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Sexual exploitation adds to existing troubles in Liberia

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Deborah Gabriel

When sex becomes a means of survival



Photo Claires Soares IRIN

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Last week Save the Children launched a report into sexual exploitation in Liberia, but the UN and UNICEF acknowledge that it is part of much bigger issues in the war-torn country, which they are taking very seriously.

The report: **From Camp to Community: Liberia Study on exploitation of children** was conducted between August and December last year and involved 315 children and adults who were staying in camps for Internally Displaced People (IDPs).

The study uncovered a pattern of girls having sex with men in exchange for money, goods and services and those involved in engaging in sex with young girls include camp officials, humanitarian workers, peacekeeping troops, businessmen, government employees and even teachers.

The problem is so widespread, that what the report refers to as **“transactional sex”** – sex in exchange for money, goods or services, takes place in a wide range of environments from entertainment centres, latrines, video clubs and bush land to camps.

The report cites poverty as the main cause, with transactional sex functioning as a means of survival. In camps there is dependency on the NGOs for food and non-food items but if there are insufficient supplies or extra money is needed for school fees or school books, the money has to be found from somewhere.

Fourteen years of armed conflict has taken its toll on Liberia with children having to become breadwinners in order to make ends meet and some as young as five being forced to do manual jobs for local farmers and market traders such as fetching and carrying and selling items such as water as drinks for traders or their parents.

But one of the major problems about transactional sex is that it has become an acceptable practice, an acceptable means of survival with both parents and peers often pressuring young girls into it, with the girls themselves – who range from eight to 12 years upwards being regularly involved in selling sex.

The suggestion that yet again UN peacekeepers may be involved in sexual exploitation in a conflict zone is a severe embarrassment for the UN, even though there are other parties involved.

But Roselyn Odera, Chief of Conduct and Discipline with the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) assured Black Britain that the problem is being taken very seriously:

“I have just this minute come back from visiting one of the military contingents, to address the military... this is so that we can remind them of their commitments and remind them that the UN has a zero tolerance policy and to let them know what the consequences are.”

An independent oversight service is responsible for conducting investigations into allegations of sexual misconduct which is sent to New York and anyone reported of such behaviour is ineligible for further work as a peacekeeper.

The UN is also working on establishing a database to ensure that this is a reality and to **“stop the transferring the problem elsewhere.”**

Morality has broken down after 14 years of civil war

But according to Odera: **“The problem of sexual exploitation in Liberia is part of a much bigger picture and we need to look at the root causes.”** Agreeing with the Save the Children Study which points to economic deprivation as the main cause, Odera added:

“The breakdown of institutions, the breakdown of morality in society,” are additional factors and before the problem of sexual exploitation can be addressed, the other aspects have to be addressed also for any solutions to be lasting and effective.

Odera explained that the IDPs, upon which the study was based were recently closed, but suggested: **“When people are sitting in a camp it’s an unnatural environment to begin with and the situation lends itself to exploitation.”**



Photo IRIN

“ We can only create awareness and we can only educate the people. ”

Pointing to social problems as well as economic ones, Odera told Black Britain: **"The moral fibre of society has broken down after 14 years of conflict, so our approach is to see how we can work with the local NGOs to see how they can see address the concerns that they find in their communities."**

*Harry Evans,
Amnesty Liberia*

To give some idea as to the scale of devastation in Liberia, there are currently around 400 NGOs operating in Liberia, but: **"There are NGOs and there are NGOs,"** said Odera, who has so far only managed to meet with representatives of international NGOs.

Odera told Black Britain that the most effective way of tackling the problem of sexual exploitation is through preventative measure such as raising awareness and training. The UN currently train not only persons in UNMIL but also those working for UN agencies and programmes based in Liberia.

All new recruits have to undergo induction training which focuses mainly on sexual exploitation and abuse: **"Because the Secretary General (Kofi Annan) is really committed to ending this practice,"** said Odera.

Odera plans to work closely with the Minister for Gender and the Minister for Education in Liberia primarily through NGOs to strengthen the capacity of local NGOs to deal with the problem. She told Black Britain:

"I think we need to be balanced in how we address the concerns. It's an ongoing challenge no doubt about it [but] the best way to address it is to look at all the elements involved."

Amnesty International in Liberia produced its own report on December 2004 which primarily focused on sex being used as a weapon of war. The report said: **"Rape and other forms of sexual violence have become endemic in Liberia."**

It documented cases of women being: **"seized, raped, abducted, forcibly recruited to fight and subjected to sexual slavery."** The report covered incidents taking place between December 1989 and August 2003 when the peace agreement between warring parties was signed.

Referring to the Save the Children report on sexual exploitation, Harry Evans from Amnesty Liberia told Black Britain: **"We can only create awareness and we can only educate the people."**

New government brings hope but the challenges are many



Angela Kearney, a UNICEF representative has been based in Liberia for two and a half years and agrees with Odera that the problem goes beyond abuse by peacekeeping troops and humanitarian workers:

“It is a part of the bigger society- it’s part of absolute poverty, it’s part of the results of fourteen years of civil war, the breakdown of family values – all of those things ”

“It is a part of the bigger society- it’s part of absolute poverty, it’s part of the results of fourteen years of civil war, the breakdown of family values – all of those things,” she told Black Britain.

She also agreed that the problem needs to be tackled on various levels and must involve the government, organisations and women’s groups as well as tackling legislation. Until recently the rape law in Liberia was very “loose,” she said, but long term persistency with Parliament had paid off with recent changes being made.

Kearney told Black Britain that the issue was not just about sex but about society and that it was the sign **“of a society that is really struggling.”**

*Angela
Kearney,
UNICEF
Representative
in Liberia*

Referring to cases of transactional sex involving video club owners, she explained that with no electricity in Liberia, **“most people just manage,”** but some get by with small generators. The video clubs are popular places for kids to go and get some form of entertainment by watching DVDs, but:

“Sometimes the video club owners are renting DVD’s out for the price of sex.” The solution, said Kearney: **“Is about getting girls and boys to believe in themselves and to not force themselves into this kind of behaviour.”**

Kearney believes that women’s empowerment and girls’ education are crucial weapons to tackling sexual exploitation by improving their self-esteem and sense of self-worth:

“They are the ones who can say no and they are the mothers of the future who aren’t going to force their daughters into prostitution,” she said.

Kearney told Black Britain that the government needs full support, especially with a female president who is aware of the situation, but Kearney sees reason to be optimistic:

“I’m thankful that there is democracy, that the people chose who they wanted and that the president has been able to choose her Cabinet based on their knowledge, skills and abilities to serve their country.”

Kearney senses hopefulness in the mood of the country, but admitted: **“the challenges are many.”** She pointed to the vast sums of money needed for

development to get electricity into the city, get sanitation services and waste disposal in place and putting the county administration system in order:

“What UNICEF would like to do is to make sure that all of our energy goes into making sure that the basic social services are available to people in the country. Where they have left the camps they need to go home to schools with paid teachers, exercise books, pens and pencils, desks and chairs and a roof over their head,” she said.

It is also necessary to have good healthcare provisions with access to family planning, information on HIV and AIDS, clean water in order to encourage people to stay put wherever they have gone home to. But job opportunities must also be available. In addition to training and raising awareness Kearney also believes that every single allegation of sexual exploitation must be investigated and taken seriously.

Kearney told Black Britain: **“The challenges are many but it’s not a hopeless situation. The report has just highlighted one of the vulnerabilities in Liberia which we are taking very, very seriously.”**

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