



Aminata and Antoine on their wedding day. Left: Moving from Sierra Leone to Australia was a culture shock for Aminata.



Through her own foundation, Aminata has helped more than 10,000 mums in her home country, including some as young as 12.



I SURVIVED 6 MONTHS IN HELL

AMINATA NEVER LET THE HORRORS OF HER PAST GET IN THE WAY OF HER FUTURE. NOW, SHE'S GIVING BACK

Aminata Conteh-Biger was a teenager when she was kidnapped by rebel soldiers.

Taken from her home town during the Sierra Leone Civil War at just 18 years of age, she was their prisoner for six harrowing months.

Brutally raped and even used as a human shield during heavy bombing, it was a

horrific start to life. Eventually, Aminata was released from her captors in a televised exchange for food and medicine.

But she couldn't return to her home country. She became one of the first refugees of the war-torn country to be brought to Australia.

Now, almost 20 years later, the mum-of-two is proud to call Australia home and has dedicated her life to

helping women in the African country.

"When something bad happens, you can rise or you can fall. I chose to rise," Aminata, 36, tells *New Idea*.

While the civil war began in 1991, it took nearly eight years to reach Freetown, where Aminata lived.

Eventually, her family's worst fears were realised when the rebels captured the

city, burning houses and murdering people in the streets.

She was plucked from a crowd by the rebels who

were looking for young virgins. During the ordeal, she fell pregnant, but miscarried shortly after. At her lowest moments, she considered suicide. Remarkably, Aminata survived, and was reunited with her family shortly afterwards.

But when one rebel became obsessed with finding her, it became clear she couldn't stay in the ravaged country. Instead, she was flown to Australia with her sister to start a new life. However, it wasn't all smooth sailing.

"It was such a culture shock to come to Australia and I constantly felt lonely," Aminata says.

She started out working in modelling and eventually found a job in the retail industry.

Struggling, she thought about the lessons her dad taught her – to be kind and compassionate and give back where possible.

"My father, a single dad, taught us that money is earned to be shared among those who need it," she says.

Aminata found community in a local church and even began producing theatre work dealing with the experiences of refugee women.

Soon, she met Antoine, the man of her dreams. "I even fell in love and got married to Antoine, she says. Soon after, they fell pregnant.

After the birth of her first daughter Sarafina in 2012, she was inspired to establish a foundation to help mothers and babies in Sierra Leone.

Giving birth was traumatic for Aminata. Her daughter was nine days overdue and a big baby. Thanks to first-rate medical care, she survived, but the near-death experience left her pondering her life's purpose.

"If I was in Sierra Leone, I would have died giving birth," she explains. "So, I kept thinking, 'Why had I made it, why was I given a second and then third chance at life?'"

So she launched the Aminata Maternal Foundation. The charity

has raised \$400,000 to help mothers and babies in Sierra Leone, where one in 17 women will die during childbirth, compared with 1 in 8,700 in Australia.

Now, Aminata has helped more than 10,000 mums, including some as young as 12. She holds no grudges against her captors and carries forgiveness in her heart. She has even turned her experiences into a moving memoir, *Rising Heart*.

"I want my kids to know what I have been through. When people call me inspiring, I'm humbled, for I'm only the voice of women, who don't have one," she says.

"Every time I share my story and someone in the crowd says, 'Thank you, that's me, too,' my heart grows."

By Astha Gupta

