



Examining gender based violence and abuse among Liberian school students in four counties: An exploratory study[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to uncover the extent of sexual gender based violence (GBV) experienced by a convenience sample of students from select counties in Liberia and to understand the disclosure experiences of those victims willing to come forward. Girls ($n = 758$) and boys ($n = 1,100$) were asked about their sexual GBV experiences including their disclosure experiences, if applicable. Results indicated that sexual violation (i.e., peeping or inappropriate touching) was found among both girls and boys. Sexual coercion (i.e., forced sex) was more prevalent than transactional sex (i.e., trading sex for grades or money). Both sexual coercion and transactional sex were reported by more girls than boys, yet the rates for the most severe form of sexual violence (i.e., sexual coercion) were high for both girls (30%) and boys (22%). When students were asked if they told anyone, 38% reported that they did disclose their experiences. This study contributes to a small but growing body of research to document the prevalence and types of sexual violence against children in Liberia. Consistent with other studies, the evidence shows that sexual violence against boys and girls is occurring at alarming rates.

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Gender based violence, as it is currently experienced by women and children in Liberia, takes place against a historical backdrop of large-scale struggle for power and violent conflicts. Liberia's historically hierarchical social structure is reflected in the status of "Americo Liberians," those who settled either as ex-slaves or free persons from the U.S. in the 1820s. This group is also disproportionately represented in the past heads of state and held a significant proportion of wealth and power until the 1980s. The occurrence of military coups in 1980 by Samuel Doe, from the Krahn tribe, and Charles Taylor with the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in 1989 were followed by corrupt and violent regimes that eventually led to civil war that inflicted immense atrocities against civilians. Despite a brief peace after Taylor's presidential election in 1997, violent conflict broke out again from 1999 to 2003.

The civil war in Liberia was brutally violent and often included the use of child soldiers, torture, and rape as a weapon. Half of all Liberians were forced to flee their homes during the civil conflict (Swiss et al., 1998) and two million people were displaced. Kenneth Cain (1999) notes that the first conflict resulted in between 200,000 and 270,000 casualties, 750,000

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international refugees, 1.2 million internally displaced persons, and thousands more people who were tortured, maimed, and otherwise victimized. Rape was also used as a weapon during the conflict (Dziewanski, 2012), and while estimates for all vary, rates of violence against both combatants and civilians was high. A review of studies using population-based surveys estimates that 10–20% of Liberian women were raped during the Liberian civil war (Cohen & Green, 2012).

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was inaugurated as the first female president in post-civil war Liberia and on the African continent in 2006. She has attempted to shape her presidency around “gender sensitive reforms and the absence of armed conflict” (Popovic, 2009, p. 9), and the Liberian government has set gender equality and the elimination of violence high on its agenda.

Despite these positive changes, rebuilding Liberia has proven challenging due to its violent recent history. Not only destructive to the social fabric of communities, families, and the psyche of its inhabitants, the conflict temporarily plunged Liberia into failed state status as a result of the economic and political consequences of conflict that resulted in higher levels of poverty and reduced access to services. Women in Liberia, already challenged by patriarchal social structures and institutions not reflective of their interests in access to employment, education, marriage and landownership, found themselves even more vulnerable during the conflict. Political and economic instability post-conflict has exacerbated this struggle.

As Liberia strives to rebuild, efforts are underway to address gender based violence (GBV) throughout the country, especially violence against women and children. Understanding the scope and nuances behind such victimization, especially among children, is a first step to developing policies and programs to address and prevent such violence; however, much of the literature related to sexual violence and GBV in Liberia is focused on violence during conflict. The purpose of this article is to uncover the extent of sexual violence experienced by a convenience sample of students from select counties in Liberia and to understand the disclosure behaviors of those victims willing to come forward.

Gender Based Violence in Liberia

The extent of sexual violence during and following the Liberian civil war is debated and difficult to determine. Cohen and Green (2012) note that estimates by various human rights organizations and media during and immediately after the conflict indicated that approximately two-thirds of women were raped during the conflict. However, they point out that the studies used to obtain these numbers were often not designed to evaluate the overall prevalence of rape during the war, but rather for the purpose of understanding the experiences of those who suffered and reported rape. More reliable data suggest that the rate was between 10 and 20% of women experienced sexual violence during the civil conflicts (Cohen & Green, 2012).

One nationally based study was conducted by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) in which researchers randomly selected 1,000 households in all fifteen counties in Liberia to determine the prevalence of and attitudes toward rape (UNMIL, 2008). Out of the total 2,952 participants who were interviewed, 37.3% were male while 62.7% were female of 10 years of age and above. Approximately 22% of respondents knew someone who had been raped, while 2% indicated that they had been raped. Rape survivors were generally between the ages of 10 and 19 while 41% of perpetrators were between 20 and 39 years old (UNMIL, 2008). Unfortunately, the researchers relied on a narrow definition of rape as dictated by Liberian law and a focus on penetration only. Additionally, the researchers reported that some parents responded on behalf of their children. Finally, the researchers identified that respondents were not willing to talk about rape or even sex but instead, only talked about incidents experienced by others (UNMIL, 2008).

A more recent population-based study on gender based violence among 600 adult females in two Liberian counties (Montserrado and Nimba counties) found 56–59% of females experienced at least one act of gender based violence over the past 18 months (Stark, Warner, Lehmann, Boothby, & Ager, 2013). However, another population-based study that surveyed 4,501 adults across the country found that almost 38% of women and over 15% of men had been severely beaten by a spouse or partner during their lifetime (Vinck & Pham, 2013). Unfortunately, both studies only provide information on adult populations with a more general view of violence that is primarily focused on physical violence between partners. Additionally, though both studies used rigorous methods, the results of experiencing intimate partner violence varied quite a bit from 56–59% (more recent violence) to as low as 38% (lifetime violence).

In another study on intimate partner violence among adult women, Horn, Puffer, Roesch, and Lehmann (2014) conducted 14 focus groups with 110 women from Sierra Leone and Liberia regarding their experiences with intimate partner violence post-war. The study found intimate partner violence to be an area of concern for women in both countries and factors such as cultural beliefs surrounding gender norms and women’s financial dependence on men contribute to the prevalence of intimate partner violence. Some women agreed that women’s increased involvement in their communities and the presence of NGOs following the war contributed to a decrease in intimate partner violence in some situations (Horn et al., 2014). After the war, there were more economic opportunities for women, which provided greater financial independence. Additionally, women became more knowledgeable about their legal rights and services available for survivors of gender based violence (Horn et al., 2014).

In Liberia, even though rape is a crime, fear, isolation, economic hardship, and mistrust of authority mean that many instances of gender based violence go unreported and the perpetrators are not identified, caught, or convicted (Ackerman, 2009). Only 6% of all reported cases of gender-based violence in 2010, which includes sexual violence or physical violence, made it to court with only 2% of the cases resulting in a conviction (Dziewanski, 2012). This is linked to both limited capacity of the law enforcement and justice systems as well as underreporting (Dziewanski, 2012). Many women do not report

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