other end of the service provision chain, the Ministry of Health’s National Clinical Guidelines (2020-2025) warns, “Try to collect forensic specimens as soon as possible. Specimens should be collected within 24 hours of the violence; after 72 hours, yields are reduced considerably. Collect the sample before requiring the victim to bathe” (p. 56). The framing of the languages in these two legal documents depicts the use of power but in contrasting ways and this contrast can intersect and oppress a survivor at the institutional level. Medically speaking, the ministry’s statement is accurate, but the manner in which it was framed can instil a feeling of fear and anxiety in the life of a survivor. On the opposite end, the National Referral protocol uses language that is relaxed with a possibility of soothing the survivor. Unfortunately, the survivor has to go through these two legal systems if she wants access to justice. This ambiguity is not necessarily intentional but “...often occurs when institutions make inappropriate assumptions about the

individuals who work in or come in contact with those institutions” (Durfee, 2021, p. 649). So, when thinking about the institutions already set up, it is never enough to just say the laws and policies exist. Rather, it is important to take it one step further and ask the question: how do these institutions collaboratively respond to the survivor? As Durfee (2021) notes, “when policies and practices are created based on assumptions...they also have other collateral and unintended consequences” (p. 650).

In summary, whether it is power over the survivor or power with them, an intersectional lens should be used as a tool to analyse the dynamics of this power and how it unfolds as the survivor seeks justice. As her body has been invaded and left her powerless, it is important to look at how these systems connect within the body and journey of the survivor and what systems or structures enforce them.

2.3 Embodiment: Experiencing Violence Through the Body

The previous section has contextualised the survivor in an interlocked loop of social identity and legal structures. Away from the lens of intersectionality, these social and legal institutions are two controlling systems that a survivor of sexual violence also has to navigate, which at their core tend to prioritise visible markers of violence on the body of the woman.¹⁸ Sexual violence, as Kalra and Bhugra (2013) suggest, “is a profoundly negative and traumatic life event with widespread psychological and sociological effects on the victim” (p. 244). It is a crime committed against the body of an individual, as “the body is, of course, always implicated in acts of violence” (Kirby, 2020, p. 211). The perpetrator firstly violates her body, and then the dominant rape script¹⁹ in the society often demands to view her body to confirm the credibility of her story. As Oyěwùmí (1997) argues, “since the body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded, the body is always *in view* and *on view*” (p. 2). Because a claim of one being sexually violated disrupts the social order, besides your narrative, your body also needs to be seen and in a certain way so

¹⁸ See Schafran (2005) on how expectations shape credibility assessment and evidence on rape & also see the Sexual Offences Act (Sierra Leone, 2012, s.39) on the role of the medical personnel and documentation.

¹⁹ The dominant rape script is a set of culturally widespread beliefs that rape typically happens with a stranger who likely uses physical force to subdue the woman.

that society believes you were violated. Consequently, it is therefore necessary that we interrogate this need for bodily credibility with respect to sexual violence holistically.

Young (1992) observes that "it is undeniable that severe trauma is inscribed in and often on the bodies of survivors" (p. 91). When a woman is sexually violated, the trauma "registers in the first instance, at a bodily...level" (Downing, 2021, p. 1). Her body now carries a foreign feeling that embodies harm and injustice (Brigden & Hlavka, 2024). This bodily experience, which starts from a point of trauma, shapes how she and her society begin to view her 'self'. The 'self', which is already 'othered' by power exerted over her gendered identity and other intersecting axes, battles with trauma, which is lived and felt in the body, often times in isolation (Thompson, 2021). How the survivor views her body, her identity and her credibility after she has been violated speaks to how she experiences that violence. Contrastingly, the perpetrator also views the body of the survivor in a manner that leads to her traumatic experience. In order to inflict this pain, "...the assailant views his victim as a mere thing, a being who is either not human or less than human" (Heberle & Grace, 2009, p. 36). The mental process of objectifying this woman as a mere thing physically manifests in his violent act conducted on her body. As Jordan (2022) argues, "Conquering women through sex, and using the rape of their bodies to indirectly conquer men, speaks to the objectification of women" (p. 43). From objectifying the woman in his mind to acting on that feeling, the perpetrator's action inscribes markers on how the survivor now continues to view her body, which sometimes produces silence.

Dartnall and Jewkes (2013) note that "rape is commonly regarded as defiling...which makes it difficult for victims to share their stories" (p. 4). The defiled body, which was most likely seen as just a 'thing' now unable to share her story, often has to carry the shame from that traumatic experience alone. It now forces the survivor to embody the harm alone, as "sexual violence tends to be perceived as provoked by the women themselves" (dos Reis et al. 2017 p. 2358) even though it was done by another person. This act disembodies her from herself and her society²⁰ and creates a barrier in her accessing justice. Even when survivors do manage to get justice, "...they still experienced the fear and stress generated by the experience of sexual assault

²⁰ Disembodiment here demonstrates how alienation from oneself coupled with social exclusion can work together to weaken the credibility of the survivor's experience of harm.

in their daily activities and interactions” (dos Reis et al. 2017, p. 2359). This fear and stress can become embodied as it shapes how survivors navigate their daily lives, which sometimes causes physical distress and pain. Because this pain is felt personally and centred on the physical body of the survivor, the impact of this might be seen by others as far-fetched. Scarry (1985) notes that,

When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth (p. 3)

2.3.1 Viewing the body: The society and legal Institutions

The need for the pain to be ‘visible’ in the ‘self’ contrasts with debates around the #MeToo movement²¹ and the anonymity of those survivors of sexual violence. It is exactly this tension between the invisible pain of the survivor and society’s demand for some visible proof that makes anonymity, on the one hand, keep the survivor safe but, also, potentially make her story a bit harder to believe. Society has often constructed a version of the woman who is supposed to silently accept violence by piling shame and guilt on her. As Jordan (2022) notes, “The shame and blame routinely expressed towards most women who dared speak out served to silence others” (p. 6). This is echoed by Chandra (2020), who observes that “the danger of claiming the suffering of an assault or other violence lies in being reduced to victimhood” (p. 179). The society primarily needs the body to visibly tell a certain story to claim victimhood but still keep the woman in the gendered, unequal space. In this gendered context, “prevalence statistics, however, continue to depict rape as the most highly gendered crime” (Jordan, 2022, p. 17), which is enforced by the concept of silence and victimhood. As Bergoffen (2009) notes, “The raped woman is expected to remain silent. Her body does the talking” (p. 315). In reality, the

²¹ The #MeToo Movement is a collective action that sparked on social media that helped survivors to publicly share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. The phrase #MeToo was originally coined by Tarana Burke and used as a hashtag widely.

survivor is stuck in a loop of being silent and anonymous and her body being visibly loud to speak about the violation. The silence or anonymity expected from her 'self' is used to judge the credibility and seriousness of her experience. As Kelly (1987) notes, "Women must define the incidence first as lying outside normal, acceptable behaviour and, second, as abusive" (p. 140). This social requirement adds on to the trauma and pain the body feels because it now has to put on a performance, according to the dominant script of the social order for her body to be deemed 'in pain'.

The need for visualisation of the survivor's pain is also embedded in the formal justice institutions she interacts with because "what is at stake for the victim is more than the words and ways in which she gives voice to her narrative of suffering" (Mulla, 2014, p. 63). Brayne et al. (2018) highlight that "visual evidence can legitimize certain accounts of events while calling others into question" (para. 1). This demonstrates how institutional guiding systems and protocols operate as validators, as they translate the survivor's pain into 'acceptable evidence'. This process now determines which survivor's account is legitimate and fit to be accepted into their system. The survivor's narrative of the invasion on her body needs not just her oral evidence, which is expected to be dull, but also visually identifiable markers either in her body (trauma) or on her body (physical marks or scars). Mulla (2014) further argues that "institutional rape produce a rape narrative that begins in an unremarkable everyday, is punctuated by disruption, which leads to suffering" (p. 63). This rape protocol further pushes the survivor away from accessing justice. Campbell (2005) situates this dynamic by stating that "Much of what is known about rape survivors' experiences with legal and medical systems has come from victims' accounts" (p. 55). The body when presented to these institutions does not only have to pass through a checklist of criterion, but they also face the possibility of what is termed as 'secondary victimisation'. Campbell & Raja (1999) define secondary victimization as, "the victim-blaming attitudes, behaviours, and practices engaged by...service providers, which result in additional trauma for rape survivors" (as cited in Campbell, 2005 p. 56). This additional trauma travels through the body by means of fear, physical pain, and sometimes constant alertness that collaboratively work to affect her daily life. In this sense, the term 'secondary victimization' implicitly functions as an institutional reproduction of inequality that an already burdened

survivor has to navigate. As a result, if the survivor's bodily narrative does not fit into the institutional rape protocols, she risks being blamed for the attack and her body nor her story is no longer credible.

When the dynamics of the physical violence, its ensuing trauma, and societal and institutional bodily expectations are all together placed on the survivor, what we are left with is a body that carries the memory of the trauma but cannot fully speak about it. This reinforces the notion of the 'other'. However, Scarry (1985) reminds us that "physical pain happens...not several miles below our feet...but within the bodies of persons who inhabit the world through which we each make our way" (p. 4).

2.4 Colonialism and Gender Roles in Sierra Leone.

Anchoring a decolonial thinking as a means to better understand the different personal, social and institutional ways a survivor can get access to justice in Sierra Leone is crucial. However, before a deep dive into this decolonial feminist thought, it is important to get a grasp of the interwoven relationship between Sierra Leone and its colonial histories. It is only when this past is acknowledged can we hope to move on to a future that is decolonial. Sierra Leone, like many other African nations, has a deep colonial history. Sylvia Tamale's (2020) claim that "every object, concept and individual has a history" (p. 1) holds true for a nation like Sierra Leone, which just gained its independence from the British empire in 1961. Sierra Leone's history is a mix of different melting pots. Whyte (2015) explains that "Sierra Leone was chosen in 1787 as the location for a radical slave trade abolitionist plan to establish a settlement of free Black colonists in Africa" (p. 232). This settlement is today known as the capital of Sierra Leone, which is called Freetown.

For 153 years, spanning roughly 6 generations, the British empire slowly reshaped the social and institutional culture of Sierra Leone as it became a haven for freed slaves and their trading activities. This colonial rule left Sierra Leone, much like other African nations, "...living at the intersection of two or more cultures who often experience difficulties in situating themselves in any of the cultures" (Akoleowo, 2024, p. 963). A key colonial inheritance passed on to its

subjects was the formation of their gender order and system. This system ranked males over females and made this inherited hierarchy as a universally accepted concept. One that the colonized needed to follow if they were to be acknowledged as modern. This hierarchical nature of gender that predominantly came from the West thrives on a concept of 'bodylessness'²² "...as a precondition of rational thought" (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 3). As a result, the body "was seen as a trap from which any rational person had to escape" (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 3); bodies now needed to be arranged according to social categories. Within this gendered 'worldview', men were seen as '...walking minds' (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 6), and women '...are peripheral if they appear at all' (p. 121). Importantly, this societal reordering became the dominant thinking in the colonised nations, even though both Oyewumi and Amadiume claim it was not originally part of the design of their respective Yoruba and Igbo cultures in Africa, which can also be said of other African nations like Sierra Leone. This claim is further supported by Ingyoroko et al. (2017, as cited in Akoleowo, 2024), that "Pre-colonial Nigerian societies showed evidence of collective power-sharing between females and males as being complementary" (p. 3). Yet, under this colonial rule, "bolstered by religion, law, education, and reconstructed cultures, colonization not only reinvented notions of 'men' and 'women' in Africa but also the way that they related to each other" (Tamale, 2020, p. 5). The effect of this impartation into the African society, as Oyewumi (1997) stated, "is to inject Western problems where such issues did not originally exist" (p. 9), relegating our social behaviours and attitudes to the back in favor of what was imported into our systems.

2.4.1 Colonial Court Structure in Sierra Leone

The reinvention of the colonial definition of gender continues to function as a tool to further marginalise women through various institutional and social actors in postcolonial African societies. Sierra Leone did not just drop this hegemonic system but carried it through to its independent state. To understand this marginalisation, it is necessary to examine colonial power since "contemporary African societies can't be understood outside from the colonial context. Because new African subjectivities and identities have been manufactured by Western

²² The concept of bodylessness refers to a Western philosophical and social ideal that values the mind, reason and objectivity while downplaying the lived bodily experience.

domination.” (Bertolt, 2018, p. 3). What we today label as our systems, laws and social norms in postcolonial Africa reproduces colonial influence from the British.²³ To see what changed, it is important to examine the precolonial systems of gender that were in place in Africa. Prior to the advent of colonialism, there were “...matriarchal societies where women held important roles and constituted the balance of society” (Bertolt, 2018, p. 10). Even though matriarchal practices were not universal across the different African societies or were social havens, they were present and showed respect and value of the different genders. However, as Oyewumi has stated, patriarchy, a Western gendered problem, was injected into African society, which thrived on maintaining the binarized gender divide that colonialism imported.

Tamale (2020) further observes that, “Social patterns were disrupted and Africa’s cosmological understanding of society was invaded by a European modernity” (p. 6). One example of an institutional system where this colonial reordering and reinvention took a strong hold is the legal or court system. In Sierra Leone, the current legal system is a result of the colonial British empire. Thompson (2013) reveals that “scholars of Sierra Leone’s legal history and constitutional law agree that the history of the administration of justice in the country dates back to the foundations of the settlement in 1787 by English philanthropists” (p. 113). What was placed at the bottom of the design of Sierra Leone’s legal system as the colonial system developed the courts was the local courts²⁴, which only “adjudicate minor criminal cases, especially those involving customary law issues” (Thompson, 2013, p. 114). The act of placing these customary courts at the bottom of the ladder produces another form of gendered barrier to justice directly from the legal systems. Most women in Sierra Leone may begin their justice journey in the customary way that is easily accessible in their communities. However, because of the seriousness of sexual violence, the law mandates that everything is to be settled in the formal courts that are sometimes inaccessible to some survivors. This means that less premium was placed on the relational issues and method of handling crimes, which were a central part of the

²³ Still today, Sierra Leone ‘s legal system continues to carry British colonial influence, especially with the dual system of our customary law and the British-based common law. Additionally, our Courts Act of 1965 still incorporates English common law and statutes of general application of England before 1st January 1880 to this day.

²⁴ The local courts in Sierra Leone were established during the colonial rule to just deal with small community disputes based on our customary laws, while other matters termed ‘serious’ were dealt by the formal court.

social order in Sierra Leone and a high premium on the high courts.²⁵ This act, as Tamale (2020) describes, “restructured hierarchical power relations based on gender, class, education, sexuality” (p. 6). This formalised the marginalisation of Sierra Leoneans in general, but more so of the women who are only to be seen in the periphery in which she has little or no view of the justice system in that nation. As Bertolt (2018) notes, “the African woman is thus deprived of any capacity to exercise in the public sphere” (p. 10). P

2.4.2 Colonial Legacies, Patriarchy, and Sexual Violence.

Patriarchy, which Nash (2009, para. 1) defines as “a system of political, social, and economic relations and institutions structured around the gender inequality of socially defined men and women”, was used as the enforcer of this barrier for women who, by their biological gender, have been placed in a marginalised position in colonial Africa and still today in the postcolonial systems. As has been noted, patriarchy operates at “different levels, from household to the macro-level and in different spheres, e.g., politics, media, religious institutions” (Kreft, 2023. P. 655) and it manifests in how the survivor access the legal systems in Sierra Leone.

hooks (2004) argues that “patriarchy is the single most life-threatening social disease” (p. 1) and it “...requires male dominance by any means necessary, hence it supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence.” (p. 4). Sexual violence is one such pervasive act of violence that has been sustained because of the unequal power imbalances in the society which are a result of the patriarchal systems of oppression that govern these societies. This is not a new phenomenon to postcolonial Africa. As Mendoza (2016) states, “Through sexual violence, exploitation, and systems of cohabitation, the colonizers used to break the will of indigenous men and women, imposing new hierarchies that were institutionalized with colonialism” (as cited by Bertolt, 2018, p. 11). Therefore, it is safe to say that in postcolonial Africa, sexual violence is used as a tool by men to keep women in their 'place' while still feeling entitled to their bodies. These women who have designated places that marginalise them and limit their access to the public sphere as citizens in the country are, on the other hand, placed on a pedestal as “national treasures”.

²⁵ This hierarchy created a situation that greatly valued the British created formal courts and severely reduced the recognition of indigenous methods of handling situations a colonial legacy which is still present today in the legal system.

Regardless of this treasured status, these same women can experience sexual violence at any point in their lives because the society functions on a patriarchal wavelength that systematically devalues women. This is not without its societal consequences, which could be, “stigmatization, social ostracism, rejection by spouses, families or communities, displacement, marginalization and exclusion in society” (Kreft, 2023, p. 657). The legal system provides little respite for the woman who has been sexually violated. As Kreft (2023) notes, “...institutions operate in a societal context in which harmful patriarchal norms and stereotypes remain salient.” (p. 669) thereby creating a hostile ecosystem that disadvantages the woman in Sierra Leone, who already has multiple identities placed on her that create a barrier when she seeks justice. With this understanding, it is now clear why decolonized thoughts are important in framing how we interpret the legal and social structures a survivor has to pass through.

2.5 Why Decolonization Matters

As an answer to this hostile ecosystem in the postcolonial African contexts, feminists and other social anthropologists have called for a turn towards decolonisation. Tamale (2020) notes that, “The struggle for decolonization and decolonial liberation is as old as colonization” (p. 18), indicating the timelessness of this concept. She further claims that, “As devastating as colonialism and its legacies have been to the African continent, there are plenty of positive stories about resistance, subversion and transformation” (Tamale, 2020, p. 18), highlighting the bursts of hope that were alive in that dreary time. As such, Memmi (2006) reflects that, “The end of colonization should have brought with it freedom” (p. 3). The freedom to authentically rebuild our societies through our own power and knowledge. However, one master was traded for another. Coloniality subtly replaced colonialism in the rebuilding process in postcolonial Africa. Maldonado-Torres defined coloniality as “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism” (Maldonado-Torres, as cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019, p. 12). Against this backdrop Tamale (2020 p.21) clearly outlines key elements that should inform decolonial African feminist scholarship, including:

reclaiming our humanity; rebuilding our territorial and bodily integrity; reasserting our self-determination; restoring our spirituality; dismantling the material and symbolic foundations of the colonial capitalist state; decentering Western hegemonies of knowledge and cultures regarding race, gender, sexuality, etc.; reparations of historical wrongs; and embracing the Ubuntu philosophy, whose worldview is underpinned by the principles of: “the interconnectedness of all things”.

When these thoughts are incorporated into the social fabric, we can then rightfully question what we accept as knowledge today and how colonial power structures still today influence how this knowledge is shaped.

2.5.1 A Decolonized Approach to Legal Access

Coloniality and its long-standing patterns of power show up in postcolonial Sierra Leone most vividly in its legal system, which is responsible for the laws, policies and acts that directly affect the lives of its citizens. Dale (2008) states that "Sierra Leone operates under a bifurcated legal structure which incorporates both elements of traditional or customary law and a formalized system based on English common law" (p. 2). Naso et al. (2020) explain this bifurcated system²⁶ as "Sierra Leone is an example of a nation governed under multiple legal regimes, one instituted by the nation-state when administered by a colonial power and one existing before the state came into being" (p. 1). This dual system clearly reflects colonial governance systems that established an 'us' versus 'them' hierarchy, consisting of the English common law imported into Sierra Leone and the customary law that existed before the advent of colonisation.

This societal order was consistent with the dominant narrative by the West that "through colonialism, Europe exported civilization to relatively backward Africa" (Tamale, 2020, p. 23). This hierarchy in the dual legal system allows for the marginalisation of most survivors who can easily access these customary justice systems at the community level but are forced to approach the formalized system because of the severity of sexual violence. Tamale (2020) now poses a critical

²⁶ This means that the legal system in Sierra Leone functions under two separate but connected legal tracks simultaneously. On the one hand, there is the formal state system which comprises of the courts and any law administered by the state which follows and is shaped by the English-style Common Law. Then we also have the Customary law that empowers local / community courts to apply community-based rules which these people living in that community know and accept as the law. This customary law is more prevalent in the rural communities in Sierra Leone.

question: “How realistic is it then to expect such a regime to protect the rights of subordinated social groups such as women that are oppressed by capitalist-patriarchal power structures” (p. 189). Even when survivors do get to these formalized systems in Sierra Leone, the power of coloniality still shows up in the accessibility of the legal system by language. Kpaka (2025) states that “English has been used by Sierra Leoneans for utilitarian purposes, such as for social, commercial, official and educational activities within the country” (p. 19), as it “...came into Sierra Leone with colonialism in the nineteenth century and the European missionaries started setting up schools” (p. 25). The result is that all official communication, from the laws to medical reports, tends to be written in the language of the coloniser, which then creates another accessibility barrier for those survivors who might not be well versed in the language of these legal systems.

Coloniality on its own fails to capture the very complex and intersecting realities of a survivor’s life and so feminist thinkers have proffered a decolonised approach to these systems. Tamale (2020) asserts that “decolonisation refers to various processes of deconstructing colonial interpretations and analyses of the social world” (p. 2). “There is, therefore, a need to understand that the decolonisation project is a means of achieving the equilibrium that is much needed by Africa” (Akoleowo, 2024, p. 966). As such, a decolonised view of these legal systems asks why a dual legal system operates in Sierra Leone and why one is prioritised over the other. A decolonised view seeks to understand why a country that has an adult literacy rate of just 48.64% (Macrotrends, n.d.) has its key laws and policies written mainly in just English. As Tamale (2020) states decolonial thinking “speaks to the dismantling of several layers of complex and entrenched colonial structures, ideologies, narratives, identities and practices that pervade every aspect of our lives” (p. 20). Because it is only when we dismantle these complex colonial systems that survivors have to navigate can we start thinking about access to the systems made to protect them.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, using the three-pronged theoretical framing of Intersectionality, Embodiment Theory and African decolonial feminist thought forces one to reflect on whose experiences become legible within these justice systems. Whose pain is recognised as harm and under what conditions? This theoretical grounding, therefore, establishes the necessary foundation for examining how survivors move through, around, and sometimes against the justice pathways available to them. Only from this point of understanding can this research meaningfully explore how survivors negotiate, resist, and survive within the systems that shape their lives.

Chapter 3: Methodology: A Feminist Approach.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.
— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*.

3.1 Research Design

The research presented here uses an interpretative qualitative design²⁷ to center and understand the thoughts and the experiences of the participants in the study. Instead of employing a method that seeks to measure observable facts, an interpretative design tries to understand how people experience, and make sense of, the world around them (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Since this research incorporates the experiences of survivors of sexual violence as they try to access justice, it is most appropriate to use a design that allows for multiple realities to be analysed. As Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2011) state, "In interpretive research, human beings are understood not as objects, but as agents" (p. 70). This research uses the interpretive approach to critically examine the different patterns through which barriers show up when survivors of sexual violence attempt to access justice in Sierra Leone. To examine this, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview participants were a mix of survivors and other key actors like first responders, the police and community-based organisations. The data from the key actors was used as supplementary to the narratives of the survivors, as their stories are paramount. In the end all the narratives were all collectively analysed according to the similar themes that emerged. This is the overarching research approach that was used to identify how survivors met and navigated the barriers to justice that they experienced and how these other key actors saw those same barriers or not.

3.2 Aims and Research Questions

This research is guided by two main questions:

1. How do survivors of SGBV experience barriers that limit their access to justice in Sierra Leone?

²⁷ See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2127372> for more context on this approach.

2. In what ways do formal and informal processes interact to determine how a survivor of SGBV gets access to justice after harm?

Additionally, a subset of research questions were also formulated to shape the nuance of the research. They are:

1. How do survivors describe the response of the formal justice systems like police and courts after they reported the violation?
2. How do informal actors, like family or community members, influence the survivor's decision to report, settle the case informally, or withdraw from the formal justice system?

3.3 Why Feminist Research Methodology?

Throughout this research work, a feminist research methodology approach was used to conduct the research. Feminist research methodology can be traced back to the dissatisfaction that what was accepted as general or universal knowledge often consisted of male experiences that were examined and deciphered. Hesse-Biber and Johnson (2015) observe that, "Findings were based mainly on male research participants and were then generalized to both men and women" (p. 73). According to feminist theorists, how knowledge has been produced marginalises women and is mostly produced by western, male who proffer solutions that have been used as credible sources of knowledge. This approach seriously limited the understanding of the lived experiences of women. As an answer then, feminist research methods strive for a new way of thinking and producing knowledge. "Feminists ask 'new' questions that place women's lives and those of "other" marginalized groups at the centre of social inquiry" (Hesse-Biber and Johnson, 2015, p. 73).

In researching the barriers survivors of sexual violence face in accessing justice in Sierra Leone, the first step was to situate the knowledge appropriately. Haraway (1988) has made it clear that all knowledge is situated, and so this research begins by understanding the importance of prioritising the voices and experiences of those survivors of sexual violence who have tried to access justice in Sierra Leone. Sandoval (2000, as cited in Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015) urges feminist researchers to become more reflexive in how they carry out research projects and to

privilege emancipatory research, particularly for those who remain marginalized, this study deliberately centres survivor experience as a primary source of knowledge.

This approach moves away from the dominant approach of understanding barriers strictly through the legal lens and framework but moves it into the realm of the survivors whose lived experience makes them the best fit to understand and express how these barriers show up and are felt.

Feminist researchers also try to work in ways that seek to even out the power imbalances that are naturally seen between a researcher and the research by challenging conventional or mainstream ways of collecting, analysing and interpreting data. In this study, the researcher chose to conduct semi-structured interviews instead of the more conventional survey with rigid yes/no answers to ensure that there is engagement with the participants. This engagement is a necessary pillar in feminist research methodology, as it serves as a way to "overcome problems such as hierarchy and unequal power relationships" (Ajayi, 2020, p. 76).

It was also important for this research to take a trauma-informed approach to structuring the interview questions to ensure re-traumatisation, intentionally or not, does not occur. Many survivors battle with post-traumatic stress disorder, and it is sometimes difficult for them to retell their stories, especially to a foreign person like the researcher. As such, all the interview questions did not specifically ask the participants to recount their experiences. Instead, questions flowed towards their actions after they were violated. The overall rationale behind using a feminist research methodology is to prioritise listening to those who have been multiply marginalised as agents of knowledge through which the systems which oppress them are examined.

3.4 Data Collection Strategy

This research used a qualitative data collection technique as its primary source of acquiring data. To achieve this goal, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with respondents, given that the research is concerned with understanding how barriers show up and how survivors navigate them. All the interviews conducted were one-on-one and intimate. For the purpose of this work, no focus group discussion was conducted.

3.4.1 Recruitment

There were two separate processes of recruiting participants for this study. On the one hand, I had to recruit survivors of sexual violence and also recruit key actors and service providers whom these survivors often reach out to for support. I used a purposeful sampling method for both processes, as there was a clearly defined target audience I knew would best fit into the research.

The survivors who participated in this research were all purposively recruited from Rainbo Initiative headquarters, a first responder that provides survivors with counselling and medical check-ups all across Sierra Leone. Given the sensitive nature of the topic of sexual violence and how stigmatised and shameful it can be in Sierra Leone, this targeted approach was the best and most ethical way to recruit survivors. I initially tried a direct approach, putting out a request to youth groups working with women and girls. However, even though I had clearly mentioned that I would want to only speak with those who had experienced sexual violence, the first batch of 3 women I got all said they had only experienced domestic violence and had never been sexually violated. Therefore, I decided to use the purposive sampling method to ensure that I get participants who have been sexually violated and are willing to speak about it. Additionally, this recruitment strategy ensured that the selected survivors had also attempted to pursue justice after their violation, making them a good sampling pool to help answer my research as it deals specifically with access to justice and the possible barriers. However, it is important to note that because of this purposive recruitment strategy, other survivors who had also tried to access justice and might be willing to share their stories but not in contact with Rainbo Services were excluded from this study. However, this sampling method was the better option to conduct this research.

Recruiting the service providers proved to be a little bit more challenging, as the few ones I initially reached out to seemed wary of participating in the interview. This reluctance is unsurprising, as they mentioned they had been participating in many interviews and research and were tired. To address this issue, I made use of my existing professional networks through Purposeful, the organization with which I work, to link me with other key actors. Although this decision opened the rooms for me to interview key actors, it also brought with it a risk of these service providers participating because of the influence of my organisation and not willingly and

this has the tendency for them to align their answers with a perceived notion of what they might have decided the end goal of the research was. They might also minimise their shortcomings and present a biased narrative. However, since I had started off each session with a detailed explanation of the purpose of the research we were able to move past that.

As I would call the recruitment purpose a niched one, I believed, this worked to give me targeted access to those whom the research really needed to work with. This resulted in giving a very rich data generated from the interviews.

3.4.2 Participant Overview

The sample size of survivors interviewed was 6, compared to the initial intended figure of 10. A total of 5 key actors were interviewed as against the initial optimal figure of 8. Due to the sensitive nature of this interview and in line with ethical considerations, recruitment of the survivors through Rainbo Initiative was subject to being approved by them. I was only allowed to interview those survivors who had already shown willingness to participate in the research. The total number of all interviews conducted for this study is 11. While the overall number of survivors interviewed was lower than expected, I prioritised the depth of the interviews over the size of the sample. Additionally, even with the 6 interviews, when analysing the data, there were a lot of cross-cutting themes from the different interviews signalling that a larger sample size would have possibly produced similar results. This aligns with Malterud et al.'s (2016) concept of "information power", which suggests that the more relevant a sample is to the research question, the fewer participants are required to achieve sufficient analytical depth and saturation. This suggests that the sample was just enough to capture the key dimensions of survivors' experiences relevant to the research questions and that a larger sample would not necessarily have produced qualitatively different findings.

All participants, including the key actors interviewed, were women, and their ages ranged from 17-46 years old. Additionally, all the participants were concentrated from Freetown, with just one of the key actors based in Moyamba, but the interview was still conducted in Freetown because she was available to be interviewed.

3.4.3 Data Collection

An in-depth but semi-structured qualitative interview design was used to collect the data, seeing as the research work is grounded in a feminist methodology which values co-creation that thrives in semi-structured interviews. This semi-structured approach helped me as the researcher, together with the survivors, discover how barriers creep into the justice pipeline and ways they bargain or navigate through it. This structure also made it possible for dialogue to flow between the participants and the researcher while also allowing the researcher to ask individualised follow-up questions from each response even though they were not part of the interview guide, making the whole interview process flexible.

★ Interviews and Power Relations

Although the interview process was semi-structured, there was a possibility that it could transform into a place where unequal power structures are reproduced between the researcher and participants. Patai (1991) notes that 'the personal interview is a particularly precise locus for ethical issues to surface' (p. 145). Given also that the issue of sexual violence is highly sensitive, it is important for a researcher to anticipate the possible ways power dynamics might show up in the interview process. It is also important that interviewers avoid making assumptions about participants, both in terms of their experiences of sexual violence and their answers to questions about it. Therefore, when interviewing the survivors, I started off by explaining the goal of the research and that my role there was primarily to listen as they shared their experiences and to help them feel more comfortable.

I also made it clear at the beginning how long the interview would last to keep myself accountable and respect their time as well, and I assured them that they could stop at any time during the interview without it counting negatively against them. At the end of each section of questions, I would inform them that we are moving to a new direction and ask if they would like to continue. This process created room for their own agency, because even though I was conducting an interview on sexual violence, I was open to listening to other related stories or narratives they might want to share in that moment. What this did was create an atmosphere of ease and convenience which made for richer interview sessions.

Choosing to conduct all the interviews in person also helped me as a researcher observe and pick up on non-verbal cues of when a survivor might be visibly uncomfortable or not sure what to answer. Anthony et al., 2025 support this approach as they note, “Studies have shown that when it comes to discussing emotional or traumatic experiences, online interviews appear inadequate for the task in that they lack the functionality to demonstrate an appropriate level of ethical care and empathy in a meaningful manner” (p. 6)

In-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the different key actors. In that dynamic, I realised that my introduction to them through my organisation as a researcher created an unequal power distribution that had the potential to shape the outcome of the interview. I tried not to make assumptions from their responses, especially not to push them to become defensive about their services or lack of them but allowed them to describe their perspectives in their own terms. These sets of interviews were also conducted in person, but the key actors decided the meeting place and as a researcher, I complied.

Transcription of Data

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants on the mobile device of the researcher. At the end of each day, every audio file was transferred from my personal phone to Google Drive in a secured folder that only I, as the researcher, have access to. The audio files were then deleted from the phone’s storage.

Each audio file of the survivors was anonymised according to the alphabetic progression. The first survivor interview was labelled 'A', and the pseudonym 'Anisa' was assigned, corresponding to the letter A. The same was done for the other five survivor interviews.

With respect to the key actors, no names were also stored, just the title of their services provided, as their audio files were also transferred to the researcher’s personal Google drive.

All the interviews were conducted in Krio to allow participants to express themselves in the language they are comfortable with.

After the files were transferred to Google Drive, I, the researcher who is fluent in both English and Krio, transcribed each of these audio files and saved them as documents in a secured folder

that only I had access to. I decided not to give it to another person to transcribe given the sensitive and personal nature of the audio files.

The focus of the transcription was not to infer meanings to the scripts but to translate directly where possible. This meant that the researcher's biases or perceptions did not overtake the transcription process and allowed the data to be as original as possible.

However, transcription also requires a bit of reflexivity, as some words in Krio have no direct verbatim equivalent to English, so because this research is designed as interpretive qualitative research, and therefore priority was given to conveying participants' intended meanings rather than producing rigid, word-for-word equivalents where this was not linguistically or culturally possible. Each audio recording was listened to twice, firstly to familiarise myself with it and then secondly to transcribe the data to English and start analysing patterns and themes.

3.5 Data Analysis

All data generated through the interview process was conducted in a semi-structured format and also required a data analysis approach that will center the experiences of these participants. Therefore, a thematic approach was used to analyse the data. Braun & Clarke (2006) note that thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (p. 79) and that is what I wanted this research to do. A thematic analysis does the job of identifying the implicit and explicitly stated themes that can be found in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis that was used in analysing the data was informed by intersectionality, which was one of the theoretical frameworks of this research work.

Each transcript from the survivor interview was read, and recurring words were highlighted against each script at the initial stage. I used an intersectional approach here to pick up on the words or phrases the survivors mentioned that positioned their age, gender, family dynamics, or social status as limiting factors that denied access to justice. Also, words or phrases associated with cost and the value that was placed on justice for them as a survivor were also noted.

Then, a separate reading was also conducted for the key actors, but now with a focus of not only closely reading but also identifying if these recurring words or phrases show up in their scripts, whether verbatim or otherwise. This comparative reading pattern created room for the research to engage with and examine how institutional roles aligned with the survivors' realities or not.

In order to sort out the themes, I scanned each interview script, particularly paying attention to sections that answered my research questions. Each of the questions were coded into keywords and I tagged sections from the scripts that answered or offered an alternative. After this, I was able to highlight recurring patterns across the survivors' script and used those to generate a first set of themes. These suggested clusters of themes were now used provisionally to further read the scripts of the key actors and then cross-reference the common thread between what the survivors mentioned as their experience and what the key actors mentioned as their role as against what they mentioned as their own perspectives. The themes that were identified through this process of analysing the data reflect both shared patterns from across the survivor's transcripts and differences in how barriers showed up in their individual journey. Finally, the research grouped similar themes and posed them as questions or thought-provoking statements to signal what would be expected under each subsection. The following were the finalised thematic concerns for this research work:

1. Silence & Shame: Did It Really Happen?
2. The Unspoken Rule: When Justice Depends on Men's Approval
3. Justice Cost: When Economics Meet Violence
4. Legal Frameworks as Invisible Barriers to Justice in Sierra Leone.

3.6 Ethical Concerns

Conducting research on sexual violence is extremely sensitive; therefore, ethical considerations should be a top priority in researcher's mind. Renzetti and Lee (1993) define sensitive topic research as "one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data" (p. 5). To minimise the potential threat that might emerge, I made sure to guide my work by feminist ethical principles for research. To do this, the

very first thing I had to do was to be clear with the participants about the scope and use of the research material.

Each interview started with me as the researcher reading an information sheet to the participants which clearly stated the scope and use of the research. It also explained her right to opt out of the research at any point in time. This informed consent is particularly necessary because it saved my research from the trap of coercing people into research by reason of the service or support they access or even financial gain they may receive through participating in the research (Fontes, 2004).

As previously mentioned, all interviews conducted with the survivors were done through Rainbo who acted as a third party. However, I, as the researcher, was also made to read, consent to and sign their own guiding principles for research ethics. I acknowledge that this route can cause participants to feel pressured to answer the questions in the 'right' way. So the interview guide made sure to stay clear of questions that explicitly asked them to rate their experience with Rainbo Initiative as a first responder. Any conversations that came up about them were done so organically.

Each interview with the survivors were conducted at the Rainbo office space. However, it was done in a private room and the only people present were the survivor and the researcher. This allowed for the survivors to feel at ease and speak confidently without fearing of speaking the right thing. This method also followed through in the anonymisation of the data, which followed with the decision of not asking specific details like the name of the perpetrator, the exact location the incidence happened and the current address and telephone numbers of these survivors.

The same ethical care and practice was done with the interviews of the key actors. Lastly, even though I had a set list of interview questions, I was reflexive enough for each individual conversation to take a natural flow and not all questions were asked strictly according to the order in the guide but were asked when they organically showed up during the interviews. My role mostly was to provide a space where the participants felt they had a space where any thoughts, feelings, and emotions were respected and valued (Mortimer et al. 2021).

3.7 Reflexive Position as a Researcher

Insider/Outside Identity

As a feminist researcher, a key component in conducting this research was to pay attention to and acknowledge my position within this research work as both an insider and an outsider. I am a young woman who has experienced sexual violence and could not access justice even though I was educated and financially independent at that time. This partial identity of mine has worked to shape my understanding of the actual gap that exists between the law of the land and obtaining justice in practice. As such, one would say that I have insider knowledge. On the other hand, I acknowledge that this shared identity with the survivors does not automatically make us the same. While my experience of being sexually violated positions me as an insider in some aspects, my level of education, my exposure, my job and social status all give me a level of privilege that cannot be said about the survivors I interviewed. These factors, I am also aware, hold the potential to shape how survivors narrate their experience to sound more aligned with that other identity I carry.

Right at the beginning of every interview, I disclosed my insider status as a young woman who has also been sexually violated to each survivor. It was important for me to disclose this to them, not only to get them more comfortable during the process, but for them to see that violence is not only located to them but also a reality that almost any woman in Sierra Leone could possibly experience regardless of her status or identity. It was a good way to see the theory of intersectionality in practice in the field, as both I as the researcher and the survivors were able to recognise how one individual could have different forms of oppression at different tangents in their lives. Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) also suggest that revealing one's insider position can be "utilised strategically to oil the wheels of the research process, making it easier to get high-quality data" (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2013, p.253), although this was not the ultimate reason for disclosing my insider status, this brought a sense of connection between myself and the survivors, with some survivors even expressing surprise that I had also been harmed.

As an outsider, I approached the research as a working-class woman with enough power to negotiate with a first responder service to introduce me to survivors who were willing to

participate in the research. This affiliation with the Rainbo Initiative served as a filter on whose story gets to be part of this research. It limited the pool to a demographic of those who had been brave enough to seek help after they were violated, excluding countless other survivors. As such, I approached the research with the intention of listening more than I spoke so that the survivors would move away from just giving answers that they felt were 'right' and be comfortable enough to share their experiences. This resulted in the survivors sharing that they know other survivors who were not brave enough to report, decentering their stories as the ultimate truth. This process is also reflected in how the data was analysed, as I used themes to understand common threads and not just centre each survivor's story as a complete representation of survivors' experiences in my findings section.

What this insider/outsider dual status did was to cultivate a reciprocal interview style, another feminist research principle. This shaped the interviews into a space that allowed the survivors to not only retell their experiences but also pose questions and ask for clarification on some particular sections. The result of this was that it balanced out the power, as I, the researcher, was not the only person asking the question, the survivors also had the space to question me. This reciprocal style also allowed me to examine the assumptions I had held as survivors narrated how they overcame or experienced certain barriers. This dynamic style also influenced the data analysis, as it challenged my long-held assumptions and presented me with the lived reality of the survivors.

Navigating the formal systems.

I want to also briefly reflect on the hurdles I encountered working with the key actors in conducting this research, especially with the Family Support Unit (FSU), the state mandated police body working on cases of sexual violence. Even though I was put in contact with the FSU head through my organisation because of an existing work relationship, the interview was rescheduled a few times.

When I finally got the audience to conduct the interview with them, I felt they initially approached the interview a bit defensively, opening with a long statement of the prescribed

procedure a victim needs to follow after reporting to them. That, however, is not surprising, as Zaal et al. (2026) note that "Research situations involving questionnaires and interviews are essentially social interactions, and as such, they are sensitive to social desirability bias" (p. 2). This is a bias that speaks to the tendency of individuals providing inaccurate self-reports in interviews to present a favourable image of themselves (van de Mortel, 2008).

What I did during the interview was to ask questions directed to them as individuals who have experienced the system and not just as representatives of the police. This looked like me asking them questions about their perception of what barriers survivors might face when seeking justice, rather than asking them what they do to counter the barriers survivors might potentially face. I was aware that in this instance they were in a position of power and I, as a researcher, needed to get as unbiased information from them as possible. The result of this interview style is demonstrated in her response when I asked what she personally thinks about the current sexual offences act. She answered:

You remember the time when something happened and the president had to declare a state of emergency on rape; rape never stopped. It was during that period that the cases of rape increased. So, the fact remains that we should just go according to the law as it, because no matter what other law the government makes, people will fall short.

What we see here is not just the response of a policewoman but that of an individual who has experienced the justice pathway in Sierra Leone in real time.

This interview approach helped to reduce the power imbalance and made her comfortable enough to have a frank conversation with me as a researcher. As a result, the data I retrieved from that key actor served as a key basis on which the barriers the survivors mentioned were also checked as I analysed my findings.

Chapter 4: Navigating barriers to meaningful justice as survivors of sexual violence in Sierra Leone.

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.
— Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

4.1 Introduction and Summary of Results

This research is deeply concerned with hearing and honouring the stories of survivors of sexual violence, as it highlights the various barriers they experienced in accessing justice in a nation that has already laid a strong foundation through its robust Sexual Offences Act of 2019. In this chapter, we discuss the lived realities and personal experiences of these survivors; listen to service providers and community-based organizations, and contrast them with the narrative from the justice system to connect and map out the major thematic concerns. These themes do not appear as standalone analyses, but they are the result of a sequence of interconnected experiences a survivor encounters as she navigates access to meaningful justice. From the embodied silence that shapes her response to violence, through the dominant role of family and community members and finally into the institutional response that is laced with delay and distrust, we see how they all co-exist.

4.2 Silence & Shame: Did It Really Happen?

If a bank is targeted and robbed by a group of armed robbers, the fact that a robbery occurred is almost always accepted, as people readily tend to believe that story, and contesting it would require the bank's management to prove it happened. There might be some enquiries to determine if it was an inside job, but the credibility of the act of the bank being robbed is not questioned. In the same vein, if a building were to burn down right now, no one would wonder if the homeowner was exaggerating about the fire incidence. They would first accept that the building was burnt and then search for the cause of the fire. However, when a woman is sexually

violated, society quickly moves its gaze away from the harm and fully into deducing whether (a) She was indeed violated and not imagining things and (b) she had not invited or welcomed this violence that has happened to her. The violated woman is now put in a position to 'prove' that she was really violated.

In a society where, "when it comes to the concept of rape, neither philosophers nor everyday competent language users are in agreement as to how to understand the concept properly" (Hänel, 2018, p. 27), a survivor often has to negotiate for her experience to be considered credible before institutions or even her family take her seriously. If she is believed, she finds it easier to access justice. If she is not, then justice becomes a faraway dream. Rape myths thrive in these ambiguous situations as survivors are encouraged to go above and beyond to prove their stories are true. In an interview with one of the survivors who was drugged and repeatedly raped by her uncle, she expressed how she found it difficult to get her family to believe she was being violated.

Anisa said,

Of course I tried to talk oh, but you see, my mother and grandmother did not listen. I tried many times to let my mother know that this man is a bad man. But how will she believe me when there was no mark on me?

From Anisa's account, it seems that her narrative alone was not enough 'proof' for her immediate family to investigate. This act of denial placed the burden of proof on the already violated body of the survivor who, in this case, as with most other cases of sexual assault, did not leave any physical mark to corroborate her story. In Anisa's case, her body contained the story internally but had no visible clues that fit into the dominant narrative of what a 'real rape' should look like. As Muehlenhard et al. (1992) observe, the "general conceptualization is that 'real' rape only occurs when a stranger attacks a woman with a weapon and threatens her life" (as cited in Young & Maguire, 2003, p. 42). Therefore, her story of being drugged and sexually violated by her uncle, who is not a stranger, was difficult for the family to believe, as patriarchal norms often grant men automatic credibility while demanding women provide extra proof. The intersecting reality of her being young, her perpetrator being a family member and no visible mark on her body to corroborate her story all combined to limit her access to justice.

Denial of the act is not the only weapon used to silence survivors when they attempt to speak up after they have been violated. Discussions from the interviews revealed that survivors are often blamed for being sexually violated when they do speak up. This response creates another barrier as survivors expect care and support from the people they disclose their stories to. As Dworkin et al. (2019) mention, "...survivors may disclose without explicit expectations of the specific social reactions they receive, but with a general belief that the people whom they tell will care about their experience and needs" (p. 10). When this expectation is not met and the survivor is blamed for being assaulted, she most likely internalises the guilt.

Baindu, a woman in her mid-thirties, recalled her experience of sharing that she was raped by her pastor.

According to Baindu:

I am someone who is shy and like my own private space, so it is difficult for me to speak out about things like this to anyone. So I only spoke to her because she is a prophetess and I experienced this problem in a place of worship, so I believed she would understand. But when someone like me speaks out about being raped, the first question they ask is always, "how old are you?" Some other people even ask me how did I manage to get raped by my pastor. Like I wished for this to happen to me.

Baindu's experience demonstrates how her identity as a woman in her mid-thirties made it difficult for people to believe her enough to investigate why she was raped by her pastor. This disbelief is tinted with blame, as it implicitly questions whether a woman of a certain age could get raped, let alone by a religious authority. This enforces the gendered responsibility trap, where a woman is always supposed to be careful about herself and her surroundings and hardly ever about the perpetrator who should know better than to cause harm. Kreft (2023) observes that 'the question of 'what will she have done to provoke this?' colours subsequent interactions for victims of sexual violence, and this transcends the private and the public sphere" (p. 661). How could she at her age allow herself to be raped by her pastor?

Shame sometimes also stems from within. During the interview with Anisa she narrates how the feeling of shame was internalised by her long before she disclosed that she was violated to anyone. To this she said:

I was the only one among my friends that had been raped, and I was even a virgin. So I found it very shameful.

From an embodiment lens, Anisa's shame now is placed in her body by the very act of the sexual violation and on her body by her own feeling of shame. In many cases, the survivor might be the very first person to doubt herself. The result of this doubt is a delay in reporting which, in some cases, like Anisa's, can lead to the continuation of the sexual assault with no consequences. Reflecting on her experience of the very first time her uncle drugged and raped her, Anisa's decision to keep her discovery to herself shows how self-protection can also lead to a justice gap. Anisa had already anticipated that her immediate family members would disbelieve her story and blame her, so she kept her discovery to herself.

When asked why she did not speak up after the first time she was assaulted by her uncle, Anisa reflected:

When I finally woke up in his room, I felt a very sharp pain on the bottom part of my stomach, so I went to use the toilet. Honestly, I thought it was my period, so I did not take it seriously. It was only when I noticed that this was not my usual menses, but it looked like I had injured myself down there was when I realised what had happened. So I was scared that no one would believe me, especially as it was me who went into his room to ask him for a medication for my headache.

It is evident that Anisa internalised the act and judged herself guilty long before her mother and grandmother denied that her uncle had raped her. So the journey started from her internalised shame and her family's subsequent denial of the crime that served as barriers in her life. This act of denial by her close family members further nourishes the feeling of self-blame in the survivor's life. In this instance, we can trace how denial breeds grounds for the survivor to blame herself. If only she had not walked into the perpetrator's (her uncle) room asking for medication, then she would not have been in this situation. This is a dilemma that Hawkey et al. (2021) describe as "Attributing sexual violence to one's own behaviour or feeling as though it is deserved reflects dominant cultural discourses about sexual violence against women, resulting in feelings of shame and guilt" (p. 3202). In Anisa's case, which can be classified as an extreme case because she was

drugged and raped, the survivor still blamed herself for the act. In that moment, her thought process resonates with the findings by Gravelin et al. (2019), who discovered that survivors who were drugged, like Anisa, were "not seen as less blameworthy than a sober victim assaulted by a sober perpetrator" (p. 10). As Mas'udah (2018) notes, "Concerned victims tend to withdraw, feel guilty, and find it difficult to reconcile with the situation. This perception is caused by a tumultuous psychological state and a mind that finds it difficult to accept the situation" (p. 4). Anisa's journey shows how deeply rooted silence and shame work hand in hand on the personal level to deter her from seeking justice. If only she did not have a headache that day. If only she had not trusted her uncle. If only she had gone to her mother for help and not another close family member.

4.3 The Unspoken Rule: When Justice Depends on Men's Approval

Sierra Leone, like many other societies, is family-centered and has a defined power structure. In homes where the mother and father are both present, the father often has significant control over every decision made, especially on issues that are seen as private or family issues. In families who live apart, it is more likely that another male figure steps in and assumes the role of father. Therefore, when a woman is raped, the moment she speaks about it, it ceases to be just about her and swiftly changes into a family matter in which the father or any other male figure has sole authority to decide the course of action. Even in her pain, her 'otherness' brought on by the gendered social norms is stronger than her autonomy or right as a human being. During the interview, Cindy shared how her family reacted when she told them that she had been sexually violated.

Cindy said:

So after my mother finally told my father of the situation, he called a family meeting. It was me, my older brother, my mother and my dad. I explained again what happened to me. He asked me who was the man that did it, and I told him that it was our next door neighbour, who I used to help fetch water, who did this. So, my dad now said that he thinks that the best thing for us to do is to sit down with the man's family and listen to what they will say.

The role of Cindy's father functions almost like a high court judge based on the almost hegemonic power society has placed on him. As Gage & Hutchinson (2006) state that "culture confers power on individuals by defining the values and meanings associated with men's and women's roles and statuses" (p. 13). So in line with society's dictate, Cindy's father is not only a father figure but also a gatekeeper to justice. Sexual violence, in this context, is not just a crime against the survivor but against the good name of her family. As a result, the head of the family now has the responsibility to react and decide the next step. In the end, Cindy, like many other survivors, becomes more than just a woman in her family. She becomes a woman whose bodily pain was, on the one hand, violated by a male perpetrator and on the other hand, had another man dictate how justice should look for her.

Discussions with a project manager for a community-based organization working on issues of sexual violence also suggest a similar stance to the survivors' narratives of male figures deciding how and if justice should be pursued. . Hawa expresses this sentiment clearly in her reflection.

She said:

In many cases, they even wait for the father to give a green light before the survivor even goes to get a medical checkup. So if the father in his own mind does not understand or accept that sexual violence is a bad thing, then of course his approach to handling this will be very different. If the father blames the daughter for being raped, then the family will first have to beg him until he forgives, before they even think of seeking help. In other cases, if the father is not around, maybe he travelled for work or a family emergency; they are more likely to wait for his return to decide the next course of action.

Hawa's reflection in some other rooms can be seen as just our 'culture'. The man is the head of the home, and, naturally, his approval to seek justice is necessary. The problem with this framing that is obscured under 'social norms' is that another person's pain needs to be validated by a male figure of authority in her life before she gets the green light to seek justice. As Hawa mentioned, if the father deems the daughter responsible for being raped, then her chances of pursuing justice become extremely slim.

Another survivor named Finda narrated how these gendered social norms almost forced her into marrying her perpetrator. In her case, the violence led to an unwanted pregnancy and very few options left for her to handle that situation. In Sierra Leone being unmarried, pregnant and living in your parents' home puts you in a position of powerlessness. You are seen as a social deviant and are pushed off to the margin with little chance at redemption. In her interview, Finda expresses the pain she felt when her family preferred to listen to her younger brother than her mother.

According to her:

It was my younger brother who was even able to calm my father after my mother tried begging him for days. He told them that the best thing for me right now was to find a way to get the man to traditionally marry me. But how can that be when he has run away and even his landlady is looking for him? For some time, my father was okay with this suggestion. So they put more effort trying to find this man's family than taking me to the police or medical centre, even though my mother had said that because I was pregnant they should suspend everything first and then we go to a hospital.

This reflection demonstrates a dynamic in male decision-making in the life of the survivor. It shows that age does not necessarily deter masculine figures from playing key deciding roles in the life of a survivor where they deem it necessary. Patriarchy does not function according to one's age; it transcends age. As in Finda's case, it was her younger brother who suggested a mediatory route. Therefore, choosing to settle the case at 'home' rather than with the law becomes the default barrier that survivors face and it is usually supported by the masculine figures in their lives.

4.4 Justice Cost: When Economics Meet Violence

Sexual violence does not only invade one's body; it also invades their finances. A survivor might find herself battling with her mental health, trying to heal whatever physical signs that may have shown up, and restructuring her finances to cope with the financial load of pursuing justice. In amending the *Sexual Offences Act*, the policymakers intentionally created a low threshold for entering the legal system in Sierra Leone. The current 2019 act states that there are no fees paid

to the police or at the medical centers to do the medical checkup. If the case does progress to the court stage, the government provides a free state counsel right up until judgement. The deputy head of the Family Support Unit, which is the police body in charge of cases of sexual violence, reiterated the government's position in bridging the financial gap in accessing justice in Sierra Leone.

She said:

We get lots and lots of people who come every day to make a report that they or someone they know has been violated. I can assure you that the process is entirely free. No one has to pay anything to give their statement. We take your statement; we write a request for a medical check up to be done at the government hospital. Even that hospital is free, survivors are not required to pay anything to do their medical.

Structurally, as mentioned by the police, there is very limited financial burden placed on the shoulders of the survivor, giving her a low threshold into entering the legal system. However, financial challenges still show up in other ways which still limits the survivor's access to justice. These challenges heavily affect those survivors who have fewer resources, as the reality is that in Sierra Leone, the road to justice is long and tedious. It is certainly not a two-week trip that one can check in and out of as they please, and this tedious journey does have some costs attached to it that filters who can continue on this journey. During the interviews, most of the survivors revealed that finances or a lack of it, served as one main reason why they felt they could not pursue justice. For instance, Ella expressed her frustrations with the repeated visits to the police station which resulted in a prolonged delay in her case that eventually caused a huge financial strain on her. Unfortunately, this delay served as a barrier in her desire to pursue justice.

According to her:

Paying my transport alone was a big problem for me and then they tell you at the police station to go and come and in two days time or come back the next week. All this time, the man was not even arrested. So, I had to come back again and again. Sometimes you don't even have enough money to pay your transport to come again but they do not seem to even care about that.

If your case has not progressed, they will still tell you to come back another day. Me, I got tired of paying my transport for this same man, so I stopped going to the police station.

This constraint was not just limited to Ella. Finda's story also echoed this clearly. According to her,

I feel like my mother and father were not too okay for us to go to the police station because they did not have money. Because we will need to pay transport for the three of us to go and that is a lot of money. So maybe that is also why my father accepted the idea of finding the man who raped me to marry me to lessen the burden on him.

This economic challenge becomes even more pronounced in the cases of those survivors who still financially depend on their families. Now you are not only a social outlier because of the violation done to your body, but you also become a survivor who needs them to financially rescue you. This burden shows up quite distinctly in those families struggling to make ends meet themselves. This puts survivors in a spot where they have to choose between pursuing justice, no matter the financial cost, or safeguarding the little they have available to them at the expense of redress. This situation is an unfair situation to place the survivor in.

Dina expressed her disappointment when she had to give up her pursuit of justice because of the repeated case follow-up at the police station.

Dina said,

Justice does not mean that the other person must be killed for having done something very bad to you. Justice means arresting the perpetrator and applying Sierra Leone's laws, but the police have made no progress in over two years, so I got tired of paying my transport and leaving my business to go over there.

Along the way, each repeated trip steals not just her time but it also robs her of her money. The survivor is now, in addition to being violated, fighting off societal stigma; she is now counting her coins even though the law of the land has technically made all the entry points free.

This reality was not limited to the survivors' narratives. During the interview with a first responder from Rainbo Initiative, she also notes how hidden costs show up as barriers that

survivors experience in Sierra Leone. These hidden costs do not just show up at the police station but even in the medical institutions that the survivor has to pass through. As first responders, they support the survivors getting access to government-mandated services which are supposed to be free. However, she adds another perspective to this as she reflects:

Now, there is a policy that says when any survivor goes for medical care relating to that incident in any government hospital, it should be free. Sadly, that is not the reality. We mostly pay for these medical bills even though the government has beautifully promised free care for survivors. So we need government to send people to monitor that indeed these people are doing what the law says.

This complication is a high cost that survivors unfortunately end up paying. The legal system has built a cycle that is almost inescapable for the survivor. She firstly needs ‘proof’ that she was violated. Then the ‘proof’ can be taken to the police, who pass it on to the court of law and use that to determine the innocence or guilt of the alleged perpetrator, and then when found guilty, he is sentenced to prison. In this cycle, the medical certificate is the oil that runs the machine. But sometimes, the system allows a survivor walk into the medical centre with hope but sometimes leaves with a medical bill that she cannot afford. In the end, the same system designed to help her, has placed many checkpoints that prioritise certain forms of evidence and leaves the survivors struggling to match up to them.

4.5 Legal Frameworks as Invisible Barriers to Justice in Sierra Leone.

What happens to a nation after a groundbreaking law on sexual violence? Does it result in a sudden decline in the cases of sexual violence in that nation? If at all there is an increase in the reported cases of sexual assault, does this point to the law being functional? How can we measure the effect of the *Sexual Offences Act* against the most recent survivor data gotten from Rainbo Initiative of a total of 2,723 reported cases of sexual violence in their own centers alone in 2025? A fair question would be who actually owns these laws?

A resounding answer that cut across all the interviews conducted was that no, these survivors had no idea about the existence of the provision within the amended sexual offences act. They also only found out about the free services available for survivors at government

institutions after they tried to pursue the legal route. In this way, the law that is made available to help survivors gets to react rather than protect. Cindy's experience shared during the interview shows the clear gap between the existence of the law in Sierra Leone and her lived reality. She was sexually assaulted by a family member who then threatened her to keep it a secret, but she still braved it and reported the incidence to the police station. When asked if she had any idea of what would happen to the perpetrator after he was arrested, she had this to say. According to Cindy:

No, I went in blank. I did not have any knowledge of what would happen at the police station. It is also possible that my sister did not share with me the possible things that would happen because she also might not know the specifics of how the police investigation happens because we did not ever personally know anybody who had done this to explain how it works to us.

Her account shows that neither she nor her sister, who accompanied her to the station, really knew about these laws nor how they function. They only had a certainty that what had been done to Baindu was wrong and the law needed to address that issue. This lack of knowledge can present itself as a barrier because if the survivor does not know her rights, then it is a difficult task for that right to be applicable to her.

Anisa also further reflects on this dynamic in not understanding the legal processes. She carefully described her experience when she and her mother got to the police station. She said:

I thought that when my mother finally went to the police station everything would be solved. I really thought they would just come the same day and arrest this my uncle. But it was when we went there I realised that there is a process. I had to get a paper from the police to take to the hospital and then they gave me a paper to take back to the police. The police now take my statement and send me to counselling oh. That was too long. I did not know about it at all.

This step-by-step retelling through the lens of the survivor forces us to see how these processes, though 'necessary', are tedious with a real tendency to push the survivor away from the justice system. The laws, even though progressive and survivor-centred, are far removed from the lived realities of the ones who are supposed to benefit from them. Unlike the customary systems,

which are community-made and owned and are widely disseminated, the state laws seem out of reach and almost require you to be a certain type of person to access them.

During the discussions with the personnel from Rainbo Initiative, she shared her thoughts on the laws and how they, as an institution, have tried to operationalise these laws.

She said:

We do lots of media engagement on radio stations where we discuss the laws protecting women. We also work with partners when we get our staff training to come and simplify the legal documents for us and to update our understanding of the medical proceedings in Sierra Leone.

While the effort of Rainbo Initiative is commendable, as this is what compliant non-state actors are expected to be engaged in, it also exposes a weakness that is found in most inherited legal systems. Interestingly, the FSU representative shared similar sentiments. She said:

As a unit, we are not well staffed to go all over the place to popularise these laws. That is how it should be, but we cannot. So, we depend on other sectors to help do that work, which will reduce our workload. But really, people do not know in detail about the laws for sexual offence.

This situation speaks to a structural issue which indicates that access to justice is not solely dependent on if there are laws in the first place. Rather, it speaks to how legible, accessible and socially embedded these laws are to those who are most at risk of needing them to function one day. Because when legal protection or redress is highly dependent on other institutions to drive it, then justice becomes conditional rather than guaranteed, and the survivor is caught at the intersection of this with little to no access to justice.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to do the work of demonstrating the many ways in which survivors experience barriers after they have been sexually violated in Sierra Leone. The reflections and narratives from participants were not all identical, but they each had several overlapping themes which showed up in their story because of their social identities and how that intersected with the legal systems in Sierra Leone. The findings in this research point to a possibility that survivors'

access to justice systems cannot be looked on as equalling the availability of the law. They experience barriers that are both interpersonal and intrapersonal.

The social and personal experiences of the key actors showed up in how they could reflect on the processes of how a survivor can access justice. However, that also has another layer as we see the response from the police tries to portray a system that works well, which is not necessarily what was heard from the community-based organizations.

From the collective voices of the survivors, we see how power relations, right from the violent act of the perpetrator on her body to the inaccessibility of the available legal frameworks, decides if survivor a survivor's body, dignity and rights are worth fighting for. We see that survivors have described the formal systems as power holders to which they have very limited access, even though the law has made access easy and open.

Therefore, using an intersectional, decolonial and embodied theoretical framework to listen to and analyse these justice gaps, we see how the legal system is not just the only loophole the survivor needs to cross. There are many other social and personal dynamics which interact at different levels in her journey. The way these other barriers show up in her life also depends on her social positioning at that particular moment. Through these findings, we can see that indeed justice for a survivor does not start and end at the court of law. It starts with her as an individual weaving through the maze of society in hopes of finding a way, any way to get redress, with no clearly defined end route.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Until the lion learns to write, every story will glorify the hunter

—Chinua Achebe, Anthills of The Savannah.

5.1 Conclusion

This research is an examination not just of the barriers survivors of sexual violence in Sierra Leone experience but also a critical analysis of how these barriers show up in the lives of the survivors. To assess this, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted and analysed thematically to map out how these barriers exist because, right from the start, the study realised that lack of a legal framework was not a barrier, seeing as Sierra Leone does have progressive laws. Therefore, the research interviewed not just survivors to hear their accounts but also key actors like the police and community-based organisations and first responders who daily interact with survivors at different levels.

In analysing the stories of the survivors, an intersectional lens was applied to see where these stories converge with the narratives of those key actors who had power and identify the weak points and recurring patterns to see how these barriers are enforced and reproduced. The aim was not to think about justice strictly through a legal lens but also to situate it within the everyday societal framework.

The results of the research reveal that survivors often have to first navigate and negotiate for justice from within their bodies as they experience trauma and being objectified by the perpetrator. To navigating around them before they can move into the legal system which has been mandated to protect them. Societal norms are a big deciding factor in how the survivor is barred from accessing justice, as they can be silenced by their close family members who doubt the occurrence of them being victimised and blame them for the sexual assault. Others face

silence from within because they internalise the act as their fault and feel some responsibility for it.

Even though no direct question was asked about male involvement in supporting or thwarting their efforts to get justice, male dominance in the decision-making process shone throughout the interviews. This study reveals the power imbalances in the family and societal structure women in Sierra Leone are subjected to and how those power structures shape the survivor's pathway to justice. As we see, even though it was her body harmed, it is a man negotiating justice for her and mostly not within reason.

As a result, we see that justice is conditional on intersecting powers, such as gender hierarchies, social norms, economic constraints, and, lastly, institutional lapses that take away the survivor's agency and her wish. Therefore, when a barrier first shows up, people could easily miss it for the conventional way of life, which ultimately works as a barrier even though Sierra Leone has explicit laws on sexual violence.

In one of the interviews, a survivor who was able to pass through all the barriers and had got her perpetrator convicted and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment shared a different experience on power play with regard to her seeking justice. The person she trusted to disclose the experience of her violation was familiar with how the police system worked. She knew the next steps to take and how to report it. This knowledge of the existing law, according to the account of this survivor, helped them move through the system effortlessly, from the home right up to the courts. This is an example of how informed support works in improving a survivor's access to justice.

The findings from this research then conclude with the understanding that access to justice for survivors of sexual violence within the landscape of Sierra Leone is not solely determined by the existing laws available. It starts with her, moves on to her family and social system and ends up with the institutional response, all shaping whether the violent act committed on her body is believed enough to allow her to pursue the potential of getting justice.

5.2 Practical Implications

The general findings of this research have revealed that justice is not just a legal process but also societal and community-owned. Therefore, this research can be used not just for the formal systems set up by the government but also by other actors in the ecosystem who design different projects and interventions that directly address sexual violence in Sierra Leone and other similar contexts as well.

- This research work provides evidence to advocacy organisations, first responders and community-based organizations that support for survivors of sexual violence should start exactly where these survivors themselves start their justice journey, which is their homes and communities. For instance, one survivor mentioned that it was only after her mother and grandmother believed that she had been violated that she started her journey towards justice. Their disbelief can be partly attributed to the fact that their societal construct of sexual violence did not correspond with the narrative of their daughter. Therefore, when community-based organisations design survivor-centred community engagement and advocacy strategies that address issues like disbelief and blame, then survivors' chances of getting justice improve.
- This research work is also beneficial for institutions and workplaces in reviewing or even creating their sexual harassment policies to strengthen their survivor-facing processes. One thing that this research made clear was that any reporting structure that is being designed should pay close attention to power imbalances and the fear of social repercussions after reporting the violation. With this in mind, institutions and workplaces can redesign or create stronger complaint mechanisms that are confidential, have a quick case investigation timeline and are accessible to improve how a survivor accesses that reporting structure.
- Additionally, this research's findings can be used, especially by service providers and community-based organisations, to develop a toolkit that specifically translates the relevant laws used on issues of sexual violence that is used for advocacy purposes.

5.3 Recommendations

This study shows that barriers are embedded in survivors' everyday lives and are difficult to stop or resist because they have become socially acceptable. The citizens cannot just go straight to the legal system to seek justice; they start their journey within the family and community. As such, targeted social awareness and advocacy programs need to be employed to support the existence of the law of the land.

1. **Strengthen Community Social Support System:** As the findings have discovered that survivors are likely to first deal with their families and communities as the first site towards justice, there is a need to create community-based programmes which challenge the gendered norms and biases surrounding sexual violence. This helps to address the issue of trusting the survivor and helps the community and family provide better assistance to the survivors. When these social settings are targeted, it builds a system that is more likely to believe a survivor enough to investigate and seek justice than silence her. It also makes it easy for the existing laws to function.
2. **Community Ownership of the Laws:** It was not surprising to discover that the survivors did not know about the existence of specific laws like the Sexual Offences Act, nor were they aware of the actual next step to take. The Sexual Offences Act (2019) of Sierra Leone is a comprehensive tool that covers a wide range of situations²⁸ that seek to ease the survivor's burden in getting justice. This shows that there is a need for more community in-depth advocacy on the existing laws in Sierra Leone so they are easily accessible in written and various other multimedia formats. We recognise that the government has created a National Referral pathway, but they need to move away from the confines of the legal document and into the communities, such as schools, marketplaces, hospitals, banks, etc. This approach serves a dual purpose. First, it has the potential to empower women and young girls, who are always at risk of being sexually violated, by educating them about the laws and how the system works to support them. Secondly, it could deter

²⁸ The act makes provision for free medical treatment and a free medical report and clearly states that the free medical treatment will include counselling, psycho-social support and mental health services among other things.

possible and even repeat perpetrators as they gain a clear understanding of the law and what it states.

3. **Engaging Men and Boys:** Although masculinities and male power were not the focus of this research, the findings show how male power, regardless of age or status, plays a key role in whether a survivor has access to justice. The gendered social norms and, arguably, patriarchy have constructed them influentially enough to determine whether a survivor gets access to justice or not. Therefore, there is a need to engage men and boys in these communities in conversations surrounding sexual violence. As power-holders, with the right advocacy messaging and consciousness-raising, there is the possibility that they move away from using a patriarchal lens to decide how and if a survivor can access justice, because without assessing this concentrated decision-making power that sits with the men in our society, women's access to justice will continue to be conditional.
4. **Institutional Accountability:** Findings from the research show that there are hidden costs which serve as a barrier that filters which survivor stays or falls of the justice system. As such, this research recommends that these institutions conduct a holistic review of the administrative process that survivors have to navigate to identify loopholes and areas to synthesise and strengthen their response. This will create a long-term structural change that could potentially minimise the delays and hidden costs associated with a system that has been designed to be completely free to ease the survivor of financial burden.

5.4 Limitations of the Research

As mentioned earlier in the methodology chapter, this research was conducted with a relatively small sample size for both sets of participants interviewed, i.e., the survivors and the key actors. This is a limitation of this particular study, as it is very concentrated, making the conclusions drawn not reflective of a statistically wide range of survivor stories from across Sierra Leone. While Rainbo Initiative's Survivor Incident Report lists Freetown as the city with the highest recorded cases of sexual violence, the research could have included survivors from other regions within Sierra Leone. However, because this research was not funded, it was financially hard to travel around Sierra Leone beyond Freetown.

At the same time, it is important to situate these limitations within the context of Sierra Leone and research on sexual violence. Survivors in Sierra Leone are silenced and even blamed for being violated, which places some heavy stigma surrounding sexual violence. This results in survivors finding it difficult to speak up.

5.5 Areas for Further Research

Future research can build on the findings of the study, but with a larger sample size of survivors and key actors to see if there are similar patterns, themes and barriers in Sierra Leone and even out of the country. In Addition, other researchers globally could situate their own country to see what barrier survivors face when pursuing justice even though they also do have progressive laws. It would be of good interest, especially within the African context for more research to be done on this.

Additionally, future research can also include a case study approach to systematically trace how survivors navigate barriers over time, in conjunction with a thematic analysis, to get a clearer picture of the cumulative nature of the barriers survivors have to navigate.

Whilst this research centred on the experiences of survivors, since we already have existing laws and policies, there is also a need to address how these frameworks co-exist and function. to see how applicable, accessible and context-specific they are. Research which directly addresses this area is necessary.

Finally, as mentioned in the recommendation section, masculinities were not a central focus of this research; however, male power and authority in the home and community setting showed up during the data analysis consistently. Therefore, future research could try to understand how male power is produced and sustained within Sierra Leone, especially around issues of sexual violence and how that might potentially affect or support a survivor's pathway to justice.

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