



Liberia Civil Society and Media Leadership Program

Report on Community Consultation Forums on Rape



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March 2015

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I. **ACRONYMS**

SGBV-Sexual/Gender-Based Violence

MGC&SP-Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection

IREX-International Research and Exchanges Board

LIWOMAC-Liberia Women Media Action Committee

USAID-United States Agency for International Development

GBV-Gender Based Violence

COP-Chief of Party

WACP-Women and Children Protection Unit of the Police

TBA-Traditional Birth Attendant

II. Acknowledgements

This document is the result of many consultations involving the Government of Liberia's Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MGC&SP), IREX and LIWOMAC on the increase in Sexual and Gender Based Violence, especially rape of young children in the country. The document would not have been possible without the individual and collective efforts of those institutions and funding from USAID through IREX, and Womankind Worldwide.

There were several Community Consultation Forums held in eight (8) selected communities in Montserrado, Margibi, Bong and Nimba Counties. Counties with high prevalence of rape were chosen for this exercise that brought together people involved in the fight against rape at the community level, as well as survivors and families of survivors and community leaders to dialogue. The forums sought to find practical solutions to rape in Liberia, while at the same gauging the perspective of ordinary citizens on the probable cause of rape and effectiveness of existing response mechanisms.

A team of IREX, LIWOMAC and the consultant facilitated all eight forums. Special thanks to the Chief of Party of IREX who was involved in the first forum held in Brewerville, Montserrado County and showed enormous interest. The President of LIWOMAC was also present and quite instrumental in arranging some of the tools that inspired discussions at the forums and helped to drive the issues and bring out the thoughts and perspectives of community people, survivors and families of victims.

We cannot complete this report without mentioning Izatta Nagbe Toukolon, whose hands-on skills in organizing the logistics and bringing out amazing suggestions for the success of the forums were phenomenal. The LIWOMAC team comprising two of the most promising female journalists, Ladymai Hunter-Summer and Varnetta Johnson-Freeman, moderated and recorded the forums respectively. Their skills brought ease to the engagement process without which the volume of information gathered from participants would have been shallow. Thanks to the community mobilizers. They made community level arrangements and mobilized participants before the team arrived at each location. Their selection of participants was also uniquely in sync with the expectation of the program implementing partners. Special thanks to all the

participants in the four counties (Montserrado, Nimba, Bong and Margibi) for their contribution to this document.

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1.0. Executive Summary

Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) threatens the possibility of ever achieving gender equity and equality in Liberia. Women and girls, many below the age of 18, are continually being raped and abused in many other ways throughout the country. Creating safe environments that assure the safety of children in their communities is a moral imperative with no alternative, especially when the country is striving to achieve gender equity. The risk of GBV and rape can only be reduced by integrating the concerns and views of community people in national policy dialogues to address those issues that contribute to the high rate of rape and GBV in Liberia. The trend over the last five years has particularly been disturbing with selective response from communities and civil society groups. It is only when rape results in the immediate death of a young victim that communities and civil society actors respond with sporadic anger. Such response is usually short lived, but the impact of the horror lingers with the families and communities for their life time.

While the terror of GBV and rape may be receiving Government's attention as demonstrated by the establishment of the appropriate legal framework to ensure that the criminal act of rape receives a just legal remedy, preventing rape in Liberia appears to be complex and challenging at best, given the increasing trend since 2010. Rape must be curtailed if Liberia is to really thrive and achieve any appreciable level of female competitive advancement in the country's vision for transformation. Such a feat cannot be possible if the critical input of the community and community actors are not prioritized and linked with sector action plans to fight against rape.

Therefore, to assist the Government in making significant gains in the fight against GBV and rape in Liberia, IREX and partner LIWOMAC in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender and the Children & Social Protection (MGC&SP) held Community Consultation Forums in eight communities in four counties over a period of one week. The four counties were selected in consultation with MGC&SP based on the prevalence of rape in those counties. The purpose of the forums and study is to document community level thinking about the issues of rape and identify gaps in services in preparation for a larger stakeholders' dialogue at the national level.

The national level dialogue is expected to strengthen existing prevention linkages across sectors, with a greater focus on community people's involvement.

It is only when community buy-in exists that a better outcome can be assured. There is no argument about the horror and crime of rape. The physical scars of gun wounds can heal, but the mental and emotional damage of rape lingers for a life time. It is like the fight against Ebola, where integration of community strategies and support to community-based organizations proved to be the game changer that brought relief to the Country. Despite the new case that showed up after several weeks, communities throughout Liberia have a greater sense of ownership in addressing Ebola when it appears. In the same way, building on the successful Ebola community response model, including IREX's Community Leaders' Forums, could be the game changer in reducing rape in various high risk communities. The predicted long term outcome is a Liberia where rape will be an exception and not the norm.

The Community Consultation Forums and National Stakeholder's Dialogue seek to bring community voices to the national table for integration and enhancement of protection and services to victims and families. During the Forums there were four key issues that drove the community discussions— prevention, impact, the law and c

1. Prevention: Most sexually abused children or those at risk of being abused were found to be in households with weak parental supervision or care. Every community pointed to children living with extended relatives or living in step parent households where supervision and provision of basic needs were weak, exposing the children to various risks of abuse. In addition, they are exploited as the bread winners for the households by selling in the streets until dark. Little girls within this population of at-risk children were more likely to be raped by men who find them to be easy targets. The issue of incest was traced mostly to men "seeking wealth through medicine men," coupled with men who some perceive as simply wicked. Poverty was also identified as a contributing factor. According to participants, children from poor families, especially those selling in the streets, are likely to be raped while selling until night falls. They also observed that poverty is partly responsible for the increased compromise by survivor/victim's family, since some perpetrators will use money to bargain for at-home -settlement. In such cases, some perpetrators will promise to pay the child's school fees, feed the family and take care of any medical cost for treatment. They also said some children may be raped due to hunger and lack of food. In this instance, some participants noted that

perpetrators may actually pretend to have food in their homes and lure their victims who may already be hungry.

2. Gaps in Services: Services provided by the Ministry of Gender and Children and Social Protection through its Observatory Group were limited in many communities. GBV task forces in the counties were not updating the standard operating procedures, which would ensure that service provider lists are revised and made visible to community people through continual awareness at the community. Even in cases where community people were aware of a service provider, coordination of services became a challenge.
3. Impact: The impact of rape on the survivor and family was discussed with participants sharing appropriate knowledge on the issue. Among other impact identified by participants were the impact of teenage pregnancy, maternal death, trauma and stigma. A full range of participants' views about the impact of rape is captured in section 3.2. later on in this document.
4. Law and Justice System: The law was classified as a very weak instrument. Many felt that the legal system is weak and that most compromises happen at the police station when alleged perpetrators are initially interrogated to be charged. In most cases alleged perpetrators never get charged, and those that do are often not prosecuted on time. As a result, some rape suspects are released from prison through advocacy by human rights groups on grounds that their rights to speedy trials have been violated.

Community recommendations were the final segment of each forum, and those recommendations and observations are the highlight of the national dialogue arranged for state actors and policy makers.

1.1. Background/Introduction

Recent data and reports are revealing disturbingly high incidence of rape throughout Liberia, especially rape of children below the age of 18 years. In 2012, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection reported a total of 2,493 Sexual and Gender-based Violence crimes across Liberia, up from 2,029 cases in 2010.¹ A majority of these (58 percent) were rape cases, of which 92 percent or 1,348 involved rape of children between the ages of three months to 17 years.² In the first two months of 2015, media reports have already catalogued some violent

¹ <http://unmil.unmissions.org/Portals/unmil/Facts%20About%20Rape%20in%20Liberia.pdf>

² Ibid

cases of alleged rape with at least two reported deaths (a 12 year old girl in Brewerville and a 7 year old girl in Thinkers' Village). Despite reported implementation of various prevention strategies by sector ministries and non-governmental organizations (national & international), incidents of rape, especially rape of young children with some resulting in death, remain on the increase.

This prevalence of Sexual and Gender-based Violence, especially rape, presents a clear threat to gender equality, women's empowerment, and to Liberia's peace, security, and development, as females play a significant role in the development and advancement of any society. The Government of Liberia and her partners have worked to establish prevention and response systems for rape and other gender-based violence cases, yet the trend remains unabated.

This document therefore captures a review of ongoing prevention mechanisms, strengths of the legal framework, and support systems from the viewpoint of eight key communities in four counties where the prevalence of rape cases is high. The information from the counties will inform the National Stakeholders' Dialogue among community members, survivors, victims and families and policy decision makers. Like the Community Consultation Forums, the national dialogue is being organized by IREX and LIWOMAC, with funding USAID through IREX, and Womankind Worldwide, in collaboration with the MGC&SP.

1.2. Definition

To understand the use of the terms GBV and Rape, their definitions must be established in the context of the documented legal understanding of both terms in Liberia.

a) Gender Based Violence

The Government and UN Joint Program on Prevention Strategies review document of 2013 defines the term "Gender-Based Violence" 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. It includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse; threats; coercion; arbitrary deprivation of liberty; and economic deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life".³

As it is, gender-based violence takes on many forms and can occur throughout the life cycle. There are various types and classifications of gender based violence. They include, but are not

³ Exploring GBV Prevention in Liberia-Government UN Joint GBV Program

limited to female infanticide; child sexual abuse; sex trafficking and forced labor; sexual coercion and abuse; neglect; domestic violence; elder abuse; and harmful traditional practices such as early and forced marriage, “honor” killings, and female genital mutilation/cutting.⁴

Women and girls are recorded as the most at risk and most affected by gender-based violence;⁵ notwithstanding, boys and men can also experience gender-based violence. Regardless of the target, gender-based violence is rooted in structural inequalities between men and women and is characterized by the use and abuse of physical, emotional, or financial power and control.⁶

b) Defining Rape

Rape as a category of GBV is defined in the Liberian Penal Code as “A person who has sexual intercourse with another person (male or female) if:

- He intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus, mouth or any other opening of another person (male or female) with his penis, without the victim’s consent; or
- He/She intentionally penetrates the vagina or anus of another person with a foreign object or with any other part of the body (other than the penis), without the victim’s consent.”⁷

The Law further classifies rape as being committed if the victim is less than eighteen years old, provided the actor is eighteen years of age or older. The accused is referred to as the perpetrator. A perpetrator is a person who has sexual intercourse intentionally with another person (male or female) without consent.

2.0. Current Data on GBV/Rape

In spite of Government’s anti-rape law, rape is continuing in many rural and urban communities throughout the country at an increased rate. The Ministry’s 2014 annual report has documented a reporting trend over a four year period with indicators pointing to a fluctuating increase in successive years.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ <http://unmil.unmissions.org/Portals/unmil/Facts%20About%20Rape%20in%20Liberia.pdf>

⁶ <http://unmil.unmissions.org/Portals/unmil/Facts%20About%20Rape%20in%20Liberia.pdf>

⁷ www.liberilii.org –Liberia Legal Information Institute

2.1. Report trend: 2011-2014/GBV Unit /MGC&SP

In its 2014 annual report, the Ministry of Gender reported that there were 2,383 cases of GBV in 2011, while in 2012 a total of 2,493 cases were reported and documented. The report indicated a slight change in the trend in 2013 and 2014, attributing the change to issues of suspected high compromises by family and community members and the Ebola crisis. However, the Report did not state how the outbreak of Ebola impacted the record of rape cases in 2014

As a result of the reasons provided in the report, there were 2,159 reported cases in 2013. The difference between 2012 and 2013 is 334 cases lower in 2013 than 2012. The figure dropped even lower in 2014 with 1,392 cases, according to the report. Four rape related deaths of children occurred in 2014, while there were 10 deaths of children in 2013 as a result of rape.

There were five recorded deaths in 2012. Most cases are reported by Ministry of Health facilities, INGOs and NGOs. Of these reported cases of GBV, the majority are rape cases. In 2014, out of the total of 1,392 GBV cases, 720 were rape, including gang rape and sodomy. 331 or 24% of the rape cases occurred at night, while 10.9% occurred during afternoon hours and 107 or 7.6% occurred in the evenings.⁹

3.0. Access to Justice for rape survivors/victims and families

In 2009, the Government established a specialized court styled and named the Criminal Court E, directly responsible for trying rape cases. However, there are numerous complaints of challenges in accessing justice when rape occurs. There are reports of reasons ranging from lack of money to meet legal expenses to cultural and traditional barriers that encourage compromise at the community level. In February this year, the Court released its report of cases that have come on its docket since 2009. According to the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism's ONLINE Portal, the Criminal Court 'E' has convicted 20 people and acquitted 16 others, while one case ended in a hung verdict since its establishment in 2009. The court released the data in early February, 2015. Meanwhile, the Joint Review has documented that 40 cases were docketed by the Court by mid-2013, of which only 2 were tried. These two varying accounts covering the same reporting period raise the critical need to challenge the data collection. Most troubling is the fact that trials are slow and prolonged even in a court set aside for trying only rape cases.

The Court is only established in Monrovia, Montserrado County. In the other counties, the circuit courts have jurisdiction. The courts in the counties are even more challenged due to the volume of cases they have to deal with, given that they are trying other criminal and civil cases in addition to GBV cases.

There is also the issue of the police. In Ganta, Nimba County, the Commander of the Police Crime Services Department (CSD), Bill Zuah stated that rape is an issue in Nimba, especially in Ganta. He recounted that in some instances there can be no evidence to prove the allegation of rape. Where there is sufficient evidence the cases are processed and sent to court. Although, he could not give figures of cases they have processed and sent to court, he stated that most of the cases in Ganta have been statutory rape involving men perpetrators age 40 years and above and victims who were mostly girls between the ages of 13 and 14 years. CSD Zuah also disclosed that most family members of victims are the first to plead with the police to withdraw cases and drop charges. Cases are always recorded before referring the victim to the hospital. He identified access to the recognized medical center as one of many challenges. Commander Zuah stated that sometimes hospitals in Nimba would refuse to treat a patient until the families produce the report from the police. If there were proper coordination, such delays wouldn't occur.

Challenges in gathering evidence within the statutory period before charging the alleged perpetrator is a major cause of suspects being released from prison early. The Police suggested that unlike other cases, if the rape law can exclude the 48 hour constitutional clause for holding a person without charge, police would then have ample time to properly gather the facts and evidence surrounding rape cases before charging alleged perpetrators and avoid losing cases based on lack of evidence.

A judge in the Ganta Magisterial Court, Judge Owens Freeman, stated that though some cases are concealed by community people, the County Attorney can also be blamed for the slow pace of prosecution of rape cases. The Judge stated that unless the County Attorney can realize that rape is dangerous and cases must be prosecuted, nothing can happen. The County Attorney is responsible for prosecuting rape cases. If he does not forward rape cases for prosecution and push for their assignment by the judge, the judge cannot assign those cases. Thus if any county attorney is weak in forwarding cases to court, that can also contribute to rape cases being down played.

4.0. Community perspectives on the issues of rape

Each forum had at least 25 participants from diverse segments of the population within each community. The selection was done by the community mobilizers in consultation with the Gender Coordinator of each of the counties based on categories of participants submitted by the team. The following is the list of the various sectors of the community from which the participants were selected:

- Education (Students & teachers)
- Health (nurses, TBA, midwives)
- Community leaders & members (youth, women, elders, ordinary community men and women)
- Religious leaders (pastors & imams)
- Traditional Council (members)

Four thematic areas surrounding the crime of rape were highlighted and discussions among community actors progressed around those key issues. As the discussion evolved, other issues came out. The four key topical issues were:

1. Causes and how it can be prevented. Also whether the communities know how to identify early warning signs.
2. Gaps in Services.
3. The impact of rape on the survivor and/or victim, victim's family and community.
4. Law and Justice System: Legal framework and strength of response. Is the law really working to stop rape in their communities? A look at issue of coordination among service providers

Each community offered a number of recommendations at the end of the discussion.

The moderator's questions were based on the trend of the discussion of the four key issues. Like focus group discussions, participants sat in a circle and they showed a high degree of interest throughout the entire time of the forum. At some point the discussions exceeded the allotted time for each topical issue.

4.1. Community awareness of signs and signals of rape

As a starter, participants were generally asked what they thought about rape and whether it was real. The responses cut across all participating sectors in every community studied. Everyone

stated that rape is evil and it is the forceful act of intercourse with an unwilling participant (male or female). “Rape is a very bad thing and it should not happen to anyone, especially children.”

a) Early Warning signs of Rape

Among the key issues was the question of whether community people could identify early warning signs of the risk of rape before it occurs. The question stimulated the discussion. The following are some of the most frequent and predominant views expressed by participants across the eight communities.

- The dress code of most young women is the main sign that that person could be raped.
- Children who lack adequate parental supervision and are frequently roaming about in the community, especially at night.
- Men who frequently give gifts of candies and cash to little girls in the community, whether or not they are related to the girls.
- Poverty in families with no income capacity.
- Single mothers who are very poor and have many young children.
- The sale of alcohol to underage children by shop keepers.
- Children living with extended relatives or non-relatives who show little or no concern for the children.
- Little girls living in homes with step-fathers.
- Allowing under age children to attend night and video clubs.
- Old men flirting with little girl children and calling them their wives, under the guise of “mere joke.”
- Mothers who are alcoholic and have young children in their care.
- Men who are addicted to drugs and alcohol.
- Single males living in communities and are fond of flirting.
- Letting children go around naked in the community.
- Children calling strangers and non-relative males uncles.
- Going to “medicine man” to seek wealth among other wishes.

The issue of dress code was noted at the beginning of every engagement by participants as the primary cause of the increase in rape incidents in Liberia. It was almost always an immediate indictment of females for being responsible for the pervasiveness of rape in the country.

However, such view sparked the question of whether the babies who are victims were also

wearing sexy diapers/pampers? In each community and among each group of participants, there were always one or two people in the group who strongly disagreed with the issue of dress code being the problem. In each instance, the rape of babies and Muslim women, who are covered from their head to toe with black robes, served as strong counter arguments to the issue of sexy dress code. At each forum, this question set the pace for changing the focus to the evil committed by perpetrators. Each group (men and women) expressed outrage and agreed that men were raping not because of dress code.

“Rape is wicked, but raping babies and little children is not only wicked, it is murder and the perpetrators must be killed! It is not rape! It is murder!! Those men are murderers!”

-A Muslim Male in Ganta, Nimba County

Participants in Nimba, Bong, Margibi and parts of Montserrado stated that some awareness had gone on in their communities, but they felt that more awareness was still needed. In Bong County, there were calls for more awareness to target traditional women in the villages, because as a participant put it, the traditional women are the main people involved in compromising cases for the cultural belief of “bringing shame to women and families of victims when such acts are publicized.”

Participants also observed that it is not good for children to go without clothes as is the case in some communities. This was flagged as a risk factor.

The box below is a story of a woman who was raped while bathing in a creek along the road side in Bong County.

“A woman (name withheld) was bathing in the public on a major highway and she was raped by a man who was passing by. The case was reported to authorities in the town. She was blamed for tempting the man since she exposed herself in that light. Nothing legally came out of the case.”

-Community Member, Nimba County

b) The Referral Pathway

The communities were mostly unaware of the referral pathway. A few GBV workers knew what to do when rape occurs, but most of the other participants were not aware of what to do. The referral pathway for rape is simply a guide showing the steps to take when rape happens in the community. The text box below contains the Ministry of Gender's official referral pathway.

1. HOSPITAL- Survivors should be referred to one of the hospitals identified by MGC&SP for treating rape cases or any hospital that is nearby and has trained staff to address the victim's medical needs.
2. POLICE-the case should then be reported to the police. The police will effect an arrest based on investigation
3. COUNSELOR-victim will be referred to service providers for counseling
4. COURT-the case then goes to court.

When asked the steps in providing services to a rape survivor or victim, the police stated that the survivor/victim's family has to first fill out a form with the police before going to the hospital. The police insisted that even if the survivor/victim's condition is grave they must still fill out the form or else the victim will not receive medical treatment until the form from the police is presented. The police, among other challenges, identified the lack of coordination between the police, health and other providers as a serious gap. The essence of the referral pathway is to know which organization or person to contact when rape happens. The referral pathway has a list of service providers as members. That list needs to be updated every year. Most communities were not aware of the existence of a directory of services and the referral pathway.

c) Access to existing services

Access to services was found to be a challenge in most communities. In some communities the hospitals with trained staff to deal with rape cases were far away from communities and transportation was a challenge. Also, travel time presented another risk of death if the survivor/victim is bleeding, as in the recent case of the Brewerville victim who died in the back of a taxi as her parents tried to get her to the JFK Hospital, more than an hour drive from their community in Brewerville. In Nimba, for instance, there are only three health centers that cater to rape cases—the Saclepea Comprehensive Health Center, Sanniquellie G. W. Harley Hospital and the Bahn Clinic. As in many counties, those centers are far from many communities, especially remote villages, and it presents a gap. Support from partners was also identified as a

gap. There is no support to ensure that cases are quickly addressed. Support to GBV by partners has reduced.

4.2. The Impact of Rape: Community knowledge

The impact of rape is often overlooked. Very often more attention is given to the act of rape and the blaming of the survivor/victim and family rather than the impact. The forum sought to probe deeper and allow participants to share what they thought were the impact of rape on the victim, the family and community. The following are the communities' responses and knowledge of the impact of rape as a crime:

- Rape can damage the survivor/victim emotionally and physically.
- It makes the victims to feel ashamed
- Victims avoid being among their friends (Isolate themselves)
- The victim, if a young female child, might not bear children later on in her life
- Rape creates trauma for the survivor/victim.
- Raping feels like it is a complete killing.
- Even if you don't die from the rape, it can still kill you because you can't be yourself again.
- Rapists are incarcerated sometimes for ten or fifteen years. When they are released from prison, they continue with normal life. Meanwhile, the victims are damaged for life.
- The survivor/victim and family suffer stigma
- Some parents stop their children from playing with a child that has been raped (Alienation of survivor/victim by neighbors and community members)
- Survivors/victims suffer fistula and other medical complications (womb may be damaged permanently)
- Survivors/victims may go on and become prostitutes. Survivors/victims are sometimes forced into early marriage to their rapist if the act results in pregnancy. The survivor/victim may contract HIV & AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases.
- The community is feared and sometimes isolated by people from other communities.
- When rape results in pregnancy the survivor/victim, if very young, may die in child birth because the body is not yet fully developed to bear children.

a) Sectors' Response

Sectors' response was identified as a gap. Community people are unaware of sector linkages in providing services. The "one stop centers" were not known by community members. The centers are often very far from communities where rape happens. At the one stop centers, actors of GBV from police, health and legal services are represented and it is intended to ease the burden of victims and families trying to access services for survivors/victims. There is no awareness on the support system. The support groups are there but there is a disconnect between those groups and the larger communities. MGC&SP GBV Task Force Lead in Nimba County, Yah Suah, complained about the lack of support to GBV issues since most INGOs and NGOs started to wane down their GBV services, like NRC and others.

b) Community People's view of the Rape Law

The moderator asked participants in each community what they thought about the Rape Law. Below is the transcript of some of the views expressed by people from the eight communities.

"I know there is a rape law, but it is not working for us in this community. Government has to make the law more strong. We, the men are very wicked. I think the law is weak."- Male participant

"The people who rape children are most of the time released from jail after a year or even less than a year. The law should not allow people to compromise cases in the community or even at the police station. I want to tell Ma Ellen to kill the men who are raping our children." – Female participant

"Sometimes, the police people themselves can tell the victim and family to go home and talk the matter "the family way." The law is not supposed to allow police people to encourage people to engage in settling rape cases out of the court. I feel that is wrong." – Female participant

"For me, I think the law is working. If people stop compromising cases, the people who do these bad things to children will be afraid. We in the community should not allow people to cover up rape. But sometimes, when you want to expose the rape of a small girl, the parents themselves can tell you it is not your business and their child has not been raped. So the problem is not the law, it is the people. We should not encourage people in our community to compromise rape cases." – Male participant

"The system is not working because the government is not taking the stance it should take against rape. Some big officials of government have their hand inside the rape business. Just because they have car and they have plenty money, they can get our small children, some of them not even twelve years old yet, and they can make them

their wives. How will the law work? The law is only for poor people who don't have big government positions. If government can catch some of those big men and jail them for life, they will stop raping our children for money." – Female participant

"The rapists are jailed for some time and released. I don't trust the law because rape is killing us women and our little girls. Even if you don't die from the rape, it can still kill you because you can't be yourself again." - Female participant

"The law should kill those who rape small children. For me raping small children is equal to murder. They should call it murder not rape. That kind of rape is murder and the people who do that kind of thing should be killed." – Male participant

"All those who rape should be stoned to death. That is the only way men will stop the rape business in this country." – Female participant

"Rapists sometimes say when I rape I will go to jail. All rapists should be killed because raping is a complete killing." – Female participant

"Legal system cannot be trusted. To fight rape, we need to go down to the poor man. Justice now requires money. People who take statements don't write the right information. They tell you come next week. Transportation is a problem. The person is already poor and looking for food money to feed their family. When the police or court keep postponing the case, the poor woman can just get frustrated because she doesn't have money to keep coming back and nothing happens. So poverty is sometimes the cause for people not to get justice in this country. Also you need money to bribe the police. The police will tell you they need money for motorbike to go and collect evidence; if you are poor, where will you get that money from to give to the police?" – Male participant

"The rape law is not being enforced. Government should call the men and ask them what can we do for you men to stop raping our children? Then they can be held by that law." – Female participant

"When police people get involved in asking families to compromise with the perpetrators, those police people should be dismissed and sent to prison. When such a thing happens once or twice, people will take the law seriously and avoid compromise."

Overwhelming Community Perception of the Rape Law:

THE LAW IS WEAK AND IT IS NOT WORKING, ESPECIALLY FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE POOR AND DON'T HAVE MONEY

A classic case of weakness of the legal system:

The story below was told by a young participant of about 16 years in Kakata, Margibi County. The girl was extremely quiet throughout the discussion until almost at the end of the discussion, a team member pointed at her and asked if she had any comment about the entire discussion. The following is the chilling account of the bravery and innovation of a group of teenage girls ready to fight to rescue their friend from repeated rape.

“I had a friend in my school who came from a village to live with a woman she called her aunty. The woman was a business woman and her husband had money too. At a certain time our friend was just acting sad and withdrawn. So one day we asked her what was her problem. Then she told us that her aunty’s husband was always doing bad things to her whenever her aunty went out of town for business. One of our friends’ father was a police officer. Our friend decided to tell her father about the girl’s situation. Our friend’s father said unless there is proof, nothing they can do. Our friend whose father was a police officer suggested that in order to grab this man, she was going to hide herself under the bed in the girl’s room and put her phone on record and lay it on the bed.

Her father was informed about our plans and he also got ready. The father also informed some police officers and they surrounded the house that night. The arrangement was made for the girl under the bed to signal her father on her phone when the act was just about to take place. Our friend did and the dad and the other officers busted the door and caught the man in the act. The man was arrested and detained. Our friend was first scared that if she told anyone about her ordeal, her aunty would send her back to the village and she would lose her chance of ever getting any formal education. After a few days, the man and his wife spent some money and the man was released from prison. After everything, our friend’s aunty sent her back to the village and nothing came out of that case. If our other friend who planned the whole thing and sneaked under the girl’s bed had been killed, that would have been in vain. So for me, the government is really not willing to stop rape. “

**“The Police, family or community member or any authority who tries to encourage compromise of rape cases should be dismissed and prosecuted. If this happens once or twice everyone will avoid compromising cases.” –
Community Member, Kakata**

5.0. Communities' Recommendations for prevention and coordination of services:

Towards the close of each forum, participants were asked what could their communities do to stop rape from happening and what would be their recommendations to government for making the law work in minimizing or stopping the increase of rape in Liberia? To this question came several suggestions from community members. The suggestions that dominated each of the community discussions are listed below.

- Awareness must go on at the community level.
- Awareness should also target ministers of government and law makers who are fond of having young girls between the ages of 12-15 as their girlfriends.
- Women should collectively come out to rally around families of rape victims and provide them with needed support. Sometimes the families may need food. They may also need money for transportation to the police station or to the court. The community should be able to help. Also, some community members should accompany them to those places so that they will know that they are not alone. This sort of support system will also focus on making sure that cases are not compromised as cases are sometimes compromised based on financial constraints and traditional pressure from members of the community.
- Government or NGOs should empower communities to establish a Community Rape Task Force like in the Ebola crisis. Such a task force will ensure that no case gets compromised if rape occurs, whether or not the alleged perpetrator is a big shot.
- Communities are not really aware of the impact of rape. If everyone knew about some of the impact that the groups have shared, families will not easily compromise cases as they are doing. Therefore, there should be more awareness in the communities, especially focusing on the immediate and long term impact of rape on the survivor/victim, survivor/victim's family and the community.
- Dramatize what can happen to young children when they are raped, that will make the awareness message stronger. The awareness should also focus on the traditional women in the villages, because they are often the first to cover up rape in order to avoid stigma and shame.
- The government should bring back capital punishment. Imprisonment of rapist is not scaring perpetrators. Rapist should be killed when death occurs as a result of the act of rape.

- Community people must remain informed by the Government on the occurrence of rape like the Ebola press briefings carried out by the government during the Ebola crisis.
- The law should hold any parent or community member that will try to compromise cases.
- If a judge, police, county attorney, health worker or social worker tries to compromise a case, that government worker should be dismissed and prosecuted. For family members and community leaders who try to settle cases in house, they should be treated as criminals, immediately charged and prosecuted as well.
- The referral pathway was found to be known by a few people in each community. The majority of community people are not aware of the appropriate steps to take when rape occurs. Therefore, there should be continuous awareness creation at the community level to educate community members about the referral pathway and list any responsibilities of service providers within reach of the community.
- GBV task forces in the counties were not updating the SOP, which would ensure that service providers lists were revised and made visible to community people through continual awareness at the community level (This was a recommendation from a team member who had extensive working knowledge of the operation of the GBV Taskforce and referral pathway.)
- Bring some of the rapists in some of these forums and ask them why they are raping the children. Invite the men. Let the men be more involved, especially those who have raped someone before and are out in the community.
- Communities are not really aware of the impact of rape. Communities and families are compromising rape cases because they are unaware of the grave impact of rape. Such awareness must be led by community members in each community.
- More female lawyers should be assigned as county attorneys because from experience they prosecute rape cases faster than the male county attorneys. Men who rape little children 14 years and below should be charged with murder.

Immediate Community Action plan against rape

- Students and teachers will carry out awareness about the impact of rape as they have heard in the forum on their school campuses.
- Pastors and Imams will conduct awareness in their worship houses at the beginning and end of every worship service.

- Every participant at the forums will continue the awareness in their households and communities, emphasizing the horrible impact of rape on the victims and families as well as the communities.
- Set up a community task force for rape at community level comprising participants at the forum and it should have more men who are already known as advocates against rape.
- Community leaders should discuss rape and the impact of rape at their community meetings. They should speak against compromising cases.

6.0. The National Dialogue

Under the theme, **“Rape as a threat to the survival of Women and the Advancement of a Nation: Bridging the gaps towards Justice and Accountability,”** the Dialogue brought together policy makers, service providers and community actors. The National level forum was intended for policy makers to listen to and know the issues as per the collective voices of community people from within the 8 selected communities. The Consultant brought forth a summary of those community voices through a 15 minute presentation, which was followed by two panel discussions among community actors and policy makers on those critical issues raised during the weeklong tour of the selected communities for proper understanding and appreciation. This paved the way for the National dialogue to look at ways to bridge the gap and create a strong network of integrated community and National action plan aimed at curtailing the wide spread of rape in Liberia. At the policy decision making level were the Ministry of Justice (Police & Legal Counsel), Ministry of Gender, Health (Doctor Jallah) and Senator Jewel Howard Taylor, Chairperson of the Women’s Legislative Caucus, serving as the Guest Speaker for the program.

About 10 community people represented the eight communities in which the forums were earlier held. Those community actors and representatives of policy makers within sectors involved in tackling rape and other forms of GBV engaged throughout the day on the causes, impacts, gaps in service and the way forward to reduce incidents of rape in Liberia. There were two panels followed by a plenary discussion on the way forward before the close of the day. Those panels included a) Seeking Community solutions for

Sustained Prevention and Response, and b) Bridging the gap towards justice and accountability. The details of those discussions are summarized as labeled in the text boxes marked “box A” and “Box B” below.

Conclusion:

Collectively, the communities are aware that rape is bad and should not be allowed to flourish as it has in the last four years. The prevention strategies articulated in this document represent a rich diversity of approaches that should be articulated at the policy level to strengthen the voices from the communities. Prevention is everyone’s business and a collective tuning in to all sides of the coin will enhance the mitigation process and reduce the rate of rape in Liberia. Government and high level policy actors must also realize that community people are the eyes and ears of the system. Their experiences and recommendations can be a useful tool in making sure the country’s justice system functions appropriately to curb the disturbing rate of rape and other gender based violence in the country. Sporadic public reaction after an incident of rape, especially the ones that result in death, is not bad. However, the strategic use of continual community dialogues among community people led by the community people is the best way to fight against rape.

As discussed at all of the community forums, engaging with the community means support for the formation of community task forces and other groups. The effectiveness of the community Ebola task force presents a powerful lesson for other national threats. Such linkage will sustain the urgency of rape prevention and the danger of its impact on the Liberian society. It is important to target community leaders who wield enormous influence over community decision making processes to play greater roles. The participants were also able to share their frustration and mistrust of the legal system in rape cases. Such frustration and anger generated the need for community action plans which were stated earlier. There was the other side to the anger. Because of the lack of trust in the legal system, many were opting for mob action against perpetrators. To restore trust in the system, the justice system must become resolute to ensure that cases are properly and legally handled.