**ÉNSURING A COMMUNITY BASED APPROACH TO SEXUAL AND**

**GENDER BASED VIOLENCE TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN MARGINILIZED COMMUITIES IN LIBERIA**



**With Women Leaders in Soul Clinic, District 4, Montserrado County**

**A SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVE PROJECT UNDERTAKEN BY**

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**LOCATION: Sonewein and Soul Clinic Communities, LIBERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the principal founders of the discipline of peace and conflict studies, Johan Galtung introduced to the world the terms ‘positive peace’ and ‘negative peace[[1]](#footnote-1)’, which have become a fundamental part of peace building across the world. Liberia underwent a deadly crisis, which lasted from 1989 and came to an end in August 2023, with the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Accra, Ghana.

Despite the silencing of guns, the issue of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) has pervaded every ethnicity, religion, and age. This unfortunate trend has continued unabated despite a number of laws to deter the perpetrators. The continuous violations of the rights of women seriously affect the foundation of positive peace in Liberia. Accordingly, based on my own personal experience as a survivor of Sexual based violence, I decided to undertake this initiative in marginalized communities in Montserrado county The project was undertaken in two marginalized communities in Montserrado County. The overall objective of the project was to empower women and key community actors in building resilient communities while improving mechanisms for inclusive dialogue platforms responsive to sexual and genderbased violence. The project encompassed a number of activities, including Community Dialogue, meeting with law enforcement officers, meetings with survivors and Men Prevention Forum.

A key outcome is that a community driven approach to tackle SGBV, led by communities’ stakeholders, including survivors and men, can help engender a culture of respect for women in marginalized communities and mitigate the problem.

**Section One**

# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Sexual and gender-based violence has devastating, long-term effects on the lives of victims, their families and communities, and also impedes development. During the civil conflict in Liberia, Liberian women became target of sexual violence and abuse.[[2]](#footnote-2) They were subject to countless number of abuses and exploitations, including rape, sexual slavery, force marriage and others, which were perpetrators by all sides in the Liberian conflict.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Since the end of the conflict in Liberia, Sexual and gender-based violence, especially rape and intimate partner violence, has become a huge problem in Liberia. The Liberian government and the international community have focused efforts on addressing sexual violence in the country since the end of the civil war in 2003. Credit to her Government, Africa’s first female President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf established a legal framework and policy that encompasses the Rape Law (2006) and the National Gender Policy (2017). In response to urgent demands for improved judicial remedies, a special court designated to deal exclusively with sexual offenses, Criminal Court “E”, was established in December 2008[[4]](#footnote-4). However, high caseloads, reduced functioning of the jury system and lack of support services for survivors limit the Court’s effectiveness.

However, drafting a law is one thing and its implementation is another. In spite of the existence of the necessary legal platforms responsive to the threat and incidence of SGBV, the number of cases of SGBV is increasing at an alarming rate and with impunity. Cases of violence against women and children have become normalized and remain under-reported because of lack of trust and faith in the system.

Meanwhile, many cases continue to go unreported. Women who are raped often do not seek services due to the stigma and shame attached to the issue, and out of fear that they will not receive a sympathetic response. Sexual violence remains underreported due to insecurity and

the stigmatization of survivors, making it more difficult to ensure care and services effectively reach those who experience such violence.

In local marginalized communities, the issue of SGBV has skyrocketed in recent time and women living in these communities are more vulnerable, particularly vulnerable to Sexual and Gender based violence due to existing conditions in these communities[[5]](#footnote-5).

The recent up break of COVID 19 in Liberia further compounded the issue of SGBV and accessing justice for victims. With school closures and the stay-at-home order, violence in homes increased, while services and justice for survivors were hard to access. The lockdown negatively affected the already weak system to address SGBV and provide justice for survivors. There was a substantial breakdown in the referral pathway, with hospitals overburdened and law enforcement focused on enforcing the stay-at-home order. Restrictions on movement also hampered reporting of SGBV cases and contributed to an increase in teenage pregnancy for girls who will be unable to access contraceptives and sexual and reproductive health services during the lockdown.

UNSCR 1325 recognizes the important role women played in the prevention of conflict peacebuilding, humanitarian response and post conflict reconstruction[[6]](#footnote-6). The participation of women is critical to the success of any humanitarian process, SGBV being no exception. Women bring different perspectives and priorities to men and their role in establishing the social fabric during crises is vital.

# PROBLEM STATEMENT

Since the end of the conflict in Liberia, violence against women has permeated every sphere of Liberian society. This unfortunate trend has continued unabated in spite of a number of laws to deter the perpetrators. It is even sad that some of the victims are children below 10 years old. The extent of their injuries leaves scars that will affect them for the rest of their lives. Sadly, enough, even though at the community level, cases have been reported to police station, most often some of these cases are compromises. According to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP), 2,105 cases of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) were reported in 2018[[7]](#footnote-7). In 2021, a total of 1761 cases were reported in 2021.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Most often victims are stigmatized and blamed for the violence preventing them from effectively pursuing legal remedies. This is due largely to a lack of awareness victims about their rights, as well as a lack of knowledge within communities and on the part of service providers.

Sexual and gender-based violence has devastating, long-term effects on the lives of victims, their families and communities, and also impedes development. Cases of violence against women and children have become normalized and lack of trust and faith in the system; Meanwhile, many cases continue to go unreported. Sexual violence remains underreported due to insecurity and the stigmatization of survivors, making it more difficult to ensure care and services effectively reach those who experience such violence.

# GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of the project is to make a contribution towards improving access to justice for victims of SGBV and to further empower women and key community actors in building resilient communities while improving mechanisms for inclusive dialogue platforms responsive to sexual and gender-based violence and peacebuilding.

The specific objectives of the initiative Include

1. To mobilize local communities to serve as key partners in addressing SGBV at the local level;

1. To Mobilize men to advocate against and tackle the prevalence of sexual and genderbased violence.

# PROJECT DESIGN

The project affirms the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa The proposal is in line with the following goals of the SDGs: Goals 3,5 and 16. It is also linked to the EU Gender Equality Strategy and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. UNSC Resolution 1325 highlights the protection of the human rights of women and girls.

The project design sought to build on community partnerships, learning, and best practices to test and advance effective approaches both to prevent GBV—including interventions to address the social norms and behaviors that underpin violence—and to scale up and improve response when violence occurs.

Improving the capacities of and forging linkages between institutional stakeholders, civil society actors and local communities will enable the rule of law system to become more equitable and accountable to the rights of women and children. To ensure its success, an inclusive and multi stakeholder process was implored to build consensus and local ownership. The project therefore sought to bring together key actors, including law enforcement officers, religious and traditional leaders, survivors, women groups, youth groups, men groups, civil society and community leaders, through innovative holistic and multi sectoral approaches, to address the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence.

The project approach is designed to inspire communities to brand themselves as ‘zero tolerance’ zones in regard to SGBV. The branding process involves a demonstration of motivation and commitment by the communities concerned.

# Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

One of the major challenges faced during the implementation of the project was the initial refusal of community leaders and stakeholders to open up and discuss the issue of rape with someone from outside their communities. The issue of SGBV is considered a “community taboo” and even so-called survivors often do not seek services due to the stigma and shame attached to the issue. The community entry process helped to mitigate this challenge as it provided the platform to gain the trust of community stakeholders, including the Women and Children Section of the Liberia National Police. Being a victim of SGBV myself, I also utilized my story and own experience to gain the cooperation of survivors.

The issue of funding also posed a serious challenge to the implementation of my project. Realizing the huge potential of the project, I sought the support of my organization and received funding under its Women Empowerment program.

# Chapter Two

**Literature Review**

The problem of Sexual and gender-based violence is considered by many women rights advocate to be one of the most serious issues affecting women around the world. Many literatures have been written to highlight this heinous problem, which is faced by many women across the world. Sexual and gender-based violence is a leading cause of physical and emotional problems around the world and provision of service is difficult to obtain and normally have low funding[[9]](#footnote-9). Wirtz et al. (2018) posit that gender-based violence has immediate and long-term consequences, including missed work, poor physical and mental health, out-of-pocket expenses for obtaining therapies, and replacement price.

Specifically, there are few scholarly articles written about SGBV in Liberia. In her paper tilted “Prospects for Accessing Justice for Sexual Violence in Libri’as Hybrid System, Freida MCormack argued that while the formal system has made great progress in reforming laws and relevant institutions, it is widely under resources, while informal and traditional systems are widely

considered affordable Mormackk[[10]](#footnote-10). In his thesis for his doctoral degree at Walden University, tilted [“Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Liberia,](https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=15855&context=dissertations) ”one of Liberia’s Contemporary Social Scientists, Nat B. Walker, outlined how women in Liberia were exposed to countless number of abuse and exploitation during the conflict in Liberia and went one to explain the difference between sexual violence and gender-based violence[[11]](#footnote-11) He further posits that strong Government involvement is needed and from a social standpoint, there is a dire need to ensure micro to macro level transformation.[[12]](#footnote-12) The author strongly agreed with this assertion that a community based approach to SGBV can go a long way in mitigating the problem and hence the reason for this Social Change Initiative. At the community level, especially in marginalized and disadvantaged communities, women usually bear the brunt of SGBV and are subject to countless numbers of abuses and exploitations on a daily basis.

In recent times, there has been an increase in the number of cases of SGBV by men utilizing social media to denigrate women through threats to expose private sexual content videos. This has skyrocketed in universities and disadvantaged communities and has seriously affected the mental and emotional health of women. The social media effects of gender-based violence are underresearched. In a research article published by Sage Journal titled Investigating the role of social media in gender based violence”, Susan Waton argued that online abuse communicated via social networking sits has increased tremendously against women in marginalized communities[[13]](#footnote-13) This project confirm this assertion when some of the victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation in the two communities narrated they consented to share sexual picture with partners and to their dismayed these pictures were used to exploit them.

The role of local communities in addressing SGBV has also been highlighted in a number of literatures. In an online publication the National Library of Medicine argued that in order to be effective local communities must be empowered in designing and delivering their own intervention and strategies for SGBV prevention.[[14]](#footnote-14) Communities have a major role to play in

addressing the issue of SGBV. Liberia has any laws to address the issue of SGBV. However, despite the existence of these laws, the issue of SGB continues to be felt at the community level. This is due largely to a lack of awareness of victims about their rights, as well as a lack of knowledge within communities and on the part of service providers, including the failure of justice and security actors to adequately address the issue.

# Theoretically Underpinning

Theoretically underpinning is important because it provides and supports investigation and at the same time inform readers of the justification of my work.[[15]](#footnote-15) In his study, “What is peace research, published in 1964, the world-renowned Norwegian Sociologist Johan Galtung (Galtung, 1964) described negative peace as the absence of human violence and war, and positive peace as the absence of structural violence

A civil conflict broke out in Liberia in 1989, when elements from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) entered Liberia from neighboring Ivory Coast and launched a civil uprising. What started out as a conflict to remove the regime of President Samuel Doe, soon escalated into a full-scale conflict, bringing brothers and sisters, formerly living together in peace, against each other. During the conflict, the issue of violence against women escalated to a new dimension. A study conducted in Monrovia, revealed that 49 percent of female participants had experienced at lest one act of sexual violence by an armed combatant.[[16]](#footnote-16) Sexual violence and gender-based violence are examples of how women in Liberia have suffered from the conflicts (Steiner et al., 2018). Nathaniel Walker posits in his doctoral thesis that the civil wars in Liberia have exposed women to different forms of sexual violations17

On August 18 2003, warring factions in the Liberian conflict signed a landmark Comprehensive

Peace Agreement (CPA) in Accra, Ghana, which brought to an end two decades of civil conflict. This year, August 18, 2023 Liberians celebrated 20 years of sustained peace, which have witnessed three Presidential and General Election. However, despite the silence of violence

and the guns (negative peace) women in Liberia still continue to experience serios sexual abuse and exploitation. **P**ositive peace, which according to Galtung, is defined by a more lasting peace, built on sustainable investments in economic development and institutions as well as the societal attitudes that foster peace.[[17]](#footnote-17) Since the end of the conflict. SGBV has increased at an alarming level and it can be argued that women in Liberia are only experiencing negative peace and not positive peace.

Community based approach is a key strategy in addressing SGBV. In a study oublishd by Barcelona Institute for Global Health, tilted Ïnnovative Community-Based Approaches to Addressing Access To Sexual Violence Services, the authors argued that in order to to tackle sexual violence it is important to address the cultural norms that support it as well as the various barriers that women meet when accessing services. The study also highlightrd how community based interventions which are multi-level, multi-sectorial and culturally situated, can have a positive impact in responding to sexual violence[[18]](#footnote-18)

Community based approach forms the basis for my interventions and Social Change Initiative. Being a victim of SGBV, I had to cope with indelible stains and scars inflicted upon me by a blood thirsty rebel, that almost ruined my life. The absence of support from community leaders, the law enforcement agencies contributed to the trauma I underwent after my unfortunate ordeal. Tis is why I decided to explore the community based approach to SGBV.

The role of various community stakeholders, including men, cannot be overemphasized. The Commission on the Status of Women at its 57th session in 2013 recognized international commitment to engage men and boys is reflected most recently in the conclusions on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.[[19]](#footnote-19)

# Change Theory

Decreasing violence against women and girls requires a community-based, multi-pronged approach, and sustained engagement with multiple stakeholders. Community mobilization and interpersonal communication can play key roles in any intervention to address SGBV. An

intensive community-mobilization intervention geared toward community-led and community-owned SGBV prevention and response is a starting point to initiative change. Fostering such ‘zero tolerance’ communities will help to change social norms around violence, leading to violence prevention and increased SGBV reporting and service-seeking by survivors. In line with this, the project will target community members to engage local authorities to place and maintain SGBV issues on local platforms, and ensure participation in mechanisms designed to respond to SGBV.

The project is comprehensive and aspires to ‘community building’. It is further underpinned by the theory of change and concept that local communities have agency to change norms relating to SGBV. The project delivers three sets of activities: community mobilisation, counselling and extended response for survivors of violence, including work with police, and legal services as well as activities to mitigate the threat of COVIP 19 and to build peace.

Any strategy to mitigate SGBV requires the support of “champions” in local communities. Religious leaders, traditional leaders and men are key target groups that could be mobilized to serve as SGBV Prevention “Champions.“ Religious leaders are key stakeholders in responding to health and social issues and can play an influential role in validating and promoting best practices for preventing and reducing gender-based violence (GBV). Traditional leaders and traditional structures are an influential force and wield influence and command much respect within their communities. Men and boys are critical stakeholders in preventing and responding to SGBV as well as in the promotion of women’s meaningful participation and empowerment. They can play a vital role as agents of change in their communities and support the implementation of interventions for working with men and boys who suffer from SGBV. They have important role to play in preventing SGBV, and gender transformative tools are key in challenging deep-seated beliefs held by men, as well as power structures which facilitate men’s abuse of women. This approach brings on board men and boys as part of the solution, instead of approaching them as perpetrators.

Engaging the three actors in debates around gender-based violence is crucial to tackle the drivers of this phenomenon and generate lasting change. Each can have a powerful role in establishing norms – and therefore in influencing social change – and must therefore be engaged with as part of the change process.

A starting point to initiate change is by working directly with the security and justice actors in local communities to strengthen their response mechanism to SGBV. In local communities, national and local capacities must be strengthened to respond to immediate justice and security needs of women.

**CHAPTER 3**

# INTERVENTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

To ensure the successful implementation of the project, the following activities were carried out

# a. Community Entry Meetings

Community entry is a process of initiating, nurturing, and sustaining a desirable relationship with the community, to secure and sustain the community's interest[[20]](#footnote-20). To realize the objectives of the project, we visited a number of communities and met with a number of community stakeholders, including the Police, Women Groups, community leaders and youth groups to get their support for the project. Communities visited included Soul Clinic, West Point, Soinewhen and Clara Town.

These meetings provide the platforms to engage holistically with the various stakeholders and help formulate the necessary strategies for the smooth implementation of the project.

# b. Meeting with Local Law Enforcement Officers

Effective and accountable rule of law institutions are essential for sustainable social protection and justice for women. Conversely, weak institutional legitimacy and/or capacity in the justice and security sectors can be a key contributor to violence against women. Unequal access to justice for SGBV survivors contributes to a climate of impunity for SGBV cases, undermining confidence in the formal justice sector. Victims of SGBV often face many obstacles within society and in the criminal justice system that render it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for them to benefit from new laws.In most instances, a large proportion of reported cases never advance to the courts. Instead, cases are withdrawn from police stations, sometimes upon the request of complainants.The withdrawal of cases, especially when forced upon complainants, undermines the purpose of SGBV legislations and

raises serious concerns about the translation of formal policies into substantive changes in the lives of women. Many SGBV continued to go unreported. Women who are raped often do not seek services due to the stigma and shame attached to the issue, and out of fear that they will not receive a sympathetic response.

As part of the project, we visited the Women and Children Unit of the Liberia National Police (LNP) in each community. The meetings provided the platform to understand the number of cases relating to SGBV that have been reported to the police stations and how these cases are being adjudicated.

# SGBV Stakeholders Dialogue

Stakeholders Dialogues were convened in the two communities. Each dialogue brought together women leaders, community’s leaders, survivors and youth groups. The community engagements were intended to formulate a “Community Strategic Approach” to SGBV. The dialogues sought to incorporate the views of the communities on the way forward in addressing SGBV at the community level.

**d. Men’s SGBV Forum**

Men are the main perpetrators of SGBV in Liberia and it is therefore extremely necessary to engage them as allies in platforms aimed at mitigating SGBV at the local levels. Towards this end, Men Prevention Forums were organized.

# KEY FINDINGS

As a victim of SGBV myself during the conflict in Liberia, the project is something that is close to my heart. The project provided the platform for me to engage key stakeholders at the local levels. Each project activities were evaluated by the participants themselves and the program Unit of the Centre for Security Studies and Development (CENSSAD)[[21]](#footnote-21). At the end of the project, the following are the key findings

1. The issue of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Liberia is so serious that an ad hoc, problem-solving approach is inadequate to address its full implications. Instead, the need to adopt a holistic community-based approach, including regular engagements with key actors and working with local law enforcement institutions and stakeholders cannot be overemphasized.
2. Improving the capacities of and forging linkages between institutional stakeholders, civil society actors and local communities will enable the rule of law system to become more equitable and accountable to the rights of women and children.
3. If the fight against SGBV is to be won at the community level, men should be considered as key partners.
4. It is important for communities to work with survivors and their families to ensure that cases of SGBV are not compromised but that the rights of survivors are protected.
5. Religious leaders can play a key role in the fight against SGBV at the community level and must be mobilized at all times.

# IMPACTS

The major impact of the project was the formation of a SGBV Platform, comprising all major stakeholders, including the police, women groups, survivors, men and young people, in each community to mitigate the issue of SGBV at the community level. The main outcomes include

improved access of women to justice, increased commitment of key actors to prevent and monitor progress and results on SGBV at the community level and engagements of stakeholders across multiple sectors to protect the rights of women. The formation of the SGBV at the community level will a long way in helping to sustain the project beyond my fellowship.

# GENERAL CONCLUSION

Liberia, currently ranked 177th out of 188 countries in the annual Gender Inequality Index[[22]](#footnote-22) is poised to see more decline in the wake of the continuous abuse and exploitation of women across the country. In its report, the Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) cited discrimination against women as one of the issues that need to be addressed to help consolidate peace in Liberia[[23]](#footnote-23). The Liberian Peace Building Planrecognized the high level of violence against women and called for appropriate measures to be undertaken to address this as it is critical to the success of peacebuilding and efforts to address the root causes of conflict[[24]](#footnote-24).

Despite the creation of a Specialized Court[[25]](#footnote-25) to try perpetrators of SGBV, too often cases have been compromised before reaching the police stations or court. This is due largely to a lack of awareness of victims about their rights, as well as a lack of knowledge within communities and on the part of service providers, including the failure of justice and security actors to adequately address the issue.

My Social Change Initiative sought to change the narrative surrounding SGBV by critically analyzing the role of the local stakeholders in helping to mitigate SGBV in these communities. Owing largely to my interventions, I can argue that a community-based approach to addressing SGBV will go a long way in addressing the problem. It is in these communities that SGBV has increased exponentially so by working with key actors, the issue of SGBV can be addressed. If the fight against SGBV is to be won, there is a need to adopt holistic community approach. This is why as part of my SCI, I have engaged authorities at the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social protection to carry out more awareness activities in local communities.

As a result of my project, I also realize the importance of cultural norms, practices, and behaviour in helping to address SGBV and the involvement of all community stakeholders in community interventions

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon my findings, I would like to make the following recommendations:

1. That the Women and Children Unit of the Liberia National Police in Marginalized communities be empowered to enable them address the issue of SGBV;
2. That traditional leaders in local communities be mobilized to join the fight against

SGBV;

1. That attempts be made to reach out to survivors of SGBV and that psycho social counselling services be provided to them;
2. THAT THE Government of Liberia and its partners adopted the Community based approach to address SGBV;
3. That the project be extended to other communities.

# SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

All good projects must have space for sustainability even after the projects have ended to ensure that the projects achieve their inherent objectives and this project is no exception. The sustainability plan of the project encompassed the setting up of the following units withing the framework of existing community structures:

1. Community Stakeholder SGBV Platform. This platform is composed of all key stakeholders in the community, including, the police, traditional leaders, youth leaders, women leaders and religious leaders. It will serve as a advocacy voice of SGBV and design strategies to address SGBV in the community.
2. Men’s SGBV Prevention Forum. This form is composed of “female champions, who ill work to sensitize men about the importance of respecting the rights of women **REFERENCES**

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