

THE BITTER FRUITS OF THEIR LABOUR

These 12-year-old girls are pregnant and facing life in a Sierra Leone slum without love, money or family support. First they must survive early childbirth, and the risk of the painfully embarrassing affliction fistula. Caroline Scott reports. Photographs by Ivor Prickett

Mabinty Kargbo hasn't been to school since she was eight. She says her mother, who sells firewood and has six other mouths to feed, neglected her. So now Mabinty, 12, spends nights with the man who impregnated her and goes home to her mum in the day. Is he nice to you? Mabinty looks at her friend, Rebecca Bangura, uncertainly. Do you expect love? This makes the girls smile. "He looks after me," Mabinty says finally. Would they go out with boys their own age? They both blink incredulously then fall about laughing. "The small boys can't help us!" What do the men give you? "Money for food."

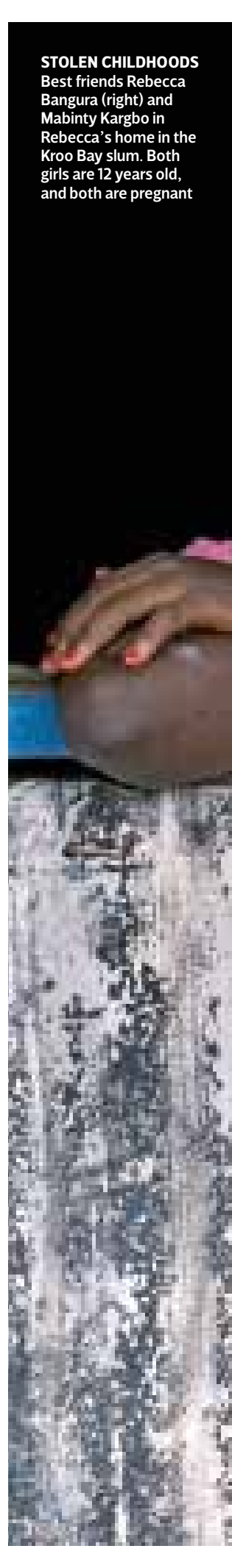
Rebecca is five-months pregnant and filled with broken dreams. She came to Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital, last year to stay with her aunt and go to school, but the money her parents gave her soon ran out. She says her family were horrified when they heard she was pregnant. "It was a mistake," she says quietly.

Mabinty, who became pregnant almost as soon as she hit puberty, hasn't considered that women can aspire to good jobs, but Rebecca wants to be an accountant. Her boyfriend used to give her lunch to take to school and she hopes that

when the baby is born he'll give her money to go back. It seems unlikely. Later I meet Simeon, a powerfully built 22-year-old who glowers menacingly, then squirms with embarrassment when I try to make eye contact. He has built a house for them, a sweltering 6ft-by-6ft metal shack; presuming he sticks around and Rebecca and the baby survive, this is where they will live, on the edge of a dump where pigs push their noses through a 3ft magma of flyblown waste.

It rains for three months of the year in Freetown, turning its frantic, pot-holed roads into rivers of mud. By mid-June, the open sewer that runs through the middle of Kroo Bay, a slum built on a rubbish tip to the east of the city, is a seething torrent. Kroo takes its Creole name from the crews who moored slave ships here, but basically, it's God's gutter. It sits at the bottom of the hill on which the city was built; detritus cascading down on its 6,500 inhabitants in one direction, buffered back to them by the sea from the other.

During Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war, which ended in 2002, people flocked to Kroo to escape the massacres in the rural areas. In the following years, the people have reclaimed land from the sea with their bare hands, compacting the rubbish to form a solid base on which they build ➤➤➤➤➤







patchwork shacks. Small traders sell fly-filled fish skewers and tiny, twisted balls of sugar and salt alongside miniature packets of Asian vitamin biscuits, plastered with the faces of healthy white babies.

There was cholera here in February. In August, when the rains have filled the gullies and a soupy slurry has climbed halfway up the sides of the shacks, malaria will follow. Diarrhoea and vomiting, pneumonia, worm infestations and infections will claim most of the inhabitants by the age of 35; the children who mine the stretches of stagnant water for empty plastic bottles, shoulder to shoulder with droves of pigs, have a one-in-four chance of seeing their fifth birthday. But Kroo's greatest threat, the most prolific killer of young women and children, is pregnancy and childbirth. Sierra Leone has the highest recorded incidence of maternal mortality in the world. Increasingly, the most vulnerable mothers are little more than children themselves.

Each year, 16m teenage girls give birth globally, with complications in pregnancy and birth — the leading cause of death among 15- to 18-year-olds. This week, the government is hosting a summit in London of world leaders,

co-sponsored by The Gates Foundation, which aims to raise the \$4bn needed to get 120m women in 69 of the world's poorest countries access to birth control by 2020. David Cameron is due to attend, but the impetus behind the launch of the summit has come from Melinda Gates, who has made contraception her signature crusade.

In Kroo Bay, most girls enter into sexual relationships voluntarily; hunger and the need

estimates that around 2m women across Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are affected by obstetric fistula, 80% developing it before the age of 15. The consequences are life-shattering. The baby usually dies and prolonged, obstructed labour causes a hole between the birth canal and the bladder or rectum, leaving the mother chronically incontinent, leaking urine or faeces, or both.

Juliet Dixon is an isolated 14-year-old who

GIRLS HIDE AWAY, EMERGING BEFORE DAWN TO WASH OUT THEIR RAGS

for money to pay for their education propel them towards older men, who they believe will look after them. They are shockingly young. A 2010 Unicef report found that 41% of Sierra Leonian girls surveyed gave birth for the first time aged between 12 and 14. And for every girl who dies in childbirth, 20 more are left with catastrophic damage, which causes them to be neglected and ostracised by their communities.

The World Health Organisation (WHO)

has already lost both parents; her father died in 2002, her mother in 2007 of "cold" (pneumonia) when Juliet was nine and her sister, Lucinda, 11. Her abiding memory is of loneliness and fear because there was no money for food. "Almost straight away men came," she says. The man who made her pregnant was 24. Juliet was 12. "He looked after me. But after he gave me the belly, he went."

Juliet says she didn't want to lie down with

BROKEN DREAMS
Juliet Dixon, 14 (far left), lost the baby she conceived with an older man who then abandoned her. Very young mothers and their offspring (right and bottom centre) are a common sight in Kroo Bay (top centre). Bottom right: Dr Tagie Gbawuru-Mansary at the Aberdeen Women's Centre, the only centre for fistula repair in Sierra Leone



systematically tortured, raped and forced girls into sexual slavery. The WHO says that after violent conflict, the rate of interpersonal violence remains high. This is certainly the case in Sierra Leone where despite the passing of the Child Rights Act, businessmen procure girls with impunity and 87% of rape victims across the entire country are under 15 years old.

Save the Children, along with the NGO Marie Stopes International, runs children's clubs in Kroo Bay, where sex — and sexual violence — is openly discussed. Shona Bezanson, Save the Children's child-protection-programme advisor says ignorance is the biggest barrier to reaching this age group. "When we asked children who would you trust to give you information, they said their mothers. But mothers don't talk to daughters about sex, and sex education isn't taught in schools; many of these girls are pregnant before they've even started their periods."

Walk along Kroo's narrow lanes and you'll find teenage mothers cradling their babies at every turn. The men — the girls call them impregnators — mostly disappear once the baby is born. The boys who strut meaningfully around the community centre say rather unconvincingly they won't go with a girl until they're 18 and then they'll use a condom. "We're scared of girls," they mew, shifting from foot to foot. "They're not interested in us..." All have fended for themselves since 11 or 12. The more able have swallowed the missionaries' line that education, if not God, will release them from the slum, but like the girls, they battle daily to earn enough to keep themselves in school. Cecil Sankoh, 16, who has five brothers and sisters, wants to be a doctor but lacks money, books, light and quiet. Every day, he mines Kroo's rank stretches of water for copper cable which he sells to recyclers for 10,000 leones a kilo. This work is seen as "too dangerous" for girls, though in reality it is infinitely safer than the unprotected sex that is killing them.

Free healthcare has existed in Sierra Leone since 2010 — but nurses have not been trained in difficult deliveries and can be lethal when a baby gets stuck, pushing and pulling to haul it out; or using forceps, which can cause uterine rupture. One midwife I met talked about "an absolute lack of proper training, leading to gross incompetence". "I cry a lot," she said, "because the lack of compassion for women here is absolutely heartbreaking."

The Aberdeen Women's Centre, which is funded by the British charity Freedom from Fistula Foundation, has the only centre

him, but he didn't make her either. She did it, she says, because she knew he would feed her. "This is my life," she says, waving her hand towards the carbon-black interior of their shack. "I was hungry."

When Juliet's time came, she laboured for three days before picking her way to the health centre, doubled over with pain. After another day, she was taken to the government hospital. She pulls up her T-shirt to show me her still-distended stomach. A jagged scar loops unevenly from umbilicus to groin. Miraculously, her baby, Memanatu, was pulled out alive via caesarean section, but died four months later from an infected abscess. "She is with God," says Juliet. "It's better for her — she's stopped suffering."

As soon as Memanatu was born, Juliet was "wet". She leaked urine constantly and couldn't walk properly because the baby's head had compressed the nerves in her pelvis, causing permanent damage. People taunted her because she smelt so bad: in a slum with an open sewer that's quite something. The humiliation of this "sickness" is the terrible isolation. No amount of sluicing and washing gets rid of the odour because the urine just

keeps on running, so girls hide away, emerging before dawn to wash out the rags they use to staunch the flow. Nobody talks about it because they're ashamed. "If men don't want you, you are nothing," says Juliet. She says she thought family planning was for women, not children: "I was only small. I didn't know anything."

Teenagers conceived during the conflict are known as "war babies": they grew up in the shadow of a war during which both sides





HOLDING ON Children by the Kroo Bay football pitch. Below: a patient in the Aberdeen Women's Centre's fistula ward

BINTU WAS 11 WHEN SHE WAS SOLD INTO MARRIAGE BY AN AUNT

for fistula repair in Sierra Leone, with the capacity to treat around 600 patients a year. The majority have undergone female genital mutilation. The resulting rigid scar tissue leads to vaginal and anal tears and increases the likelihood of fistula. In smaller girls of 14 and under, with pelvic bones stunted from malnutrition, it is almost inevitable. Ami Ngegbae, who runs the antenatal clinic, trawls 15 communities including the Freetown slums for pregnant teenagers, bringing them into the hospital where the record for live births is impressive: out of 2,500 deliveries since 2010 there have been only four maternal deaths. But up country, where there is no antenatal care, stillbirth and fistula is endemic.

Jude Holden, the twinkly Scottish Midwife who runs AWC, admits that a free fistula hotline set up last year has been far from inundated. Every month Bernadette Fofannah, a no-nonsense Sierra Leonian who speaks four languages — Timene, Mende, Creole and English — scours remote villages for women and girls who have no access to either phone or radio. The shame is so great, she says, initially nobody comes forward; instead, they'll creep to her hut in the night. Or she'll get up before dawn when she knows she'll catch them washing their rags. Two surgeons, Dr Alyona Lewis and a trainee, Dr Tagie Gbawuru-Mansary, perform around 250 fistula repairs a year. Their youngest patient was eight, a rape victim; the majority are in their teens.

Bintu Kamara, an orphan from a small village in the northern Koinadugu district, was

11 when she was sold into marriage against her will by an aunt: the price was 20 litres of palm oil, 40 kola nuts and 40,000 leones (about £6). For this, Bintu became a 46-year-old man's second wife. When she delivered a dead baby, then began leaking urine and faeces, he returned her to her aunt's house where Bintu lay in a foetal position in a pool of her own urine for six months. She's now 14 and so weak that she still uses a wheelchair; physiotherapy has helped her to flex her paralysed legs but despite three operations, she is not yet dry. Aminata Sawnaeh is a fragile 18-year-old from Moyamba district in the south. One of 15 siblings, her father, a farmer, could not pay for the education of his girl children, so at 14 he chose a husband for her. Aminata was in labour for five days before she was taken to the



village hospital. Dispassionately, she mimes midwives pulling at her uterus and crushing her stomach. On the eighth day, she was taken to another town, with the baby — dead, by now — stuck halfway in and halfway out of her body. Mercifully, she was by now unconscious and unaware of what was happening. The baby, a boy, was finally delivered at the government hospital in Freetown by caesarean. When she came to the women's centre a month later, she was emaciated, mute with shock, and covered in bedsores. She'd shut down to the point that initially, she had to be fed intravenously.

Aminata still isn't well enough to have her surgery, but she's advanced from bed to wheelchair to an unsteady walk. She's put on weight and has been happily painting her nails and playing with make-up. Every day, there are classes in numeracy, literacy and singing; girls and grown women belting out nursery rhymes, drumming the table with one hand and crayoning merrily like toddlers with the other. But when Aminata hitches up her skirt she reveals an adult nappy. All the pre-surgery women wear them. They are the symbols of this explicitly awful affliction; I watch a tiny, snake-hipped girl without one totter across the ward, urine pouring down her legs.

When their operations are over, the women at the women's centre take part in a happy-clappy *gladi-gladi* ceremony and are given a new dress to go home in. Maime, a patient, speechless crone at 49, has been ostracised for so many years, she's learning to talk again. "It's the end of the story!" says the indefatigable Jude Holden with a beatific smile. But it isn't really. As we leave Kroo for the last time, I notice a piece of white paper fluttering on the door of Juliet's shack. It's an eviction order in her dead mother's name. Juliet and her sister have not been able to pay their rent of 30,000 leones a month (about £5) for the past two years; despite intervention and pleading from community leaders, the slumlord is implacable. On August 31, they and Grace's three children will become homeless. Juliet, traumatised by what she has been through, is terrified of men, and says nobody will look at her anyway. She's still only 14 and has no alternative means of survival. *Watin a go do?* ("What can I do?") she shrugs ■
For more information, visit www.savethechildren.org.uk and www.freedomfromfistula.org.uk