

Manyua, a 16 year old Liberian refugee girl living in Sierra Leone

Manyua is a slim, pretty and petite 16 years old. She lives in a two-roomed mud hut in a refugee camp in Largo, in the Kenema district in Sierra Leone, with a younger sister and an older brother. Their mother was a business woman. She died a few years ago. Their father, an Imam, was killed by a stray bullet last year.

When their parents were alive, the children did not have to do anything at home. The parents provided everything. All they did was to go to school, and come home after school and watch television. Now, it is Manyua's responsibility to fetch firewood and water, tend the garden next to her house, care for her four-year old sister and prepare all the meals. Her 18 year old brother cannot help her with these tasks. He has no time because he is the breadwinner of the family.

Manyua tries to supplement the family's income by collecting extra firewood to sell. She also used the little extra money she earns to buy necessities such as underwear and sanitary material for herself.

Manyua can remember a little of her home area before the war. She remembers there being several houses gathered around an estate. There were hospitals, schools and shops. She has stronger memories of the houses razed to the ground, of the devastation caused by the chronic civil war which has beset Liberia for many years. Manyua's home town in the Kolahun district area was under the control of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebels. The area is almost constantly under siege and Manyua is afraid to return.

The thing she misses the most about her former life in Liberia is her freedom. She could walk anywhere and do whatever she wanted. But in the camp, her movement is restricted and this she finds unbearable. Of course, she doesn't miss the look of destruction all over her home area after the rebels took over the district.

Manyua and her siblings left their home when their father was killed during the escalating violence between rebel soldiers and government forces. She was kidnapped by government troops while still in her home town but was able to flee with her elder brother, Fofie Amadu, and her younger sister, Mawatta Monah. Her eldest brother, Bockarie had by then moved to Monrovia to try and make a living for his siblings. He remained there.

All the children in the family went to school. Manyua enjoyed going to school a lot. What she enjoyed most was the football and volleyball that they took as extracurricular activities at school. Manyua was in the middle of fourth grade when she had to flee Liberia. The problem she now faces is that she is in grade 5, still in primary school, despite being 16 years old. She attends school in the morning in Largo town. If there had not been an interruption in her education due to the civil war and her flight, she would be in either grade 7 or 8. Manyua would like to become a midwife when she finishes school. She says that she has problems at school especially because, as refugees, they are marginalised and teased by their fellow Sierra Leonean students, and the teachers do not treat them equally.

Her life at Largo camp is not very pleasant. As separated minors, Manyua and her siblings receive help from UNHCR and Save the Children UK. They are under the supervision of a guardian, and receive the standard food and non-food packages that are distributed to refugees in the camp, but Manyua says that they receive no clothing and the food ration is insufficient.

She has no close friends. The infrastructure of the camp is very basic. Sport is very popular in the camp because there is very little else to do in terms of recreation. Manyua loves sport, and plays football. There is a teenage girls' club which came about at the girls' own initiative. There is no young people's centre or a special meeting place for them in the camp. Manyua thinks that a vocational training centre and a sports field are greatly needed in the camp.

Manyua is sceptical about lasting peace returning to her country. She would prefer to be adopted or naturalised in her country of asylum, and to have the opportunity to learn a profession that would generate an income. Even better, Manyua would like to be resettled in a third country. Like so many refugees around the world, she dreams of living in Western Europe or North America.

