

Eleven Women

FACING WAR

Mariatu Kamara

Mariatu Kamara, one of the women featured in the exhibition **Eleven Women Facing War**, is a native of Sierra Leone who now lives in Toronto.

Raised by her aunt and uncle in the small village of Magborou (population 200), she was 12 years old in 1999 when rebels captured and tortured her, then chopped off her hands with a machete. She begged them to kill her instead, but the soldiers—many of whom were just children themselves—told her that people vote with their hands, and they wanted no one to cast a ballot.

Kamara was one of about 20,000 people—half of them children—maimed during the bloody, bitter civil war that devastated her West African country from 1991 to 2002. An estimated 50,000 Sierra Leoneans were killed, and two million fled to neighbouring countries as refugees.

After losing her hands, Kamara spent three years in a refugee camp, begging on the streets of the capital, Freetown, to survive. She joined a camp theatre troupe, and along with other young amputees, helped raised awareness of her country's plight by performing and dancing.

When the war ended, Kamara came to Canada as a refugee, enrolled in English classes in Toronto, graduated from high school and learned to live independently without hands. She teamed up with Toronto-based journalist Susan McClelland to write her memoir, *The Bite of the Mango* (Annick Press, 2008). The award-winning book takes its title from the first food Kamara ate after she was attacked. The taste of the sweet fruit affirmed her will to live, but the difficulty of holding it in her bloodied arms underscored the enormous challenges she still faced.

Kamara decided to become a social worker, studying at George Brown College in Toronto, so she could help women and children who have been abused. She is a UNICEF Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, and was honoured in 2009 with the Voices of Courage Award from the Women's Refugee Commission in New York City.