

Challenging Liberian attitudes towards violence against women

by June Munala

During the 14-year long civil war, Liberia's south-east region witnessed extreme levels of sexual violence. Without action to heighten awareness of the root causes of male violence it will not be possible to unlearn destructive notions of masculinity and machismo.

The south-eastern counties of Grand Gedeh, River Gee, Sinoe, River Cess and Maryland make up much of the hinterland of Liberia. Governed by a different set of laws, the area is populated by indigenous Liberians – referred to as the ‘country people’. Infrastructure and health and education services are virtually non-existent in a region long neglected by the Americo-Liberian elite who have traditionally dominated Liberia. Inhabitants of the area hold close to their traditions and culture – including the practice of trials by ordeal, female genital mutilation, ritual killings, witchcraft, sorcery and early marriages. During the many years of protracted war and civil strife, two rebel groups – Liberians United for Restoration of Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) – and government soldiers terrorised the region. Systematised and endemic rape of women and girls, gang rape and multiple reoccurrence of sexual abuse were rampant. Many were raped in front of their families, as a sign of victory or ‘conquering’ – an ultimate expression of power over the enemy. Interviews with community members suggest that around two thirds of all women and girls experienced some form of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

In Liberia, as in other war zones, sexual acts were used to violate a person in a mental, physical, emotional, economic and psychological way and not necessarily simply as a means of satisfying sexual desires. Rape of women in war is an act of aggression against a nation or community. Sexual violence continues to be practised even in

post-conflict communities as a way of reinforcing or reasserting lost power or ‘glory’ of the perpetrator.

With huge support from the international community – and the presence of the world’s largest peacekeeping force – Liberia has embarked on a slow and painful process of reconstruction and recovery. Emphasis has been placed on repairing the visible damage to infrastructure, health and education facilities and peoples’ livelihoods. However, despite the large number of UN and other international agencies working on SGBV issues, there still appears to be a high number of incidents of post-war rape and domestic violence. This can be traced to the culture of impunity and acquiescence in a society which views rape of women as ‘no big deal’ and in which it is considered normal for intimate partner relations to be characterised by violence.

Sexual violence is reinforced in domestic relationships. The changed gender roles and identities that the war brought about have left many men feeling powerless. Many of those forced to watch helplessly as their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters were raped and sexually abused admit to shame and inability to live up to the hegemonic model of masculinity. The easiest way for them to regain their power has been through exerting control over their women through sexual and physical violence.

Humanitarian workers, teachers and others in positions of authority have also been guilty of sexual exploitation. A large number of perpetrators are

seen to go scot-free. Many tolerate the fact that young girls and women have ‘offered’ themselves to humanitarian workers in order to secure much-needed household income. Interviews with parents showed that some had encouraged daughters to go out and search for food, using their bodies.

In Liberia, as elsewhere, large military peacekeeping operations create a breeding ground for sexual exploitation and harassment of women. In all armies men are drilled into accepting values of aggressive masculinity. Oppression and dominance over all, including women, is implicitly or explicitly part of their training. Only this can explain the extent of sexual abuse of women by forces who are supposed to be keeping the peace or protecting the population. Military misogyny has often taken precedence over the protection role that soldiers are supposed to perform.

Evidence is anecdotal but interviews with women and girls in Grand Gedeh and River Gee counties reflected the scale of ongoing sexual violence. There is particular concern at the large number of reported cases of raped children. Attacks are perpetrated not only out of sexual desire but also due to belief in rape as a ritual capable of increasing power and virility.

People in the south-east are also worried by the rate of teenage pregnancies. Girls and women are sexually active at an early age. By the age of 13, it is reported, four out of five girls are either pregnant or have had a child. There appears to be a connection between prostitution for survival and breakdown in values attached to sexual behaviour. Nowadays both men and women may have multiple sexual partners within their community. Many women find it acceptable for their husbands to have several women as this enhances his ‘power’. Inevitably, this contributes

to increased prevalence of HIV/AIDS, further worsening the lives of survivors of sexual violence.

Need for action

Action is urgently required to tackle huge gaps in service provision. In Grand Gedeh there is only one hospital to serve the whole county. Health facilities are poorly equipped and staff are often absent. The county lacks trained psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors to provide therapeutic assistance to survivors of violence.

Survivors of sexual violence find it virtually impossible to access justice. In many counties the judicial system has completely collapsed. Staff in those courts which do still function are poorly trained. Even if perpetrators are convicted, a lack of detention facilities can lead to their immediate release back into the community. Corrupt magistrates and police officers still prefer to settle GBV cases the ‘family way’. The police are yet to undergo

training on how to respond to incidents of sexual violence and rural police stations, unlike those in Monrovia and other urban locations, do not yet have specialised Women and Children Units.

Integrated multisectoral prevention and response strategies are not in place. Competition and information hoarding by humanitarian agencies are rife. Records are not kept. Few NGOs have statistics or collate scientific evidence of reported incidents of sexual violence. Roles, responsibilities and institutional mandates must be urgently clarified.

Men should not be regarded as obstacles to women’s empowerment and gender equality. It is vital to understand the causes of men’s violence and alcoholism as well as changing gender roles in post-conflict environments and to involve men in programmes aimed at preventing and responding to sexual violence. Without tackling issues of men’s lost masculinity, women may continue to face the after-effects of violent male

behaviour as men seek to reaffirm their superiority and domination.

Many traditional institutions survived the conflict and their chiefs continue to be held in respect. Secret societies – for both men and women – remain influential. Behaviour change campaigns must recognise the power of these cultural institutions as potential catalysts for change. They could enhance messages relating to responsible sexual behaviour and the dangers of multiple partners and HIV/AIDS.

With more careful interpretation and understanding of conflict from a gender perspective, we may be able to move forward in building a more effective, coordinated, community-driven response to GBV in conflict and post-conflict communities.

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