

Mothers of Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone

Lehigh University

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Project Summary: Mothers of Sierra Leone is a social-impact film campaign designed to showcase both the resiliency of women and healthcare professionals in Sierra Leone and the specific accomplishments of the Sierra Leonean people to improve maternal health. Our three-year filming plan highlights innovations in midwifery, hospital delivery services, emergency surgery, neonatal care, and postpartum care during the antenatal, perinatal, and postpartum periods. We have released early iterations of this project as a video series for distribution in Sierra Leone and make our work available to our collaborators. Our films are designed for Sierra Leonean audiences and will (1) amplify the voices of women in Sierra Leone, (2) demonstrate the effectiveness of Sierra Leonean health innovations, and (3) help to recruit additional individuals to participate in the maternal healthcare system. As a team of interdisciplinary filmmakers and scholars, we will also publish qualitative and quantitative research on the efficacy of our films, study the efficiency of different distribution methods, and exhibit our films at film festivals.

Mothers of Sierra Leone is not a panacea, and we do not erase or ignore the devastating effects of the nation's civil war, the Ebola epidemic, or widespread poverty. Instead, we tell stories that treat women as competent, worthy, and vital, and we avoid narratives that sensationalize dangers or threats to mothers, children, and pregnant women. Women's authentic voices and stories are essential to any peaceful society. We work to promote a peaceful society in which women's voices are heard, valued as vital and competent, and protected as integral to the future of Sierra Leone. Our preliminary data suggests these stories educate women about maternal health services in the country, which will potentially increase engagement with the healthcare system and improve maternal health outcomes integral to peace.

Background: *Mothers of Sierra Leone* began in 2019 as a student-driven filmmaking project. Since 2019, our work has evolved to collaborate with filmmakers and healthcare workers in Sierra Leone; we are also actively involved in public-facing research and qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Our documentary film leverages filmic storytelling to decrease maternal mortality in Sierra Leone. We privilege stories of innovation and resilience, and we deploy our research methods to illustrate the efficacy of these stories for improving maternal health outcomes. We foreground the voices of Sierra Leonean women and the expertise of Sierra Leonean health care workers.

While we in the West may not hear frequent accounts of maternal mortality in Sierra Leone, as extensive prior research shows, such treatments are neither new nor difficult to find. And all too often, these narratives manipulate storytelling techniques that dismiss the competencies of women to vocalize or hear their own stories, engendering a form of exploitative empathy in which we enjoy the suffering of others, negate the experiences of Sierra Leonean women, and prevent them from sharing their advice with other women. As part of Lehigh University's Global Social Impact Fellowship program, *Mothers of Sierra Leone* brings together faculty and students from diverse disciplines to engage in an alternative vision for filmic storytelling, one that highlights pragmatic solutions rather than consciousness-raising, alarm-sounding, or blame assignment—efforts that all too often sustain problems, prompting Sierra Leonean women to endure difficulties rather than make change.

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The films of *Mothers of Sierra Leone* are short, simple, direct, and designed for Sierra Leonean viewers, but they are neither simplistic nor disingenuous. We do not dramatize the sufferings of individual Sierra Leonean women to advance political ends, raise money, or attempt to increase awareness amongst Western viewers. We tell stories that teach maternal health practices, explain and build trust in Sierra Leonean healthcare experts, and motivate more Sierra Leoneans to become maternal healthcare practitioners. We craft our films for the people of Sierra Leone and evaluate the efficacy of our stories to ensure we are meeting our explicit goal: to improve maternal health outcomes.

Implementation: Funding from the Davis Projects for Peace award would be utilized in three ways: (1) supporting student travel for fieldwork in Sierra Leone during August 2023 and (2) to purchase specific technology (i.e. video tablets) to support our quantitative and qualitative research, and (3) support payment of our collaborator/translator. Beginning with our fieldwork in August 2023 and extending through 2024, we plan to extend our filming and research to increase the efficacy and efficiency of our documentary films on maternal health care conditions in Sierra Leone. We will be employing pre- and post-screening surveys and focus groups to generate data through a study on the effectiveness of our films on antenatal care; in particular, we will be seeking to extend our work in future years to study the impacts of our films at (1) a private, urban clinic and (2) a rural, government clinic. The diverse, collated data from these distinct locations will ultimately help us to build a district-wide media campaign for Bombali, Sierra Leone.

During the lifecycle of this project, , we will expand our data collection to the government-funded rural clinic at Kalangba (Kalangba CHC) and a privately-funded urban hospital in Makeni (Gladys Koroma). We have already developed strong relationships with the healthcare professionals at these clinics, and the locations of these facilities are specifically important for our goals to develop a district-wide media campaign. The village of Kalanga is located 45 km away from Makeni; the mothers in this area have very limited healthcare options and will either pursue care at Kalangba CHC, turn to traditional birthing methods, or pursue no care at all. The mothers who live near Gladys Koroma Hospital have a variety of healthcare options, including numerous government funded clinics, and yet, many turn to a privately-funded institution that charges them for care. During our fieldwork in August 2023, we will conduct a focus group at both clinics in order to generate discussion and gain deeper insights about the ways our films on antenatal care services could be improved. We will provide appropriate incentives for our focus group and survey participants. The data from our surveys and focus groups will help us modify our films and work towards making new films focused on perinatal care (20 weeks gestation through four months postpartum) services.

Davis Projects for Peace funding will allow us to better evaluate (1) the diversity of barriers preventing mothers in Sierra Leone from seeking available maternal healthcare services, (2) how best to adjust films for different audiences of women in different locations, and (3) how best to coordinate with different healthcare providers working in different clinics, hospitals, and settings. We seek funding for travel expenses for six students to conduct this research in Sierra Leone in August 2023. Funds will be allocated towards student airfare, passport and visa fees, and immunization costs for six team members.

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Further, we request funding to purchase video tablets that our translator will use to screen the films with individual women and healthcare workers at Kalangba and Gladys; our translator will also use the tablets to record data and efficiently transmit the data to us. In addition, funds would be used to compensate our translator for his data collection and reporting at each clinic.

Anticipated Results:

The primary expected outcome of this proposed project is improved maternal health outcomes for the women of Sierra Leone. We will achieve this by disseminating our films, collaborating with our partners in Sierra Leone, and developing diversified and collated data that will inform how we scale (i.e. expand and frame) our current work to implement a district-wide media campaign in Bombali District, Sierra Leone. In particular, when we travel to Sierra Leone in August 2023 and subsequently shift our focus to innovations and programs focused on perinatal and postnatal care, we will work on the next steps in our research project and plan the implementation of a broader healthcare media campaign in the Bombali district.

We pride ourselves on employing a collaborative filmmaking process: we work with partners in Sierra Leone, openly share our films with collaborators, actively seek feedback from mothers and healthcare workers throughout the country, and specifically value the voices of women. The systemic gender inequality in Sierra Leone regularly silences women, even in matters of their own health. Our project, however, exposes mothers to a platform in which their input is recognized and valued. Listening to and valuing the perspectives of Sierra Leonean women who are using the healthcare system is essential to enhancing both the validity of our project and the long-term peace and stability of the country. We deliberately incorporate the feedback these women provide into our films, helping us to tailor our films to our target audience.