

Martha's Story

As a young child in Sierra Leone, Martha was told that she looked like her mother, so she spent hours in front of the mirror, trying to see in her own features an image of the mother she lost as a toddler. Martha's father, a successful businessman, cared deeply for his daughter. He bought her new clothes every week and took her to school every morning.

In 2000, when Martha was eight years old, her village was attacked by members of a rebel group trying to overthrow the government. As the sound of gunfire filled the neighborhood, Martha and her father stayed locked inside their house for over a week, waiting for the fighting to stop.

When things quieted down, the village was occupied by rebels and the situation was tense. Martha's father saw his business drop off, and he was forced to move to a town he thought would be safe from rebel attack. There, he was able to rebuild his business and send money and clothes to his daughter.

With her father gone, Martha moved in with her grandmother, who made a living by selling vegetables in the market. Sometimes Martha had to help her and missed school as a result. Her life became even more difficult when her grandmother had a severe stroke, which left her unable to walk and almost unable to speak. Martha, by then 13 years old, found herself caring for her ill grandmother and had no news from her father.

Though Martha was barely able to keep up with school work, she managed to pass the National Primary School Examination, which allowed her to go on to high school. However, with her father gone and her grandmother no longer able to work, there was no money for the necessary school fees.

Martha's hopes for continuing her education now depended on her father, and she anxiously waited to hear from him. One morning, she received devastating news: her father had been murdered by the rebels. "The whole world stopped for me," says Martha. "For the first time in my life I felt alone. I realized I was an orphan."

Martha is now staying with her stepmother (a woman her father married before his death and who she refers to as 'aunty') and her stepmother's three children. To help her new family, Martha sells biscuits in the street market, but she longs to go back to school. Luckily, her stepmother's new husband has shown sympathy toward her and is willing to help.

The Impact of Armed Conflict

Sierra Leone's civil war (from 1991–2002) affected over 10,000 children like Martha, causing separation from their families and exposing them to violence. Some were injured or killed by landmines. Others were forced to serve as child soldiers. Many more children missed out on schooling, and were often unable to get health care during the conflict.

UNICEF helps children like Martha by providing food, water, and medical supplies during times of conflict. It also helps children who are serving as child soldiers to leave armed groups and return to their families and communities. Where children have been separated from their families during conflict, UNICEF works to reunite them. In addition, the organization provides counseling for children who need emotional help. For the many children who, like Martha, want to continue learning, UNICEF provides basic education so that children do not miss out on school during times of conflict.

Source: www.unicef.org/sowc06/profiles/full

1. Name at least three ways in which armed conflict has affected Martha's life.

2. Martha has many responsibilities. What are two of those responsibilities?

3. What else do you think is needed to support children and families involved in armed conflict?
