Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Liberia

During both of the Liberian Civil Wars, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence were used widely as a weapon of war.¹ Since the end of the conflict in 2003, Gender-Based Violence has continued to be widespread throughout Liberian society. As seen in Box 1, the magnitude of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) throughout Liberia is still high, with 50% of women surviving Female Genital Cutting (FGC) or Domestic Violence and over a third of women facing emotional and psychological Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Forced Early Marriage or Physical Violence. Gender-Based Violence has numerous effects for survivors including physical and mental trauma and the loss of social and professional networks.² There are also high costs for the government of Liberia; some studies calculate the economic costs of GBV to be at least 2% of GDP.³ Gender-Based Violence is a human rights violation in Liberia, as right to life and security of person is a fundamental right in the Constitution.⁴ The perpetuation of Gender-Based Violence “stems from the failure of governments and societies to recognize the human rights of women.”⁵ The Government of Liberia has attempted to address Gender-Based Violence in their National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNR 1325 and their National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Management of Gender Based Violence in Liberia. However, Liberia has not renewed their National Action Plan, which ended in 2013 nor their National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Management of Gender Based Violence in Liberia, which ended in 2016, even though sexual violence against women remains at high levels. Liberia needs to reinstate their National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Management of Gender Based Violence

to address GBV in Liberia to address this widespread problem.

Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence in Liberia

Violence Against Women and Girls and Gender-Based Violence (defined in Box 2) have been serious issues in Liberia since both the first and second Liberian Civil Wars. During the Liberian Civil Wars, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence was used as a weapon of war. Although VAWG and GBV occurred within Liberia before the conflict, it’s widespread use over the 14 year struggle entrenched Sexual and Gender-Based Violence within Liberian society.6 Today, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence remains to be a prevalent problem throughout Liberia, even 15 years after the end of the war. During the conflict, 89.2 percent of the perpetrators of reported rape were fighting forces. However, this has changed, with the majority of reported sexual and gender-based

Box 2
Defining Violence

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is defined as “…any act of violence resulting in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty.”

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is defined as “…violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex, gender identity, or perceived adherence to socially defined norms of masculinity and femininity.”


Box 3
Causes of Gender-Based Violence

“Factors that perpetuate GBV within the Liberian context include social, cultural, and traditional constructions that enable GBV to evolve and persist.” These include:

- Low Value of Women and Girls
- Stereotypes and Discrimination
- Cultural and Societal Norms and Expectations
- Gender Inequalities Between Men and Women


violence perpetrated by intimate partners or by family or community members.7 Box 3 lists some contributors to the perpetuation of Gender-Based Violence, although this list is not extensive. Societal, cultural and traditional factors all help to perpetuate violence against women and girls; more studies and data collection is needed to be able to determine these factors and how to accurately address them to prevent this type of violence.

There are many different forms of Gender-Based Violence, many of which are summarized in Box 4. In Liberia, 39 percent of women endure physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime while 36 percent have experienced marital emotional violence. Overall, 49 percent of women have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence by a husband or other intimate partner.8 Rape continues to be the most

frequently reported serious crime in Liberia, especially the rape of children, with 49 percent of reported rape cases to the Liberian National Police involving children under the age of 18 and the instances of the rape of children increasing between 2009 and 2013. Lifetime non-partner sexual violence remains low, at only 3 percent. However, this is in contrast to the study that the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Management of Gender-Based Violence is informed by, which puts the instances of sexual violence experienced by women at 90 percent and the Liberian Demographic and Health Survey, which found 17 percent of women had experienced sexual violence. This discrepancy may be due to the pool of respondents informing the study, the non-disaggregation in known vs. unknown assailants and the unwillingness of survivors to report.

Other forms of gender-based violence include child marriage, female genital cutting and physical violence. In Liberia, about 36 percent of girls endure child marriage while 50 percent endure female genital cutting. 44 percent of women have experienced physical violence in their lifetime. Other forms of gender-based violence that have no statistics present are sexual harassment and socio-economic violence.

While this data provides a helpful overview of GBV in Liberia, it may be outdated. The most recent DHS study removed Gender-Based Violence that is any violence of a sexual nature that is non-consensual and/or forced. This includes rape, attempted rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, incest, and sexual exploitation.

Physical Violence is any act of physical assault, which includes slapping, hitting, beating, kicking, and use of weapons.

Forced Early Marriage is when parents or others arrange for and force a minor to marry someone. Force may be exerted through physical, emotional or economic pressure.

Domestic Violence is violence that takes place between intimate partners (spouses, boyfriend/girlfriend) as well as between family members (for example, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law). Domestic violence may include sexual, physical, emotional and psychological or economic abuse.

Emotional and Psychological Violence is violence that includes verbal and emotional abuse, humiliation and confinement, forced social isolation, and threats of physical harm.

Socio-Economic Violence is violence that includes discrimination and/or denial of opportunities, services, social exclusion/ostracism based on sexual orientation and obstructive legislation practice, spouse’s or partners control and deprivation of his/her partner’s access to food, water, shelter, clothing, health care, fertility (forced pregnancies and/or abortions).

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is violence that entails cutting of healthy female genital tissue as part of a traditional ceremony that symbolizes a rite of passage for the victim. Force may be exerted through social and cultural pressure or physically violence. FGC is also referred to as Female "Circumcision" and Female Genital Mutilation.


Violence indicators from the survey\textsuperscript{16}, so many of these statistics are from before 2010. More data needs to be collected to determine the levels of Gender-Based Violence in Liberia.

**Effects of GBV**

Gender-Based Violence results in numerous challenges for survivors to overcome. GBV does not only result in physical, emotional and mental trauma for the survivor, but also often carries long-term social consequences, such as denouncement by their families and the community. Additionally, some women and girls that are raped end up getting pregnant, which further stigmatizes them. Because of this, GBV survivors usually face high rates of divorce and/or wife abandonment.\textsuperscript{17} Outside of mental, emotional, physical and social effects, GBV survivors also face higher levels of poverty and a lack of social safety networks, making them more vulnerable to additional Gender-Based Violence. GBV survivors are more likely to stop participating in work, school or civic life because of trauma, lack of support and lack of treatment options. This is an indirect cost of GBV: the loss of wages, productivity and potential.\textsuperscript{18} Box 5 further details the effects Gender-Based Violence has on survivors.

Not only does Gender Based Violence leave lasting effects on the survivors but also to Liberian society at all levels; GBV has high effects on communities and societies. The economy loses productive and capable workers and loses the money these workers could be putting back into the economy. The country has a less educated workforce which can prevent innovation and job growth. Gender-Based Violence drains resources from social services, the justice system, healthcare agencies, and employers. Research conducted


**Box 5**

**Effects of GBV on Survivors**

It is difficult to determine the magnitude of the effects of GBV on survivors because of the lack of data available. However, the following are all effects GBV survivors can experience:

**Physical:** From the DHS survey, 43% of women had dealt with injuries obtained from domestic abuse. Women who face other forms of GBV, such as sexual violence, physical violence or FGC also face physical injuries. Women who experience rape also risk contracting a sexually transmitted disease or becoming pregnant.

**Mental Trauma:** After the instance(s) of GBV, survivors can suffer from severe mental and debilitating mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Loss of Social/Professional Network:** Because of the stigma surrounding GBV, women are often ostracized from their communities after experiencing violence, especially if they become pregnant.

**Loss of Work/Education:** Women often lose the ability to work or gain an education, because of physical injuries, mental trauma, GBV stigma or the continuation of GBV.

**Death:** If the effects listed above go untreated, death could result. There is no data on the rates of this effect; however, there are cases recorded of this happening in Liberia, such as in 2015 when a 14-year-old girl died from injuries after being raped.


by the UN shows that intimate partner and domestic violence cause more deaths and have higher economic costs than civil wars and could cost at least 1-2 per cent of a country’s gross domestic product (GDP). The direct effects this may cause Liberia are detailed in Box 6.

**Current Legislation**

The Liberian Constitution details the fundamental human rights that all citizens should enjoy in the country. These rights have no distinction between male and female, giving men and women equal rights under the law. These rights, including the right to life, the right to security of person, and the right to gain and hold employment without discrimination, protect citizens from Gender-Based Violence. However, the continuation and magnitude of Gender-Based violence within Liberia after the Constitution was approved in 1986 is a challenge.

19 UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri. “The Economic Costs of Violence Against Women.” UN Women Discussion, September 21, 2016.


Box 7
What Legal Protections against GBV Exist?

Constitution, Articles 11-26: These articles detail the fundamental rights of all Liberian people. There is no gender distinction made within these articles, giving women and men equal right to right to life and security of person, gain and hold employment without discrimination, maintain personal privacy, equality before the law and equal protection of the law and the prohibition of torture or inhumane treatment.

Rape Law: This law was passed in 2005 and defines rape in a gender-neutral way, allowing for male and female victims to seek justice against male and/or female perpetrators. It allows for spousal rape charges and defines consent. The law provides severe sentences for rape, including making rape a non-bailable offense with no access to parole.

Rape Law Amendment: This amendment allows for rape to be a bailable crime.

Executive Order: Before leaving office, former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, issued an executive order banning domestic violence and female genital mutilation.

Source:


Amnesty International Policy Brief

Agency Coordination Task Force through the Gender Based Violence Unit of the Ministry. The Ministry of Gender and Development, also known as the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, “…serves as a driving force of Government for the practicalization of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” which includes the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC); the AU Protocols on Women and Children, UNSCR 1325 on Women Peace and Security; and the Beijing Platform for Action.24

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women put forward numerous critiques and suggestions for the Government of Liberia which have yet to be implemented through the Ministry of Gender and Development. These include incorporating CEDAW into the national legislature, increasing the number of women in the legislature (currently at 12 percent25), improving the educational infrastructure, and addressing social and cultural barriers women face for education, work, and civil society. 26 While many of these goals have not yet been obtained by the Government, the National Action Plans put forward in 2006 and 2009 tried to address some of these criticisms.

National Action Plans


Promotion of women in society, and planned to achieve this through monitoring and evaluation, strengthening coordination, promoting partnerships and strategic linkages, data collect, storage and analysis, enhancing donor commitment to Liberia, strengthening monitoring and watchdog role of civil society and improving accountability and ownership. While this was seen as a comprehensive and inclusive process, there was a bias towards women’s groups that were already in the capital and whose agenda was already closely aligned with Resolution 1325. There was also no final report after the completion of the four-year cycle, although there were achievements in having more women in key decision-making positions; improving women’s social and economic standing and empowerment; and providing women with information on how to protect their rights and security. This Action Plan was not specifically targeting GBV but was meant to be complimentary to the Liberian National Action Plan (LNAP) for the Prevention and Management of Gender-Based Violence.

The LNAP for the Prevention and Management of Gender-Based Violence was created to coordinate efforts to addressing Gender-Based Violence prevention and response across Liberia at the national and county levels. The approach to GBV interventions was broken down into five areas: (1) Psychosocial support including economic empowerment of survivors, (2) Medical, (3) Legal, (4) Protection, and (5) Coordination. The two overarching goals of this plan were to minimize GBV by 30% by the year 2011 and to appropriate care and services to survivors of GBV. The five objectives under these goals can be found in Box 8.

While this was a comprehensive program, it failed to meet its overall goals as all forms of Gender-Based Violence measured remain at over 30% and only a limited number of survivors of GBV receive the care they need. No final report was conducted or released upon the completion of the plan in 2016. The Liberian National Action Plan has yet to be renewed or improved upon with a new plan.

**Recommendations**

Gender-Based Violence is a violation of the fundamental rights of the people of Liberia. To address this widespread issue, Amnesty International makes the following recommendations:

1. Psychosocial support including economic empowerment of survivors

To address cultural and social causes of Gender-Based Violence as well as provide support to GBV victims, psychosocial support, particularly the economic empowerment of women and girls, should be an important consideration of the government. This includes social, civil, and economic empowerment programs, social and cultural change programs and programs that address discrimination and stereotypes. Outside of programming, more data needs to be collected to determine the root causes of GBV in Liberia and what programs are effective at addressing these causes.

2. Medical

Survivors of Gender-Based Violence usually suffer from physical, mental and emotional trauma. The Government of Liberia needs to ensure there are social and medical resources available to survivors and trained personnel capable of addressing survivors’ needs. The Government should also collect more data to determine the magnitude of the problem in each county and allocate resources accordingly.

3. Legal

While the Liberian Constitution should protect the fundamental rights of both men and women, more specific laws are needed to address Gender-Based Violence.

- Incorporate CEDAW into legal infrastructure
- Change the amendment that makes rape a bailable offense
- Implement a domestic violence law

4. Protection

The Government needs to do more to ensure protection for Liberian citizens against Gender-Based Violence. To protect its citizens, the government should:

- Increase trainings of law enforcement and judicial bodies around the importance of prosecuting GBV perpetrators.
- Trainings for communities on causes and effects of Gender-Based Violence

5. Coordination

This issue is too large for the Government of Liberia to handle alone. The government should reinstate the National Action Plan on the Implementation and Management of Gender-Based Violence to coordinate the approach to Gender-Based Violence across the Government, private, and non-profit sectors to ensure the best response for the people of Liberia. Follow the outlined plan, focusing on the prevention of Gender-Based Violence, while incorporating the criticisms given from CEDAW and UN Human Rights.

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