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Vulnerability and Power

Executive Summary

**A psycho-social
study on the situation
of women and girls
in post-war Liberia**

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Executive Summary

„Vulnerability and Power“ – between these extreme poles are the experiences of women and girls who have survived the brutal civil war in Liberia (1989-2003). This study looks at these different experiences and shows that the massive and systematic sexualised violence that 70% of the women and girls were exposed to is only the extreme climax of a structural violence that still shapes the violent everyday life after the war. This structural violence of post-conflict times can be seen in the omnipresence of domestic and sexualised violence and sexual exploitation. Causes of this situation are the extreme poverty and the lack of access to education, health and political decision making power, especially for girls and women from the hinterland, the rupture of stable gender relations through war and flight, and finally an internalised devaluation of women and girls vis-à-vis their own sex that has been reinforced through the massive sexualised violence. However, women and girls in Liberia are not only passive victims. They have also always broken with current gender stereotypes – partly out of (more or less) free choices, partly under pressure due to the danger.

The study wants to show that without interventions that enable trauma and gender sensitive empowerment, the situation of women and girls will hardly change. The structural gender-specific violence thus reinforces the potential for conflict and excludes women as actors from participating in (socio-)political decisions, especially in more traditional areas.

Methodological foundations

The study is based on data collected through participatory methods for the medica mondiale project that has been active in the South East of Liberia since 2006 (a needs assessment of November 2005 and a base line survey of 2006), and includes secondary literature and studies relating to the topic and the region. Through this triangulation of methods the topic can be dealt with from various angles. The study's aims are to present the interplay between personal experience, social context and socio-political structures, and from this synopsis, to formulate recommendations for a psycho-political reconstruction that will enable both personal and structural empowerment of Liberian women and girls.

Central concepts

The theoretical concepts of gender, trauma and empowerment are at the foundation of this study.

Gender means gender identity as a social construct

separate from the biological sex. Gender plays a role in all phases of a conflict. Sexualised and gender-based violence comprises in this context those forms of violence that a person is subjected to because of her gender and the roles and symbolisms associated with it.

Trauma describes the many psychosocial consequences of experiences that go beyond the human capacity to cope, and where neither flight nor fight is possible. One of the typical psychological disorders that follows trauma is post-traumatic stress disorder. In epidemiological studies worldwide, rape has proven to be the most debilitating traumatic experience. The psycho-social stress of the survivors also depends on what follows in the time after the traumatic experiences and how stable or instable the situation is afterwards. This relationship determines the situation of the survivors of sexualised violence who are frequently stigmatised by their social environment because of their experiences – particularly by communities, the families and society – and who often internalise the social devaluations and see themselves as “damaged”.

Empowerment as a concept contains various facets that are connected with the notion of power. In regard to the societal empowerment of women, this concept was developed in the context of the work of the Southern network DAWN in the middle of the 1980s. It describes a strategy focused on women, enabling them to gain a form of power through which they break up societal structures of oppression “from below” and gain access to decision-making and societal presentation. When social, political and personal aspects of empowerment come together, real change of power and “psycho-political” well-being becomes possible.

Regarding the situation of Liberia and its South East

Liberia is one of the poorest countries of the world and shows a significant urban-rural divide in almost all developmental indicators.

The Southeast of Liberia – especially Grand Gedeh, River Gee and Sinoe – belongs to the most marginalised regions of the whole country. Medical care is disastrous. Due to the bad roads and the lack of a public transport system, many women and girls die on their way to the remote hospital when they have complications in labour.

Apart from these deficiencies in the health sector there are also other structural deficits, for example, in the public infrastructure, in the justice system and the police.



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The economy is at subsistence level and access to safe drinking water remains critical.

Women and girls affected by sexualised violence during the Liberian war (1989-2003)

Liberia's fourteen year war has been shaped by its extreme cruelty towards the civil population: around 250 000 people have died and about two million people displaced. Women and girls were exposed to different kinds of vulnerability such as endemic rapes, forced marriages with combatants and sexual torture. According to estimates, two out of three women and girls have undergone sexualised violence, frequently also mass rape – either when fleeing or during attacks from all sides (government soldiers and rebel groups).

Another form of systemic structural violence during the war was the sexual exploitation in the refugee camps in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone that has also continued during resettlement. The victims are usually poor girls between 13 and 18 years who “sell” sex for food, school fees or little material gifts, also often, in order to ensure the survival of their family. The perpetrators are frequently men with influence and power: employees of humanitarian organisations, security forces in the camps, teachers, peacekeepers, refugee leaders or men from the commercial sector. The sexual exploitation is tolerated silently on the one hand by parents and families because of the material poverty – while on the other hand, at the same time, the girls are stigmatised as “bad”. As a result it is impossible for them to speak about their experiences or to receive support.

Women and girls in the fighting groups

Another experience that often leads to stigmatisation is the role of women and girls in the fighting forces. Around 30-40% of those in the fighting forces in the Liberian civil

war were women and girls. Most of them were abducted and forcibly recruited. However, there were also more or less voluntary forms of recruitment, where protection from sexualised violence, revenge for the death of family members, peer pressure, material interests and assurance of survival played a role. The female ex-combatants also give “feminist reasons” for their participation in the fighting forces: they fought for example, to overcome the oppression of women in Liberian society. However, it has to be said that “voluntary” in the context of extreme brutality and insecurity is better defined as a “choiceless decision”.

The role of women during peace efforts

Liberian women have also played a significant role during the peace efforts: peace activists from different groups like the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) or Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) organised mediation, network meetings and protest marches, and were present at the different phases of peace negotiations although they were often not officially invited.

Consequences of the war “after” the war for Liberian women and girls

The consequences of the war “after” the war reflect the continuation of structural violence and the various facets of vulnerability and powerlessness for Liberian women and girls: The survivors of sexualised violence suffer from many physical consequences such as gynaecological problems and psychosomatic disorders. The psychic wounds are not only different psychological trauma disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, but also depression and sexual disorders. These problems often remain long after the recovery of physical wounds. Women and girls who have gone through sexualised violence change their self-image and their attitude towards themselves and their body: this change mostly consists of self-devaluation that is further reinforced by the social messages, as well as the stigmatisation through the community and families who see the women and girls as “dirty” or “damaged”.

Continuation of violence in post-conflict Liberia

The violence in the Liberian society has not stopped after the war. Many studies, articles, and documents from the Liberian government call the continuing sexualised and gender-based violence one of the big societal challenges. The reasons for this continuation of violence lie in the militarisation of gender relations, in the uprooting of families, and the alienation of genders due to the waves of displacement during which men and women were frequently separated from each other. Other structural reasons are the continued impunity and the blatant shortcomings in the justice system. Children who are raped are particularly

affected by the sexualised violence in post-conflict Liberia. However, the estimated number of unreported cases amongst raped women might be much higher than those of children. The experience of women and girls is often trivialised in a context of numbness caused by the omnipresence of violence and of misogynist ideas.

Domestic violence and the phenomenon of abandonment of women by their “husbands” is on the increase in Liberian communities as are accusations of witchcraft and traditional trial by ordeals. At the same time, those cultural protective mechanisms for women and relationships with obligations such as marriages have broken down due to the long years of war and displacement. The rampant poverty leads to a continuation of sexual exploitation of girls who are in relationships with mostly grown-up wealthy or powerful men. This has to do with traditional attitudes, but it also reflects the general resignation of adults and children in the midst of experiences of violence and poverty after the war.

The deficit of empowerment – especially up-country

The relationship between sexual exploitation and poverty can be particularly seen in the poor and marginalised South East of Liberia where teenage pregnancies are one of the biggest challenges for the communities and families. Especially poor are also households headed by females, which make up a third of all households in the South East. These women and their children are often prone to violent relationships with men. They depend on men because they have to do the heavy work in subsistence farming. The great poverty especially in the countryside is therefore a big problem and a major reason why many women are not empowered – despite policies sensitive to women, despite important laws and national documents (that hint at the problems of sexualised and gender-based violence) and despite the experience of many women during the war that they can make it “alone”: They are dependent on men and, especially in rural areas, are trapped in traditional gender roles.

This dependency is aggravated by the politically fragile structures and the blatant deficiencies in the justice system. The latter means for example that in the hinterland there is little infrastructure for courts or for the police: there are few prisons and those that exist are in a very poor condition. There are frequent cases of corruption and malpractice: The accused in cases of rape are for example often “bought free”, making a mockery of the law.

Part of this problem is the parallel justice system in Liberia that comprises both the modern statutory law and recognises the customary law especially in the hinterland where state structures have always been weaker.

Rape cases are often “tried” by traditional representatives of the community customary law because of a lack of alternatives. This happens out of misogynist ideas, opportunism and ignorance, and often leads to very problematic judgements in the form of fines, a forced marriage between victim and perpetrator, “fees” for the traditional rulers or forced labour for these rulers.

Opportunities for empowerment of women and girls given the vulnerability and powerlessness – recommendations for a psycho-political reconstruction

To summarise, opportunities for women and girls, and significant factors of vulnerability and powerlessness of women and girls face often conflict with each other. The study formulates the following recommendations for psycho-political reconstruction work that takes into consideration both the personal and structural changes of the situation of women and girls:



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Recommendations for the Government of Liberia, the UN and international organisations that are involved in the construction of the Justice and Police system as well as in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

- The construction of functioning justice structures and the consistent persecution of cases of malpractice and corruption are essential conditions which have to be fulfilled in order to put an end to impunity and to empower women and girls to create those conditions that are vital for their psychosocial stabilisation.
- The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission must give gender-based violence adequate space and offer women and girls who give their testimony comprehensive protection mechanisms

Recommendations for international and national NGOs:

- Projects in the area of rehabilitation with a special focus on women and girls need income-generating opportunities that must be linked with psychosocial empowerment in order to effectively change their situation.
- Awareness raising is central, it must take into consideration the urban-rural divide and concentrate on the traditional structures in the communities (Council of Elders, town chiefs); these activities have to be done in a power-sensitive and culture-sensitive way
- Any reconstruction and development planning must integrate thinking on gender images and roles in form of gender training; men must be incorporated in order to work through destructive images of masculinity and to find alternatives for the violence. What is needed is

trauma and gender sensitive work that takes into consideration the social dynamics of violence and becomes an integral part of all segments of reconstruction work, - in humanitarian work, in physical and infrastructural reconstruction and in development cooperation. This requires not only some trauma or women's "projects" but also a fundamental shift in direction in programming and in practical project work.

- Programmes and projects for the empowerment of women and girls must take into consideration the variety of femininity. They must therefore avoid causing women and girls to define themselves as victims in order to gain access to opportunities for support. International organisations must revise their own gender images in relation to their empowering effects for women and girls.