# Introduction

## One Metaphor, Many Faces

Papani (55) leans back on his bench, so that his back rests against the coarse yellow stone wall of the two-room-house which we share with nine others in the hillside community of Allentown in the eastern part of Freetown. He closes his eyes to let the sun kiss his face or maybe to block out my anxious expression. He takes time to answer, and, while I observe him, I feel like one massive bundle of nerves.

After many years of research and countless conversations on this very bench, I had just explained to Papani once again how I aimed to write this ethnography of violence in relationships. This was the ninth time I offered a framing, and, at last, the sun seems to have penetrated the skin as his features turned to one big smile:

> Madam Schneider, finally you have understood that all rests not within one interpretation against the other but in their simultaneous presence with all the hardship this entails. Mind you that this insight was always with you in the metaphor of the teeth and the tongue. You just needed time to see that all these different interpretations are like a microcosm for our world.

The metaphor of the teeth and tongue jammed together (*Tit ɛn tɔŋ mɔs jam*), which Papani refers to, says something valuable about the relationship between men (teeth) and women (tongue). During my research in Freetown, the teeth and the tongue were my constant companions. This notion was invoked again and again to express widely contrasting attitudes towards love and violence in Sierra Leone. These differing interpretations can also be found in development discourses, anthropological literature, and oral history. Gender studies read the teeth and the tongue as a metaphor for sex and for the female reproductive organs (Bledsoe 1980a). Development discourses tend to see in it a critique of physical violence against women, of men's sense of entitlement, and of gender inequality. Indeed, it was often referred to when I spoke with employees of international organisations (IOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development practitioners, policy-makers, and expats working



Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

in and on Sierra Leone. I was told that the tongue represents the woman, who is locked in and controlled by the teeth without the possibility of escape or independent existence, getting bitten whenever she makes a questionable move. The teeth stand for violent men ready to crush and grind anything that gets in their way. Many of my interlocutors invoked an individualistic, rights-, and empowerment-based narrative (see Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim 2010) when proposing their solution to this scenario of patriarchal oppression. In their view, women's empowerment should be achieved through awareness raising, education, a well-functioning legal and political system, and the implementation of universal human rights. These would ideally allow women to leave those men who maltreat them and, though this is hardly ever mentioned, men to leave those women who hurt them.

In contrast, local understandings hold that the metaphor of the teeth and the tongue highlights the complementarity of men and women. Without teeth and tongue, it becomes impossible to digest food and people will starve and eventually die. The teeth chew the food, while the tongue helps to move it around. Before swallowing, the tongue must move some of the chewed food towards the back of the throat and into the opening of the oesophagus. The teeth are responsible for the manual labour, while the tongue organises the processing and distribution of food and is also the organ of taste. Between themselves, teeth and tongue divide the labour necessary to nourish the body, but, while they agree on the overall goal and the need to cooperate, their relationship is not inherently harmonious. In relationships between men and women, teeth and tongue may collide or hurt each other. But the bottom line is that no matter their disputes, neither can nourish the body without the other. Hence, they are jammed together, not in the sense of something blocked or unworkable, but in the sense of codependency and reliance. I was often told that 'no matter how often the one hurts the other, they still stay together in one mouth. They need each other'. The men (the teeth) do the rough, independent work, while the women (the tongue) are the soft organs, the social connectors to family and community, and thus those who give taste and meaning to a relationship.[1]

[1] These are but two well-known interpretations. Metaphors are of course open to many readings and constantly reinterpreted. See, for example, the birdcage metaphor in feminist discourses or Ramon Sarró's (2005) work on differing notions of 'the throat and the belly' among the Baga. Sarró argues that teeth and throat open two different symbolic domains. Swallowing is constructive of personhood and community, while chewing is destructive. In many African languages, eating something that implies chewing with the teeth (such as meat) is expressed with a different verb from eating something for which the throat alone is necessary (such as rice).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

These contrasting interpretations of the same metaphor show how different outlooks, experiences, and dispositions can give rise to a broad variety of understandings of the same process. This is true, too, of the function and significance of violence in relationships and of appropriate forms of mediation and punishment. Such variance in interpretation, which is based on the social positions of various actors, is crucial for the analysis to come in this book.

Indeed, love and violence are strong concepts, which have come to form doxa, in that many believe they know precisely what love and violence entail. Yet, these popular opinions are not necessarily epistemes, and people's beliefs often contradict not only each other but accepted practices, rules, and laws as well. This makes them particular analytical problems. The two seem to occupy polar opposites that are connected along lines of intention, purpose, and consequence. They are affective and emotional concepts and are seen as both intensely individual and at the same time connected to the making and breaking of personal, social, and societal bonds. Love and violence lie at the heart of social, economic, political, and legal fabrics. And they also trigger interventions. However, while policy-makers need simple narratives to frame social problems and justify intervention, just as lawmakers rely on them to defend legal prescriptions and sanctions, these narratives tend to collapse when they come up against lived experiences (for an analysis of such narratives, see Autesserre 2012). The resulting 'social struggles' around power, justice, rights, and violence – and the social, political, and institutional responses to them – reveal discrepancies between global (rights) epistemes and local lived experience (Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001; Cowan 2006). They challenge us to find ways to reconcile competing claims and justifications, but also to accept the idea of incommensurability (Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001; Cowan 2006). Uncovering the difficulty of imposing single words charged with strong connotations – like 'love' or 'violence' – to capture phenomena that are empirically diverse and complexly related, this phenomenological and critically feminist book deconstructs singular meanings and foregrounds the ways in which both love and violence are locally experienced and conceived.

Ethnographies that illuminate such discrepancies between local meanings and political, legal, or policy conceptions can help enhance the knowledge of policy-makers and improve social interventions. In particular, the anthropologist can penetrate below the surface to uncover those underlying nuances that otherwise remain invisible. During the two decades following the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), the country experienced rapid and fundamental legal changes. Laws were passed to rebuild the state and in particular to

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

prevent rape and teenage pregnancy. These laws ended up severely impacting on relationship dynamics, triggering fundamental changes in the politics of intimacy and throwing the respective jurisdictions of households, communities, and criminal justice institutions into question. Yet we lack an analysis of the deeper context that goes beyond the current political moment. *Love and Violence* seeks to remedy this by providing a thorough analysis of the role and place of violence within intimate relationships and its mediation. In this way, I hope to unravel the changing role of the state and its component organisations and illuminate the relationships between the state, individuals, communities, and households.

In the course of this study, the metaphor of the teeth and the tongue offers a framework for understanding how my research collaborators,[2] the Sierra Leoneans with whom and alongside whom I conducted my research, execute, witness, or endure violence; how they make sense of their experiences; and how they navigate between household, community, and state systems to mediate violence. The metaphor furthermore helps us understand how these different systems conceptualise and mediate violence in terms of their respective ideals of gender relations, and how partnerships and individuals often become 'jammed' between these opposing ideals.

## The Relationship between Love and Violence

This book is an ethnographic study of violence in intimate relationships in Sierra Leone. It explores how such violence is experienced, negotiated, and regulated in the context of often colliding domestic, local, international, and global forces. In this sense, it addresses two core concerns of our time: (1) the understanding and control of intimacy and sexual practices; and (2) the meaning and role of violence in relationships and the appropriate forms of its regulation. Violence and intimacy are becoming increasingly pressing issues in our contemporary world, shaping relations between states, institutions, and people. This is especially the case in sub-Saharan Africa, where a politico-legal discourse about the control of intimacy and sexual practices seeks to legitimise the expansion of state jurisdiction into spheres that are otherwise reserved for communities or households (see, for instance, Thomas 2003; Parikh 2004b; 2012; Lorway 2008; Tamale 2011; Steinberg 2013). A complicated history of international influence and exploitation weighs down on these states, which

[2] In this book, I use the term 'research collaborator' to refer to the people who let me into their lives and with and alongside whom I conducted research.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

are being pressured to further international development agendas. In this book, I explore this trend in Freetown, focussing on what happens when state institutions and local communities fundamentally disagree on how to approach issues of intimacy and violence.

This ethnography first introduces the reader to contemporary relationship dynamics in Freetown and the diverse forms of violence within them. I examine the social significance of violence in intimate relationships and the gendered dimension of such violence. I show in which circumstances specific violent acts are tolerated or even expected, and when they are seen to cross a line. I then analyse how violence regarded as illegitimate is mediated and punished within a complex plural legal system by households, communities, and criminal justice institutions. The book combines a detailed examination of laws and policies around violence prevention and response with grassroots conceptions of violence in relationships in Sierra Leone. In this way, it contributes to the anthropological literature on the multiple, often contradictory pressures and influences exerted on persons and institutions as they enact, experience, and respond to violence.

An important precondition for a fuller and deeper understanding of this phenomenon, which is essential for developing social policies that actually work, is analysing what is considered to be violence and what is not and questioning prevailing interpretations and responses to violence. Scholarship that only localises or individualises violence neglects larger structural factors. Studies that shy away from including perspectives that complicate one-dimensional interpretations of violence and treat violence not as unequivocally negative prevent the development of a systematic analysis. Understanding violence requires an analysis that is both theoretically and empirically rigorous. It should also account not only for the way in which histories of oppression, global power, and the dynamics and structures of violence impact local lived experience, but also for how people themselves shape their conditions.

Knowledge production is political in nature. To be committed to emancipation and liberation, it must value and take seriously research collaborators' perspectives, consider a plurality of stories, engage with uncomfortable aspects when they appear, and allow them space within published work too. Forcing my data into a unifying narrative that describes violence as always bad would not do justice to the complexity and breadth of the phenomenon. This would only have served to elevate myself above my research collaborators and interpret or explain their narratives and experiences in ways other than their own framing ('this is what they really mean'). However, treating violence as multifaceted is not the same as condoning it. This book attempts to explain how violence is

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

executed, perceived, and responded to. I consider how these perceptions came into being in the first place and which mechanisms strengthen them. In sum, the book moves beyond studying either structural factors or individual experiences in order to provide an encompassing, multi-layered perspective on violence.

The starting point for this analysis lies in rethinking pervasive assumptions about love and violence. This is a necessary first step if we are to engage with the subtleties of violence in intimate and familial contexts. It is already well known that the forms violence takes are historically contingent and that perceptions of violence are context-specific, but the assumption that love and violence are two opposite ends of a continuum remains widely held. In many of the love stories depicted in this book, these certainties become unsettled. I demonstrate that in some contexts, such as in post-war Sierra Leone, many forms of violence between partners are perceived as signs of an active struggle to maintain relationships and sustain genuine emotions. In the understanding of my research collaborators, violence, the fear of violence, the diverse messages it communicates, and the pain it can cause are valorised as necessary for a functional relationship. Within relationships, violence thereby becomes constitutive of the experience of affection and love – although careful distinctions are drawn between so-called acceptable violence and transgressive or unacceptable violence.

An important part in this negotiation between the accepted and the unaccepted is played by generational tensions and by people's social position within the urban community. Thus, different life stages allow for distinctive relationships and generate specific expectations and tolerances regarding violence. In fact, what forms of violence are accepted in a particular context and by whom has as much to do with life stage, seniority, and social capital as with gender. This effectively challenges a second widespread assumption that where intimate violence exists, women tend to be on the receiving end of it. The ethnographic account of love and violence that I present here disrupts common victim–perpetrator narratives. It nuances these fixed positions into relational ones and shows how the acceptability of a practice can change over the course of people's lives and depends on the relationship between the partners. In contemporary Sierra Leone, there is often an expectation on the part of younger women that love and care will be manifested through physical violence. Here, women are not simply passive victims. What is more, men can in fact feel under pressure to execute violence.

In addition, I show that violent practices are perceived to be gendered – but not with women as victims and men as perpetrators; rather, it is with men using violence mostly against bodies and women infiltrating and

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

controlling minds. With these uncomfortable but important insights, I highlight the tension between the assumptions of global rights and local experiences and between simple narratives and messy day-to-day intimacy. This is necessary if we are to grasp the role and place of violence in intimate relationships and to comprehend why interventions fail if they simplify the intricacies of the contexts in which they operate.

These insights allow me to continue a strand of regional anthropology that started during the civil war and that has shaped the scholarly understanding of violence in conflict globally. Catherine Bolten's (2012) ethnography illustrates how Sierra Leoneans survived wartime violence by invoking love, a deeply compassionate relationship rooted in exchange and nurturing. At the time of the conflict, anthropologists working on gender and sexual violence sensitively moved analyses past simplistic male/perpetrator, female/victim dynamics by showing the various roles women and girls played during the war. Illustrative of this trend is Chris Coulter's (2005; 2009) work on bush wives and girl soldiers and Dara Kay Cohen's (2013) study of female fighters and women's perpetration of war-time violence. In this book, I attempt to move this work beyond the sphere of violent conflict and into that of everyday intimacy. By examining both male and female agency in respect of issues of everyday violence in sub-Saharan Africa, I seek to build a bridge over the perceived gendered gap between violent men and violated women.

## What Laws Do: Community Continuity and State Rupture

This book also contributes to the anthropological study of policy, laws, and their impact at all levels of people's lives. While violence is not summarily condemned or even rejected in Freetown, its acceptability has clear limits. According to a moral economy of relationships, violence is accepted in these dynamics as a form of give and take so long as it does not cause excessive harm that cannot be undone (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010). If it does, people turn to their family, their community, or the state to report it. In Chapters 4 to 8, I examine how transgressive violence is regulated by different institutions, ranging from households to state courts. I show that for both households and communities, violence constitutes a relationship between people that must be cooperatively mediated. Building on a rich history of female political leadership in the region, such mediations are female-led and can adjudicate both male and female forms of violence. The criminal justice system, on the other hand, is restricted to judging visible or traceable violence and thus to violence predominantly attributed to men. This means that,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

if only the data from criminal justice institutions are considered, they support the gendered dualism of victim–perpetrator. But if non-state cases are included, a whole other set of violent practices emerges that state institutions cannot consider and that collapses this neat dichotomy. This finding raises questions about the ways in which violence tends to be conceptualised globally.

During household and community mediations, violent acts are re-embedded in the larger social context in which they occur, and what is put on trial is a person's overall comportment, not specific acts. Mediation follows a processual format that has been observed for other forms of disputes (especially concerning murder and land conflicts) in various parts of Africa (see particularly Gibbs 1963). Sessions can be lengthy, as room is given to all those who wish to air their grievances before they are asked to 'swallow' them and move on. Because holding grudges is seen as an ineradicable part of the human condition, such mediations do not seek to overcome discord to achieve harmony (*pace* Gibbs 1963; Porter 2017). Instead, they attempt to reduce anger to a bearable limit and, through various closing rituals, trap grievances within individual bodies so as to maintain those social bonds that keep a household or community functioning. Given the relational perception of harm and the need to ensure continuity, no single wrongdoer is identified. Instead, punishment is apportioned between the parties involved in a dispute. This can mean, however, that the needs of individuals are subsumed under those of the social group.

By contrast, the criminal justice system presides over specific acts, not personhood. Passing definitive judgements on acts requires constructing specific types of subjects, such as victims and perpetrators, thereby narrowing down the 'complex range of perspectives involved in rights processes' to a bare minimum and 'eliding the inherent ambiguity of social life' (Hall 1996; Wilson and Mitchell 2003; Hunter 2010: 8–9; Richter 2016). Here, no intrinsic value is placed on continuity. Since, according to rights discourses, rights are inherent in everyone, they cannot be given partially or divided between persons so as to appease a particular social group. In a court setting, the person identified as the harmed party is therefore encouraged to leave the relationship so as to end the violence and claim their rights. Here, punishment and imprisonment have the aim and outcome of rupturing relationships and dissolving social bonds.

As I show, the intrinsic unshakeable value communities place on continuity must be understood not as a conscious attempt to limit the individual but as a defence mechanism that developed in response to a long history of rupture – through colonialism, slavery, violent

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

interventions, and conflict – that sought to undermine and override community mechanisms. In this book, I examine how household and community processes seeking to maintain relationships collide with state practices that rupture them. These different approaches towards mediation and punishment mean that for individuals confronted with unbearable violence, reporting such violence involves choosing one's allegiances and cutting one's losses. Reporting to state institutions leads to the withdrawal of community and familial support – sometimes even to fines and punishment – while reporting to the household or community results in the prioritisation of the needs of the group over personal exigencies. These insights help us understand why despite campaigning, legal reforms, destigmatising efforts, and institutional support, only certain individuals will consider reporting violence to the police. These are usually minors – or adults on behalf of minors – who do so as a result of the intense political focus placed on them or adult women who have enough resources to leave their communities and start over if their lives collapse after reporting. These findings should make practitioners and policy-makers aware that only some facets of a phenomenon can be derived from reporting statistics so long as many people continue not to report instances of such a phenomenon in the first place.

The book is set in the aftermath of the civil war and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),[3] when efforts were undertaken to address sexual and gender-based violence. This resulted in the 'gender justice laws', which include the Domestic Violence Act (Government of Sierra Leone 2007c) and the Devolution of Estates Act (Government of Sierra Leone 2007b), which were enacted on 26 July 2007, and the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act (Government of Sierra Leone 2009), which entered into force on 22 January 2009. Any conduct within an intimate relationship that brings about physical, psychological, economic, or sexual harm to either partner is rendered unlawful and liable to conviction and imprisonment by these laws (Mills et al. 2015). The laws also animate women to formally register religious and traditional matrimony, and they accord equal rights to both spouses over all assets, including land and property should they divorce. A particular focus of these laws was the protection of young girls from sexual harassment and grooming and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. One means involved raising the age of sexual consent for girls and boys from 14 to 18. This was formalised in the Sexual Offences

[3] The TRC was a product of the Lomé Peace Accord between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). After the civil war, the TRC analysed the causes of the war, human rights violations, and the influence of foreign actors.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

Act (SOA) of 2012, which rendered sexual relations with – and among – minors illegal and provided sentences for up to fifteen years. Consent is no longer a defence.

After political power changed hands in 2018, sexual violence, particularly against young girls, and teenage pregnancy continued to loom large on the national agenda. Grassroots organisations and activists campaigned untiringly for increased protection for girls. Early in 2019, President Maada Bio gave in to their demands. He declared a national emergency on rape and sexual violence with the intention of making sexual penetration of minors punishable by lengthy terms of imprisonment, including life. Though the emergency was later revoked, this goal was still achieved by the Sexual Offences Amendment Act, passed in September 2019. This provided for the possibility of life imprisonment for offenders and of sentencing twelve-year-old boys for sexual penetration (including sleeping with girlfriends). These legal changes became the subject of a global debate about consent and protection against violence. Sierra Leone emerged as the development movement's poster child – a place where the tireless efforts of grassroots activists and vernacular voices finally impacted on national politics and where effective steps were taken to establish zero tolerance for rape and sexual violence. However, while celebrated internationally as a milestone in the struggle against violence, from the outset these laws were ambiguous in their effects.

By documenting their impact in great ethnographic detail, this book provides an analysis of the unexpected effects of well-intentioned laws. While international organisations and transitional justice instruments have pushed for these laws to combat sexual violence, in practice these laws have often resulted in girls being forced to abandon their education and in boys and young men being incarcerated for up to fifteen years for having sexual intercourse in consensual relationships: 'Age-of-consent law is complex. If it is set too high, there's a risk that it will undercut young people's agency. If it is set too low, it does not offer enough protection for vulnerable young people' (Schneider 2019c). This is the quandary with which Sierra Leone has wrestled in the last decade. Sierra Leonean lawmakers have created some positive change: the Act protects children, particularly girls, who are abused by adults. Conjointly, however, it limits young people's liberty and criminalises not only violence but desire. Strangers are encouraged to report on each other, and stigmatisation and exclusion are common. For instance, a school ban carried out by invasive physical searches and tests has formalised a practice that had long been underway, namely barring visibly pregnant girls from going to regular schools and taking exams.

The outcome of these rape prevention efforts, which made worldwide headlines, is therefore far-reaching. They go far beyond the prevention of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

sexual violence and underage pregnancies and touch upon the very foundation of intimacy. At their base, these laws and regulations have created a new punitive regime that polices intimacy and criminalises the sexual behaviour of young people. These rigid laws operate, moreover, in a seriously overstretched criminal justice system that does not have the capacity for appropriate investigations and trials and where prison conditions constitute a human rights problem in themselves (Schneider 2019b). These shortcomings are reinforced by discriminatory regulations such as the school ban.

Illegalising sex between minors and stigmatising teenage pregnancy not only blurs the line between sex and rape but also shapes coming of age, affects the formation and livelihood strategies of families and households, and creates intense changes in the fabric of social organisation. In this book, I explore the paradox between people's valorisation of violence, which can – if internally monitored against excess – be a productive force, and attempts by the post-conflict state and international community to police it. I try to show the consequences of the state's focus on sex for love, intimacy, and violence. In doing so, I study how rigid laws rub against contingent social categories and how the criminalisation and policing of sexual relationships clash with the normalisation of violence in ordinary speech, acts, and relationships.

## Homing in on the Young: Gendered Ideologies in a Gendered Social and Legal World

By tracing how young people fare as the full power of state attention is directed at them while they continue to shoulder the expectations of their communities and households, I hope to contribute to the literature on the 'crisis of youth' in Africa. This rich body of work has done much to counter studies that start with the continent's 'youth bulge' to explain violence, conflict, migration, and radical ruptures in intergenerational relations. Instead, it established the notion of 'youth' as a relational category rather than as an age group (e.g. Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Honwana 2014). Standing on the shoulders of this work, *Love and Violence* offers a counter-narrative to the popular one of radical rupture in the wake of civil war by showing that families and communities remain the principal mediators of violence and of problems between partners, though this mainly applies to marriages or committed relationships. In this book, I examine what happens to those who find themselves 'in-between'. I uncover the plight of the many urban youths who, unable to build formal alliances between households through marriage (often because they cannot afford to), attempt to

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

create relationships that bridge their families' expectations, their personal desires, and the constraints placed on them. Different demands are made on personhood when trying to realise individual choices regarding lovers and at the same time cultivating social relations (e.g. Piot 1999; Jackson 2012). Sierra Leoneans negotiate relationships (and violence within them) between the simultaneous but irreconcilable desires for freedom through individually directed lives and for security through familial and community ties (Bauman 2001: 5).

Young Freetonians navigate changing gender dynamics in circumstances of poverty and contrasting expectations by developing a broad variety of relationship forms – some consecutive, others overlapping – that are characterised by varying degrees of permanence and commitment (Chapter 3). These relationship practices add further variance to the ongoing efforts of scholars to complicate one-dimensional notions of romantic love in Africa (e.g. Cole and Thomas 2009; Hunter 2010; Vaughan 2011). These have shown that while economy and emotion are entangled worldwide and intimacy is always also political, the ways these dynamics are navigated are far richer than the tropes of romantic love, sexual desire, or transactional relationships can capture. But I also consider the dark shadows that follow some of these attempts at building bridges between want, need, and obligation. Many relationship forms in Freetown today are an attempt at reconciling individual desire, social responsibility, and legal restrictions. It is the impossibility of achieving this reconciliation that gives rise to violence. As this book shows, aiming to satisfy these differing and fluid demands of starting a household and living a committed relationship while fulfilling personal aspirations and carrying the burden of hardship and poverty often creates dynamics that foster violence.

Hence, this book is an urban ethnography of how youth – caught between state laws that criminalise their sexual behaviour and elders who expect them to marry and start families – are coping under the attack of irreconcilable demands without being able to make any acceptable moves. But it is also an ethnography of how adults and elders deal with violence in their relationships when they, unlike young people, are expected to have figured everything out. To them, carrying out too much or too little violence or reporting violence to the wrong institution may well lead to the collapse of their carefully built livelihoods, social networks, and families.

Precarity affects all generations and makes it difficult to realise expected roles. Violence between partners, as anthropologists have shown, is often the result of structural violence by economic, social, political, and institutional forces (Bourgois 2004; Farmer 2004; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Accomazzo 2012: 547). This makes it impossible for people to fulfil the gendered ideal of a male

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

breadwinner and female dependant living together in marriage. Throughout the book, I show how in real life both men and women are actively engaged in making a living and how gendered demands and roles are often inverted. Economic constraints and the impossibility of fulfilling expected relationship roles lie at the heart of forms of violence in Freetown, and not only for men. Hence, this work challenges the notion of a 'crisis of masculinity' that is present in much Africanist literature. It shows instead that it is gender relations as a whole that people perceive to be under attack, rather than masculinity on its own.

In addition, the book offers a new angle to the classic debate on gender complementarity. I agree with scholars working in the region that gendered differences, alongside the need for cooperation, form the fabric with which the social world is woven. However, I seek to advance this classic literature in two ways. Firstly, instead of focussing on women (gender parallelism) or men ('crisis of masculinity'), I look instead at gender and at male and female perspectives. Secondly, I show that the road to achieving complementarity has become rocky and is full of obstacles. Existing studies that focus predominantly on rural areas have revealed the manifold ways in which the idea of neat gender parallelism can be upset by lived experiences. At the same time, deviations from the norm are carefully concealed and do not openly challenge the ideal of complementarity (e.g. Ferme 2001). By contrast, in contemporary urban Sierra Leone, as a result of people's diverse relationship practices and the corresponding legal changes, there is no longer one main model of gender relations. Instead, institutions and communities struggle to promote their respective ideal of gender dynamics against the opposing views of other systems. And partners find themselves caught between them. What is more, relationships are often visibly spiked with violence and pain. Indeed, exposing and displaying dissonances forms an important part of contemporary intimacy. My study therefore argues for a more nuanced interpretation of gender relations that allows for an analysis of friction. It shows how everyday practices differ from gender principles, but it also shows how the principles are nevertheless held in place because of the important role they play in shaping expectations and behaviours. What we can observe in Sierra Leone today are competing gender ideologies rather than one main model of parallelism.

## Imagined Others, Human Rights, and the State's Attempts at Future Making through Legal Reform

The Sierra Leonean case demonstrates that the 'crisis of youth' in Africa is constructed by policies promoted by NGOs and multilateral

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

organisations. In post-conflict Sierra Leone, 'youth' are viewed as a 'problem' that requires policy intervention (Chapter 3). Much as in countries like Kenya (Thomas 2003) and Uganda, the control over girls' sexual behaviour, reproductive capacities, and premarital pregnancies has become a central concern for the state and its performance of power in Sierra Leone. Here, the state's vision of a prosperous future relies on the need to control girls' sexual behaviour, which is seen as a threat to the national project. Development agencies, lawmakers, and politicians have discursively framed and justified new laws by depicting young people implicated in sexual offences cases and pregnant girls as 'imagined others' (Carlbom 2003), whose frivolous sexual behaviour poses a danger to society's well-being. This framing has reduced young people's diverse relationships to a single, static aspect: sex. Young men and boys who engage in sexual activities with underage girlfriends are portrayed as threatening perpetrators who must be excluded from the national community for society to thrive. Young girls in turn are depicted as victims, and their virginity in need of protection. Pregnant girls are considered carriers of the 'disease of desire', which can only be contained by social distancing mechanisms such as excluding them from school, thereby limiting their contact with other girls. By depicting young couples as unruly subjects and exerting control over them, the authorities aim to enforce nationwide sexual self-control.

Through the above-mentioned laws, the responsibility for overseeing and regulating intimacy, sex, and violence has largely been transferred from households and communities to the state. However, it is important to note that this transfer of responsibility is contingent upon Sierra Leoneans reporting on each other's sexual behaviour. This presents a challenge for state institutions, as discussing another person's private affairs is considered antisocial behaviour in Sierra Leone (Szanto 2018), and there is also a long-standing ambivalence towards state laws.

During colonialism, Sierra Leoneans experienced systematic structural abuse, as colonisers divided and governed them on the basis of locally obscure principles (Ferme 2004: 92). Sierra Leone was a central site of the transatlantic slave trade, and its people experienced the capture, trafficking, uprooting, killing, and death of individuals. There is a complicated history between families who were enslaved and those who took part in or benefited from the trade in human lives on domestic and international scales.

After independence, state practices continued to be indirectly influenced by foreigners through development aid and humanitarian intervention triggered by the civil war and health emergencies. This had drastic adverse consequences on the ground. These multifarious

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

influences, alongside privatisation, made it increasingly difficult for Sierra Leoneans to understand who was responsible and what goals were driving actions. The state, as an ominous body, seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time (Ferme 1998; 2004).

Today, state legal practices tend to be perceived as capricious in that 'the state can arbitrate, decide, or create situations in which competing interests or interpretations of the common good obscure the threshold between legality and illegality' (Ferme 2004: 83). National laws are often experienced by people as consistently disadvantaging them and appear to 'serve the interests of particular categories of people' (Ferme 2004: 83). In the face of this adversity, communities attempt to keep the state and its institutions at arm's length by mediating conflicts internally and preventing members from turning elsewhere for support.

Socio-legal organisation in West Africa continues to be shaped by the notion of harmony ideology, which Laura Nader identified many decades ago (Nader 1990; Pirie 2007; 2014: 35) in her analysis of how colonised groups seek to escape the influence of colonisers. Communities seek to evade unwanted foreign influence, neo-colonial patterns, and state domination by presenting a united front to outsiders, even if they may be riddled with conflict internally. This creates a problem for the state, however, which may rightfully intervene in communities only if called upon to do so.

Mediations of intimate relationships demonstrate significant continuities between pre- and post-war periods, as well as between the longer historical trajectory of colonialism and slavery, and the ongoing international influences in the region. The criminal justice system contradicts community norms about 'how, when and with whom' minors can have consensual sex (Tamale 2011: 3), thereby unsettling the lines between state and community jurisdiction. To encourage people to report cases to the state, state institutions needed to instil the idea that reporting is a social responsibility that ensures the greater good (Kierkegaard 1940). After the passage of the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) and later the Sexual Offences Amendment Act (SOAA), human rights became the country's socio-political 'ideoscape' (Appadurai 1990; Cowan 2006) and were used to justify informing practices. The message was clear: to create a future free of rape and teenage pregnancy, sex among young people must stop. Because young people were not trusted to do this independently, and communities might have other interests, adults – including uninvolved bystanders – were made responsible for reporting any cases of early sex to the authorities. The success of this campaign demonstrates the power of a human rights discourse to shape 'how the world is apprehended' (Kierkegaard 1940; Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001;

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

Cowan 2006). These discourses are so powerful that they can undermine pervasive social norms and long-established practices.

While the carefully drawn boundaries between state and community could not be permanently redrawn by conflicts and health emergencies, they have become unsteady now that individuals move between them to report. This practice of informing on one another, alongside the unequal implementation of the law for the rich and the poor, deepens existing structural inequalities and creates imagined communities woven together by the exclusion of 'imagined others' (Carlbom 2003). What takes place in Sierra Leone is an example of the formation of an imagined community through othering (Anderson 1983). Some of the disputes documented in the book also highlight how families or individuals – usually from different socioeconomic backgrounds – may use the law as a tool to control young men and women. These state laws now enable individuals to perform the dramaturgy of structural violence that was historically executed by colonisers and ruling elites, thereby exposing a historical continuum of structural violence (Whitehead 2004; Scheper-Hughes and Robben 2008: 81).

To date, the negative effects of only one of these regulations – the school ban – have received global attention. This shows the selectivity of rights discourses in the process of constructing unambiguous scenarios necessary for rapid dissemination. The school ban for visibly pregnant girls has been widely criticised as discriminatory and for exacerbating risks and hardships associated with teenage pregnancy (Amnesty International 2015). Grassroots, feminist and empowerment groups not only campaigned against this ban, but also filed a case with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) court on behalf of the over ten thousand girls directly affected by it. In 2019, the court found that the ban was contrary to human rights and ordered Sierra Leone to lift it. This was celebrated as a landmark moment for girls' rights in Africa and beyond.

However, despite this global debate, the drastic effects of the consent laws for young couples, for adults, and for the relationship between communities and the state remain unseen, untold, and unchallenged. While these Acts are framed as mechanisms of female empowerment and instruments of protection, the unfolding story on the ground is one of increasing marginalisation and increasing restriction of girls' and boys' autonomy in respect of their bodies and sexual behaviours. The life sentences young men can now receive for sleeping with their romantic partners are a human rights violation that goes unreported. The situation is accepted pragmatically as a kind of collateral damage for the sake of bigger human rights goals and development discourses. Moreover, the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

focus on minors has caused a backlog of cases that paralyses the legal system to the extent that it is unable to deal with adult violence cases (Chapter 7). Adults who turn to the state are often met with long waits, pre-trial dismissal, and referrals back to communities. It is young bodies that absorb state resources, while mature bodies are encouraged to negotiate violence informally.

This book adds to scholarly efforts that investigate the harm of instrumentalising human rights as the sole benchmark for judging violence (Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001; Hastrup 2003: 309; Cowan 2006; Englund 2006; Johnson 2018). When protective or empowering human rights language is used by politicians and policy-makers to justify laws and policing tactics that limit personal autonomy,[4] we should be concerned. This ethnography shows how developmental and policy-oriented work can become alienated from the realities in which it claims to operate. It also demonstrates how current local developments cannot be examined apart from histories of colonialism and ongoing international influences. International human rights interventions that emanate from a desire to assist but do not examine the global socio-political, economic, and material inequalities that have given rise to them in the first place can inadvertently become part of a global strategy to achieve social control, rehabilitate what are deemed to be defiant states, and reproduce conditions of domination (see Jefferson 2005).

On a global scale, the Sierra Leonean case highlights the problems with development and rights discourses that emphasise the need for a strong and vigorous state capable of addressing social issues through legislation. Many of the social issues can be traced back to the legacies of slavery and violent exploitation: these are often neglected by global agendas that prioritise future development rather than address the underlying causes of current problems.

Violence is often treated as a localised issue, while the structural violence of international political and economic arrangements is overlooked. This places additional pressure on African states to overcome their marginal position in the global economy. Some states even attempt to extend their regulatory reach into private spaces such as households and bedrooms, perpetuating neo-colonial dependencies.

[4] For an overall critique of human rights instrumentalisation, see Hastrup (2003: 309). For case studies, consider, for example, the ban on ethnicities in Rwanda and the subsequent policing of speech (Lacey 2004). Consider, also, the subjective (e.g. Porter 2017 on Uganda), the political (e.g. Thomas 2003 on Kenya; Parikh 2004a; 2004b; 2012 on Uganda; Tamale 2011), or the cultural (Steinberg 2013 on South Africa) angle of changing discourses around gender roles, sexual practices, and sexual violence in contemporary Africa.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002

These consequences call for an ethnography that addresses the reasons for the incompatibility of state legal dogmatism and empirical multifacetedness, and shows not only what laws set out to do but also their impact. It is an analysis that critically examines the implications of seemingly neutral rights discourses.

## Road Map of the Book

In its structure, this book follows the negotiations that my research collaborators explained when experiencing violence. Part one is concerned with examining the influence of external violence and historical developments on relationship dynamics over time (Chapter 2); with showing how intimate relationships are lived in contemporary Freetown (Chapter 3); with developing a critique of the concepts of love and violence; and with showing how violence in relationships is perceived and practised (Chapters 4 and 5). Part two is concerned with the mediation and regulation of such violence by households and communities (Chapter 6), state courts for adult cases (Chapter 7), and state courts for cases involving minors (Chapter 8). I also trace the effects of the new laws for minors imprisoned in Pademba Road Prison and their girlfriends (Chapter 9).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 10:16:27, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009532990.002