In-depth Study on Reasons for High Incidence of SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN LIBERIA - Recommendations on Prevention and Response

Government of Liberia/ UN
Joint Programme on Sexual and Gender Based Violence

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In-depth Study on Reasons for High Incidence of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Liberia - Recommendations on Prevention and Response
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ABBREVIATION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards an Understanding of Gender</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict and Gender</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION 2: RESEARCH GOAL, OBJECTIVES AND METHODS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: Before the Conflict</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Roles before the Conflict</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage Practices</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual and Gender-based Violence</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Tensions and Violence</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: During the Conflict</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Conflict and its Impact on Communities</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of the Effects of the Conflict</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displacement</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Roles and Survival Strategies</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects of Sexual and Gender-based Violence on Men</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in the Fighting Forces</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children and Youth in the Fighting Forces</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notions of Masculinity</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3: After the Conflict</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures to Address Sexual and Gender-based Violence</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Socio-Economic Situation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage Patterns</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of the Prevalence of Sexual and Gender-based Violence</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of the Key Drivers of Sexual and Gender-based Violence</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing the Customary Justice System</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints in the Formal Justice System</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION 4: INTERPRETING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How, if at all, have gender relations changed?</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How, if at all, do notions of masculinity contribute to SGBV?</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for the High Incidence of Sexual and Gender-based Violence</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>County Development Agenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPA</td>
<td>Comprehensive Peace Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBV</td>
<td>Gender Based Violence</td>
</tr>
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<td>GOL</td>
<td>Government of Liberia</td>
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<tr>
<td>IASC</td>
<td>Inter-Agency Standing Committee</td>
</tr>
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<td>LDHS</td>
<td>Liberian Demographic and Health Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNP</td>
<td>Liberia National Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOGD</td>
<td>Ministry of Gender and Development</td>
</tr>
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<td>MOJ</td>
<td>Ministry of Justice</td>
</tr>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRC</td>
<td>Norwegian Refugee Council</td>
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<td>PRS</td>
<td>Poverty Reduction Strategy</td>
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<td>RHRC</td>
<td>Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium</td>
</tr>
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<td>SEA</td>
<td>Sexual Exploitation and Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGBV</td>
<td>Sexual and Gender Based Violence</td>
</tr>
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<td>TRC</td>
<td>Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commission for Refugees</td>
</tr>
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<td>UNMIL</td>
<td>United Nations Mission in Liberia</td>
</tr>
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<td>UN SC</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council</td>
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<td>UNSCR</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council Resolution</td>
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<td>WACPS</td>
<td>Women and Children Protection Section</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

Liberia is transforming towards sustainable development after 14 years of conflict. Inspite of the remarkable recovery that has been achieved since 2005, the peace, basic human rights and freedoms that women and girls of Liberia expect to enjoy continue to be undermined by the increasing cases of sexual and gender based violence. Statistics from the 2008 Population and Housing Census show that rape and domestic violence, accounted for over 70% of all reported cases in Liberia.

It is noteworthy that rape and other forms of sexual abuse were widespread during the war as a tool that was used to terrorise, punish and control the civilian population. It was used to destroy the fabric of society and leave its victims with physical, emotional and social scars that could not be erased. However the persistence of this act in peaceful times requires a concerted effort to understand the dynamics fuelling it, understanding the perpetrators and how communities have dealt with the issue is key to finding lasting solutions.

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the reasons behind the high prevalence of sexual violence in Liberia and makes broad recommendations that should be used by everyone involved in the fight against Gender based Violence. The study should be utilized in programming for development of effective prevention and response programs against Sexual and Gender based violence.

The Ministry of Gender and Development views the commissioning of this study as a timely input to the various efforts that Government, the United Nations, Development partners and NGOs have put in place to address Sexual and Gender Based Violence. The Ministry welcomes this initiative as it will provide additional strategies to complement the Revised National Plan of Action against Gender Based Violence (2011-2015)

I would like to extend gratitude to the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) for their continued support to the Government of Liberia to combat SGBV through funding under the UN Joint Programme on SGBV, which also made this study possible. In addition, I would like to thank the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for providing technical and logistical support during the entire process of this study.

I would be failing in my duty if I do not express my gratitude to the women, men, boys and girls who were consulted and provided a lot of valuable and sometimes recalled traumatic experiences that informed the study.

The Ministry would like to recommend this study to everyone who has an interest in curbing sexual and Gender based violence in Liberia and beyond.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our thanks to all the elders, chiefs, religious leaders, women’s groups, youth groups, high school learners and individuals from Gbarqueta, Bopolu, Buchanan, Todee-Koon Town, Clara Town, Zwedru, Gbuyee, Ganta, Bahn, Tappita, and Zorzor communities who willingly availed their time and knowledge to enrich this report and our appreciation to the County Officials, UN Agencies, UNMIL and Government departments for their time and their willingness to share information with us. I would also like to thank Dr. Madhumita Sarkar, Programme Advisor GBV Joint Programme, for her valuable inputs to the design, tools and research findings.

I am indebted to Mr Edwin Dorbor who served as the national consultant on this project. His easy rapport with community elders, civic leaders, community members and high school learners, enabled us to uncover stories that might otherwise not have been told. A special thanks goes to all the members of our field research team, Ms Vera Mussah; Mr Mohammed Fahnbulleh; Ms Madia Baryougar; Mr Joseph Suloe; Mr Luther Mafalleh; Mr Bestto Tingba; and Mr Zawolo Z. Zuagele. Without their tireless enthusiasm and assistance in facilitating group discussions, this project could not have been possible.

Bea Abrahams
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Throughout this document terms and concepts describing forms of gender based violence are used. We recognise there is no single or universal definition of gender based or sexual violence and those understandings differ from one country or context to the next. The intention therefore is not to offer a legal definition but rather to clarify the meaning of terms and concepts as applied in the context of this study.

**Gender-based Violence (GBV)** is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females. The nature and extent of specific types of GBV vary across cultures, countries, and regions. Examples of GBV include, but are not limited to sexual violence; sexual exploitation and abuse; forced prostitution; domestic violence; human trafficking; forced or early marriage; and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, honour killings, widow inheritance, among others.

Gender based violence is a violation of universal human rights protected by international human rights conventions, including the right to security of person; the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; the right to freedom from torture or cruelty, inhuman, or degrading treatment; and the right to life.

**Rape or Attempted Rape** is an act of non-consensual sexual intercourse. This can include the invasion of any part of the body with a sexual organ and/or the invasion of the genital or anal opening with any object or body part. Rape and attempted rape involve the use of force, threat of force, and/or coercion. Any penetration is considered rape. Efforts to rape someone that do not result in penetration are considered attempted rape.

**Sexual abuse** is the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.

**Sexual exploitation** is any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.
Sexual Violence

is any sexual act; attempt to obtain a sexual act; unwanted sexual comments or advances; or acts to traffic a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of the relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work. Sexual violence takes many forms, including rape, sexual slavery and/or trafficking, forced pregnancy, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and/or abuse, and forced abortion or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity, which may include indecent assault; trafficking; inappropriate medical examinations; and strip searches.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2010, the United Nations Population Development Fund (UNFPA), under the auspices of the United Nations/Government of Liberia, Gender Based Violence Joint Programme, commissioned a study into sexual and gender based violence in Liberia. The objective was to identify the socio-historical and cultural factors, pre- and post-conflict, that contribute to the high incidence of sexual and gender based violence and to make recommendations on prevention and response strategies. Specifically, the study sought to answer two core research questions. Firstly, what was the nature of gender relations before, during and after the conflict and secondly, how do socially constructed notions of masculinity contribute to gender based violence?

The enquiry into the reasons for the high incidence of gender based violence was carried out in 6 of the 15 counties in Liberia, namely, Montserrado; Grand Bassa; Nimba; Lofa; Grand Gedeh; and Gbarpolu. It was to span a period of more than thirty years – roughly from the decade immediately preceding the outbreak of the civil conflict in 1989 to date. Over the course of these years, gender based violence developed from a phenomenon that was largely muted to one that earned Liberia the dubious distinction as having experienced among the world’s highest incidences of sexual violence against women. Despite post-war restoration of statutory courts, policing and the passage of legislation protecting women’s rights, the high prevalence of sexual and gender based violence today is seen as blight on the country’s efforts to establish the conditions for development and peace. This apparent incongruence begs the question whether the rampancy of gender based violence throughout the 14-year civil conflict was indeed a new occurrence or if the conflict merely accentuated, albeit in unparalleled scale and brutality, a problem that had thrived before the war?

A number of studies, including the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, document the sheer scale and ruthlessness of sexual crimes committed during the Liberian conflict. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that all armed factions in the civil conflict used gender based violence, especially sexual violence, as a deliberate tactic to intimidate, humiliate and instil fear in civilian populations. It found, however, that while men accounted for nearly 50% or half of all reported violations compared to one third or 33% from women, more than 70% of all sexual based violations reported were against women who were systematically targeted, mainly as a result of their gender. Now, almost a decade into the Accra Peace Accord that brought an end to the conflict in Liberia, women and girls continue to bear the brunt of sexual and gender based violence. Rape remains the most frequently reported serious crime in Liberia, accounting for more than one-third of reported protection cases involving sexual violence. Committed primarily against young people between the ages of 10 and 19 years, 40.6% of present-day perpetrators of rape are men aged 20 to 39 years and are known to the victim. In parallel to sexual violence, there is a legacy of domestic violence, sexual exploitation and abuse and disempowerment of women that remains embedded in socio-cultural institutions, value systems, norms and practices.

This report explores the nexus between violent conflicts, gender based violence and gender power relations in Liberia. It seeks to provide an understanding of the mix of socio-historic and cultural factors, pre and post-conflict, which shape and are shaped by hierarchies of power within notions
of gender and gender relations. It sets out to determine how these underlying power dynamics within gender relations may or may not account for the high incidence of sexual and gender-based violence today. Parallel to this understanding, it allows us to hone in on the social and cultural dimensions of male-female interactions and to trace how dominant socio-cultural structures, institutions, values and norms generate and/or reinforce power inequalities that induce violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.

Section 1 of this report provides a review of literature dealing with armed conflict and its complex interconnections with power inequalities, gender relations and gender-based violence. Drawing extensively on research reports from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, northern Uganda and other conflict settings, it goes beyond conventional images of women as victims and men as perpetrators of war, and documents the impact of violent social upheaval on the lives of both men and women. It demonstrates how the shifting dynamics of violence, especially gender-based violence, influence the reconfiguration of gender roles and positions during and in the wake of conflict.

The following section details the research goal, objectives and methodology used during the field study. Using a set of tools adapted from participatory action research methodologies, we chose to engage research participants in an information-gathering process in which they, and the research team, could actively shape, take ownership of and participate in small group discussions. We recognised that to give expression to the multitude of nuances, complexities and interconnections of gendered relations and sexualised violence, we would have to take on board a wide view of values, beliefs, perceptions and assumptions spanning across age, gender, ethnic, cultural and social status lines. Such sensitivities were especially relevant in the context of the cultural communities we surveyed; where, real or perceived, there are acuities that they are peripheral to formal social and political decision-making processes. It was important therefore to put in place an information gathering process that would draw in views from the margins and create space for diverse, sometimes contradictory, voices to be heard.

Section 3 discusses the key findings of the field study. The section is divided into three parts or chronological periods: Before the Conflict; During the Conflict; and After the Conflict. Of each part, we seek to answer the questions: What subordinates the power of females? Who or what confers power, how is it embraced by females and males and how does society enable or inhibit the exercise of this power? How has the protracted conflict in Liberia altered social notions of what it means to be female or male? How has females’ involvement and in some instances active participation in the conflict changed notions of femininity in Liberia? How has the fact of males’ experiences of gender-based violence, during the conflict and in its aftermath, changed notions of masculinity and what, if any, connection does it have to the high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence today?

Section 4 integrates the findings of each of the periods under review and provides an analysis of the main socio-cultural features and dynamics in Liberia that contour relations between males and females. Using a framework developed by El-Bushra and Sahl, we examine gender relations in terms of roles, identities, institutions and ideologies in order to trace the progression of male-female relations prior to, during and after the civil conflict. Next we turn our attention to conceptions of
power and patriarchy and their prevailing influence on men to conform or adhere to socially constructed notions of masculinity. Examining these two core questions enable us to comment on the key factors and motivations that contribute to the high incidence of sexual and gender based violence in Liberia presently.

The report concludes with a summary of the key findings and a series of recommendations for community-centred strategies for the prevention and response to sexual and gender based violence.
SECTION 1:

INTRODUCTION

The Liberian civil conflict took place at a time when at least 38 countries across the globe; 14 of which are on the African continent, were either, entering into, actively waging, or concluding armed conflicts. While the underlying causes varied, the key characteristics and impacts of these seemingly disparate conflicts were strikingly similar. Almost without exception, these conflicts were marked by the indiscriminate mass-scale commission of sexual and gender based violence, the extent and sheer brutality of which was unprecedented. It is widely estimated, for example, that up to 250,000 women and girls in Sierra Leone were victims of sexual violence during that country’s ten-year war.

The regional character of African conflicts saw the spread of sexual violence across conflict-affected regions as armed groups often moved between countries, carrying out similar forms of atrocities wherever they went. Much of the widespread sexual violations carried out in the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, have been attributed to armed groups implicated in the genocide in Rwanda. Sexual violations committed by Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front in Liberia, and raping sprees carried out by Liberian armed groups in the north-eastern regions of Sierra Leone followed similar patterns of sexual violations across national borders.

Although many of these wars have now come to a formal end and countries are undertaking the arduous task of rebuilding their infrastructure, institutions and communities after conflict, the end of hostilities has not put an end to the rampancy of sexual and gender based violence. Rather, as the focus moved from the battlefield to community sites, so too the profile of the main perpetrators of sexual and gender based violations shifted from rebels to husbands, neighbours, relatives and fellow civilians.

Towards an Understanding of Gender

We are propelled to ask: what drives the high levels of sexual and gender based violence during and after conflicts? What are the connections between conflict and sexual and gender based violence and how, if at all, do these dynamics change relations between males and females? If sexual and gender based violence is indeed the outcome of gendered power inequalities, what are the power domains of males and those of females and how do these shape their experiences of and responses to sexual and gender based violence? Before we elaborate on these questions, let us take a closer look at the concept ‘gender’. UN-INSTRAW defines gender as a ‘system of roles and relationships between men and women which are determined not by biology but by the social, political and economic context’. Gender refers to the social differences between females and males and their relative access to and control over resources and power. Typically embedded within social systems, institutions, societal values, beliefs and practices, notions of gender determine the different roles, responsibilities, status, opportunities, privileges, and limitations assigned to men and women. In most societies the roles and responsibilities of women are largely confined to the reproductive sphere and though
many may actively contribute to household and other forms of productive income-generation, their work, status and contribution to social, political and economic decision-making processes are most often under-valued or ignored.

However, as El-Bushra and Sahl point out, gender is one among several factors of difference. Gender as a marker of difference is integrally linked to and interacts with other factors such as age, ethnicity, class and religion, each of which has gendered dimensions. In the context of conflict it is not uncommon for civilians to be targeted because of the presence of one or more of these factors of difference. The 1994 Rwandan genocide, for example, had produced a death toll of over 800,000 in addition to widespread rape and sexual violence of between 250,000 and 500,000 mainly Tutsi women and girls.

A Human Rights Watch report concluded that, in the build-up to the genocide, political propaganda manipulated prevailing sexual stereotypes of Tutsi women. These stereotypes, coupled with the view of woman as man’s possession, rendered Tutsi women particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. While it is important that we understand and respond to men and women’s differential experiences of conflict, it is equally important that we take account of the varied experiences of people discriminated against on the basis of other markers of difference - the ramifications of which can often have mass-scale and devastating impacts.

Despite – or maybe because of- its common usage, there is still considerable confusion about the term ‘gender’. All too often ‘gender’ is substituted for the term ‘women’ and vice versa. Unfortunately, such narrow interpretation of the concept ‘gender’ not only precludes the life experiences of one half within the male-female dyad, it also tends to render a one-dimensional representation of women’s experiences of conflict, most often casting them as hapless victims of violence, devoid of political and social agency. We are reminded, in different situations and at different times, men and women take on different roles and responsibilities, in line with their different interests, experiences and needs.

What men and women do and how they respond to situations before them does not always fit into socially prescribed expectations of the ‘ideal man’ or the ‘ideal woman’. In the complex realities of conflict in Somalia, Uganda, Sierra Leone and elsewhere, women distinguished themselves not only as social activists and peace mediators but, at times, also as perpetrators of violence. Likewise, over the course of a conflict, men may not only lose their traditional roles as providers but may indeed be targeted for specific forms of human rights violations, including sexual violence. The diversity in males’ and females’ experiences of and their responses to conflict transcend conventional female-male gender divides and puts to rest the conceptualisation of a singular, undifferentiated male or female experience of war. By embracing a more inclusive understanding of gender, it allows us the appreciation that women and men function in a variety of roles – stereotypical or otherwise – and that these roles are dynamic, fluid and subject to change, depending on local circumstances, needs and demands. Moreover, in the dynamic of conflict access to the resources and instruments of war, between and among males and females, is often highly differentiated, giving some men power not only over women, but also over other men.

This is not to minimise the disproportionate disempowerment and suffering of women during
conflict and its aftermath, but rather to illustrate that a comprehensive assessment of gender and gender relations must take a more nuanced view to include the differential roles and experiences of men and women and their varying degrees of access to power.

Conflict and Gender

The conventional expectation is that in times of conflict men would take up their place on the battle lines to protect ‘kin, kith and country’ while the women stay back to ‘keep the home fires burning’. Such stereotypical interpretations cast the male as the fighter, aggressor and, invariably also the perpetrator of violence. Women, on the other hand, are perceived as wives, mothers and, most frequently, as victims of aggression. While it is true that women and men do often assume these traditional parts, the shifting power dynamics of armed conflict impose significant role adaptations on the part of both males and females.

The deliberate targeting and massive forced displacement of civilian populations; the involvement of women and girls with fighting forces; and the wide-spread prevalence of sexual and gender based violence during and after conflict are but some of the features of contemporary armed conflict that alter the nature of relations between males and females. However, to gain a more complete picture of how change manifests, we are challenged to further interrogate the notion of gender relations and identify the socio-cultural and political dimensions of its various supporting elements and assess how and which of these shift stay the same. Zarkov argues that ‘gender is an organising principle of social life that affects different levels of social reality, not only individual people’. It interacts with social institutions, values, norms, ideologies and doctrines that produce different notions of what it means to be male or female.

In this connection El-Bushra and Sahl propose that when assessing gender relations, in addition to gender roles (societal expectations of men and women in the division of labour), we must also examine the function of gender identities (notions of the ideal man or woman); gendered institutions (the household, schools, traditional and public institutions); and gender ideologies or the deeply-rooted values which interact with all the other elements. They argue that while there are often major shifts in women’s roles as a result of war, it does not follow that this will lead to sustained change in women’s roles and in gender relations generally. Within the different elements, that shape and are shaped by relations of power, change takes place at different rates and while change may occur within one or more of these elements, in others the state of things remains the same.

Women Associated with Fighting Forces: Changing Gender Roles?

A 2004 study carried out by Mackay and Mazurana found that between 1990 and 2003, girls and young women were associated with and at times actively participated in 38 armed conflicts around the world. The reasons for their involvement in fighting forces are complex and varied. While there is evidence that some may have joined voluntarily, case studies from conflict situations such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Rwanda and Sierra Leone suggest that the vast majority were abducted or coerced, often through sexual violence, into fighting factions.
While there is evidence of women and girls actively participating in conflict-related atrocities and in some instances even advancing in the ranks of fighting factions, Mackay and Mazurana’s research indicate that their primary role is most often linked to roles traditionally carried out in pre-conflict times. They found that in all three countries studied – Sierra Leone, northern Uganda and Mozambique - girls in fighting forces carried out traditional gender roles such as cooking, cleaning and serving men, and thus seemingly replicated tasks that women and girls undertake in larger society. They concluded that while, armed conflict and girls’ and women's participation in fighting forces sometimes provided opportunities for these girls and women—such as achieving positions of power not previously possible and learning new skills - in the aftermath of war, girls and women are usually expected to resume traditional gender roles.

**Forced Displacement: Obstacles and Opportunities**

Research from conflict-affected countries show that the impacts of forced displacement is profound, long-lasting and often lead to significant shifts in gendered roles and responsibilities for both women and men. In addition to dramatic disruptions in social structures and support systems, displacement and separation often lead to changes in the division of labour within a family. Particularly in situations where men are targeted for killing, abduction or forced recruitment into rebel forces, women and girls may be forced into non-traditional roles, petty trading or even survival sex in order to supplement the family income. In other instances, women and girls who find themselves in refugee camps or camps for internally displaced may be given priority for training and development programmes as well as in income-generating activities, thus gaining new skills that will enable them to assume new roles within their households.
On the other hand, the insecurities generated by conflict and forced displacement may create a yearning to return to and enforce traditional cultural values and practices – almost as a cultural preservation strategy. As a result, age-old practices to reassert traditional hierarchies, gender ideologies and gender roles may re-emerge in order to bring ‘normalcy’ to the chaos of displacement. According to the ICRC, in Sierra Leone, for example, 500 female genital mutilations were carried out in a single night on young girls newly displaced to a camp near Freetown. An increase in the incidence of early marriages had also been observed in some places, the purpose being to ensure that a girl can find a husband before it is too late or to boost the family’s income with a dowry. This finding is consistent with research from other conflict situations which indicate that where gendered power relations are deeply entrenched and where ‘maleness’ is a badge of honour, the return to former gender roles is enabled, or even encouraged, by the perseverance of patriarchal ideologies, values and practices.

**Sexual Violence against Men and Boys**

Sexual violence against men and boys is said to have taken place during the conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Burundi, Uganda, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The most prevalent form of sexual violence against men and boys involves a combination of rape, sexual mutilation or tying heavy objects onto male genitals – forms of violations that are reportedly rife in conflict situations where men are sexually abused. Another form of sexual violence used against males involves men being forced to rape family members or the elderly. Under-reporting of rape and sexual violence is generally common, but it seems particularly problematic when it comes to the matter of male rape and male sexual violence, due to a combination of shame, confusion, guilt, fear and stigma. Although there has been very little research on the psychosocial reactions of men to these forms of gender-based violence, it is likely that the psychosocial consequences of such acts are not significantly different to those manifesting in female survivors. Dolan argues that ‘the level of stigma attached (to male rape) is even higher than that associated with female rape’, and ‘undermining men’s sense of masculinity becomes a key channel for men to exercise power over other men’. Commenting on this, Carpenter argues that ‘if rape is understood as the exercise of power, however, we cannot ignore the way in which sexual assault is used against men as well as women to undermine and invert gendered constructions of protector/protected roles, with the aim of terrorizing entire societies’.

**What Motivates Sexual and Gender based Violence?**

To understand the possible triggers for sexual and gender-based violence, we must take a closer look at what motivates sexual and gender-based violence, during conflict and in its aftermath. Bastick, Grimm and Kunz offer an inventory of possible reasons why sexual violence is committed during armed conflict. Among others, they contend, sexual violence is used to ‘torture and humiliate people, in order to gain control over their victims, to ensure their compliance, or to induce flight from a given area. When committed against women and girls, sexual violence is often intended to humiliate their families and communities, wherein women and girls are “bearers of honour”, and men are shamed for failing to protect “their” women. It is used as a means of destroying family
and community structures, most overtly when armed groups commit public rapes in front of the community, force family members to witness each other’s rape, or even force people to commit acts of sexual violence against their own family members.\(^{29}\)

However, while it is true that sexual violence is exacerbated by armed conflict, the prevalence of gender based violence is almost always reflective of gender inequalities and power imbalances that have been in existence before the conflict. Such power asymmetries give men power not only over women, but also over other men. Moreover, the prevalence of rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse in African countries emerging from the wars of the 1990s, underline the sad reality that the end of formal hostilities has not led to a reduction in sexual violence. Rather, it reinforces the position that the continuities in sexual and gender based violence — before, during and after conflict — cannot be separated from conditions in the wider context that breed and sustain violence and, ultimately, infuse every aspect of the male-female relationship. More than seven years after the signing of the all-inclusive agreement to end the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, UNHCR reported no less than 1,244\(^{30}\) incidents of sexual violations for the first quarter of 2010. Similarly, in countries such as Angola, Burundi and Sierra Leone, incidents of sexual violence appear to continue at levels not unlike those seen during the conflict years. Studies emanating from these and other post-conflict settings strongly suggest that ‘conflict dynamics and gender dynamics are intricately interconnected, and will be drawn into interlocking and self-perpetuating cycles of violence unless the political will to create alternative dynamics can be mobilized.'\(^{31}\)

Until we address the profound psychosocial, health, social and economic needs of both women and men, the backlash imposed by power inequalities may be harsh and prolonged. Consequently, efforts must be made to capitalise on the potential of both women and men to assist in the prevention and response to sexual and gender based violence.
SECTION 2:

GOAL, OBJECTIVES AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

The overall goal of this study was to identify and critically assess the role of socio-historic and cultural factors that contribute to the high incidence of SGBV in Liberia and to make recommendations on prevention and response strategies. The specific objectives of the study were:

- To understand the nature of gender power relations and socially assigned roles before, during and after the conflict and to assess if significant shifts have occurred and how these may be impacting current levels of sexual and gender based violence;

- To identify the underlying socio-historic factors that shape the construction of masculinity/masculinities and to assess how changes in the socio-political environment contribute to current levels of violence;

- To identify past drivers of violence and to assess their potential for triggering conflict in the current political, economic and socio-cultural environment;

- To determine how the customary justice system can be strengthened to support effective preventative and response strategies in order to promote accountability.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA COVERED

From the outset we recognised that with the limited time available to us, we will not be able to conduct a national study including all 15 counties. Instead, we selected the counties most fundamentally impacted by the civil conflict and/or presently reported to experience higher than national average levels of sexual and gender based violence. Consequently, over a period of 5 weeks during December 2010 and January 2011, the field study was carried out in six counties, namely, Gbarpolu, Nimba, Grand Bassa, Montserrado, Grand Gedeh and Lofa, only. The table below shows the local sites where the field research was carried out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>LOCAL COMMUNITY/ VILLAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gbarpolu</td>
<td>Gbarqueta; Bopolu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Bassa</td>
<td>Buchanan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montserrado</td>
<td>Todee-Koon Town; Clara Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Gedeh</td>
<td>Zwedru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimba</td>
<td>Gbuyee; Ganta; Bahn; Tappita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lofa</td>
<td>Zorzor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information was gathered through three sets of activities, namely:

- A comprehensive review of academic articles and research reports by Government Ministries, United Nations agencies, national and international NGOs about the interconnections between conflict, sexual and gender based violence and gender relations. We drew extensively on material relating to the conflict and post-conflict situations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, and Northern Uganda with a view to drawing out lessons for our understanding of sexual and gender based violence in Liberia.
- A series of in-depth interviews with traditional and religious leaders; county officials; community-based support groups; and partners to the UN/GoL GBV Joint Programme.
- A participatory research process involving group discussions with chiefs, traditional and religious leaders, elders and members of the Poro and Sande societies, women’s groups, youth groups, former combatants, survivors of sexual and gender based violence, high school students and community members.

IMPLEMENTING THE FIELD STUDY

We conducted a total of 44 group discussions, reaching a total of 753 respondents: 30 group discussions with adult females and males; and 14 group discussions with high school learners (female and male), aged between 16 to 23 years. Group discussions with adults comprised of elders, traditional leaders, women groups, teachers, students, women groups, youth groups and community members, including former combatants and survivors of gender based violence. The purpose of discussions with this diverse group was: i) to establish the reasons for the high incidence of sexual and gender based violence; ii) to understand the nature of relations between and among men and women before, during and after the conflict; and iii) to determine the nature of current social tensions and their relationship to the high prevalence of gender based violence.

Figure 1: Breakdown of Groups by Sex and Age Category
Typically, groups consisted of approximately 12 to 20 persons and were constituted as female only; male only; or mixed groups comprised of females and males. It is important to note that the full set of questions was asked in groups attended solely by women as well as those attended solely by men, so that respondents in each group discussed their own experiences, as well as those of the opposite sex, as they perceived them. Two tools, the Timeline and the Causal Tree Analysis provided the basic structure for group discussions. The specific questions were adapted in line with the specificities of the area or the community and/or the profile of respondents. For example, if the community was said to experience high levels of gender based violence, we would steer discussions towards the nature of social relations and their relevance to sexual and gender based violence. In other situations, where, for example, we had considerable numbers of former combatants, discussions focused on connections between politically-inspired violence and sexual violence; or social constructions of masculinity, which ever topic was most suited to the general profile of the group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gbarpolu</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Bassa</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montserrado</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Gedeh</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimba</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lofa</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>351</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>753</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More about the Information-gathering Tools

Information gathering was organised around the use of three tools, namely, the Participatory Mapping exercise; the Causal Tree exercise; and the Timeline exercise. All three participatory tools, discussed in greater detail below, are widely used in Rapid Rural Appraisal, Participatory Action Research and UNDPs Community Capacity Enhancement methodologies.

The **Timeline** exercise is a linear representation of a series of events of particular significance to a group of respondents or community. It is a highly participatory exercise in that respondents have to discuss and analyse the importance of occurrences before they agree to plot them on a flipchart. They are then invited to discuss their own perceptions or perspectives about the event. During the course of discussions respondents are exposed to points of view which may or may not correspond to their own ideas. Since there are no right or wrong answers, respondents learn that events of significance affect people differently, they perceive the matter differently and consequently have very different experiences of or reactions to the issue at hand. This exercise was particularly useful in female only, male only, or mixed sex group settings, exploring perceptions about topics such as the roles, responsibilities and sources of power between males and females; socio-cultural factors that shape notions of the ‘ideal’ female or male; or the absence or presence of social tensions and
their potential impact on sexual and gender based violence.

The *Causal Analysis Tree* (also called Situational Analysis or Problem Analysis) is a graphic representation of a problem issue. The problem or issue is drawn in the centre of the flip chart and becomes the ‘trunk’ of the tree. The group is then asked to identify the causes of the focal problem - these become the ‘roots’ of the tree. Next, they are asked to discuss the consequences of the problem, which become the “branches” of the tree. The simplicity of the tool contributes to its appeal in community context: the analogies between the root causes that nourish a problem situation and the steps that should be taken to starve off its ‘branches’ or to uproot the problem tree is accessible to all community groups, irrespective of literacy levels, age or social position. In discussing the causes and consequences of conflict or gender based violence, some of the key questions were: What were/ are the main characteristics of the time periods before, during and after the conflict?; Which factors in these respective phases contributed to the increase or decrease of sexual and gender based violence?; How have these factors shaped the relations between males and females?

We used the *Participatory Mapping* for group discussions with senior high school learners only. The overall objective of this exercise was for high school learners to identify geographic spaces in the community where young people are considered safe (green grass) and those areas that are perceived to pose potential risks or dangers (dry grass) for SGBV. In groups of 12 to 15, learners were asked to draw a map of their surroundings and, after discussion and agreement, to plot areas or places that are considered safe by young people. They are then asked to agree on areas or places that are considered unsafe and to plot these on their map, using a symbol or mark agreed on by the group. They then have to identify and discuss the specific environmental, demographic, and social, security and economic factors that render some places safe and others unsafe and how these factors contribute to the sexual abuse and exploitation of young people. Thereafter, learners are asked to identify and discuss the actions they or other organisations or structures in their community can take to make these areas safe for young people. This exercise challenges respondents to think more critically about the geographic space they live in; the social and cultural factors that contribute to gender based violence; and the resources or strengths at their disposal to initiate community-driven actions to combat gender based violence.

**Table 3: Gender Breakdown of High School Learners**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grand Bassa</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montserrado</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimba</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>109</strong></td>
<td><strong>141</strong></td>
<td><strong>250</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SECTION 3:

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Much has been written about the causes and chronology of events that led to the Liberian 14-year conflict. Notably, the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Consolidated Final Report provides a comprehensive account of the root causes and the range of actors implicated in the conflict. Apart from the political dimensions of this tragic history, of particular concern to this study was the profound and far-reaching impact of prolonged violence on the lives of ordinary Liberians. This emphasis reflected our goal for the field study, namely, to focus on the lived experiences of ordinary people and the ways in which gender based violence affected their everyday social relations. Secondly, we sought to understand the social and cultural factors and values that determined males and females’ roles, identities and power and how these might contribute to explaining the high prevalence of sexual and gender based violence over the course of the conflict to date. Consequently, we embarked on the field research process with a set of interrelated questions, namely:

- What are the social and cultural factors and values that determined men and women’s roles and responsibilities before, during and after the conflict?
- How, if at all, have changes in these roles shaped relations between men and women?
- What are the factors, values and criteria that influence commonly-held notions of the ‘ideal man’?
- What are the main factors which contribute to the prevalence of sexual and gender based violence?

In this section of the report, we present the key findings of the field research carried out in the six main study locations, in Montserrado, Grand Gedeh, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Lofa and Gbarpolu counties. Where possible, we triangulate qualitative information obtained during the field study with other data sources and statistics currently available on the situation in Liberia. For purposes of clarity, we discuss the findings in three main parts, broadly representing the stages of the conflict, namely, Before the Conflict; During the Conflict; and After the Conflict. We recognise, however, that the complexities, dynamics and continuities of gender based violence cannot be parcelled into neat, clearly defined time periods. In Part 1, we provide an overview of the main socio-cultural institutions and values, including the institution of marriage, and how these might have contributed to power inequalities between men and women before the conflict. Part 2 discusses men and women’s differential experiences of and responses to the changes imposed as a result of the conflict. Part 3 highlights men and women’s perceptions of the incidence of and reasons for gender based violence today. Of each part we ask the two core questions posed in this study. Firstly, what is the nature of gender relations and secondly, how do constructions of masculinity impact gender based violence?
Throughout the discussion of the research findings, we use direct, unedited quotes, allowing the respondents themselves to describe their experiences of gender based violence and the multiple and complex ways in which historical, social and cultural dogmas, beliefs and practices have and continue to shape relations between and among men and women.

**PART 1: BEFORE THE CONFLICT**

From the outset, the lack of social integration and cohesion between the various groups of freed slaves, who had settled in the country, and the indigenous Liberians undermined the stability of the newly-formed state. The 1847 founding Constitution was designed to concentrate social, economic and political power in the hands of the ruling settler elite, to the exclusion of the indigenous populations. Over the course of almost 150 years, the ruling elite used indirect rule to usurp land, property, the country’s vast mineral and natural resources, and the rights of the indigenous majority. By the time they received the vote in 1950; the indigenous Liberians had been purposely and systematically stripped of all economic and political power and relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

This long-standing pattern of unequal relations permeated all aspects of economic and social life. During the 1950s, the Liberian economy was one of the world’s leading economies with a real annual growth rate of 12%, derived mainly from its principal exports of iron ore, rubber, forestry products, cocoa and coffee. By the mid-1960’s the country experienced an unprecedented economic boom, due primarily to the injection of massive private foreign investments. However, only a small minority – mainly landowners and concession holders among the ruling elite - benefited from this rapid economic growth. Structural inequalities and skewed economic policies ensured that less than 1% of the population accounted for more than 60% of the national income, while more than 80% lived below the poverty line. By the 1970s, however, the economy began to unravel, due in part to the global economic slump, but mainly because of growing domestic corruption and the gross mismanagement of natural resources. As a result, economic growth stagnated; unemployment increased, reaching the 85% mark; and public discontent grew.

The subsistence sector, which was mainly rural based, became virtually the sole source of livelihood for more than 75% of the population. However, after many decades of systematic neglect, the rural areas had neither the infrastructural nor human resource base to sustain the livelihood needs of an increasingly impoverished population. Despite educational advances of the 1970’s and early 1980’s, generations of neglect had left the vast majority of the adolescent and adult population without formal education. By 1984, for example, only 34% of males and 17% of females above the age of 10 years were literate. The 1986 LDHS revealed, for example, that 63% of women had no education, 18% had had some primary education, and 19% had secondary or higher education. Of these, 85% of women (75% in rural areas and 46% in urban areas) aged 35 and over had not had any formal education.

Systematic state neglect, supported by pervasive patriarchy and male-focused traditional values and practices, ensured that women’s contribution in all other social and economic spheres was severely undermined. In the agricultural sector, where women accounted for about 60% of the production of rice, corn, cassava and other food crops, their output and capacity remained negligible. Despite
women’s predominance in agricultural production, their lack of access to land; insecurity of tenure; and a chronic lack of access to credit and other agricultural resources, rendered women vulnerable not only to economic hardship, but indeed to perpetual poverty and subordination.

Gender Roles before the Conflict

Cultural life and relations in rural Liberia was governed by an intricate system of Traditional Chiefs and Elders or Zoes in the Poro and Sande secret societies. Collectively, the Traditional Chiefs and elders of the secret societies performed a range of political, social and cultural functions, including the resolution of interpersonal or community disputes. The secret societies, found among several groups in central and western Liberia, including the Vai, Gola, Dei, Mende, Gbandi, Lorma, Kpelle and part of the Mano, were and continue to be the main institutions responsible for initiating young boys and girls into adulthood to instil in them notions of morality and proper sexual conduct. This entailed teaching young boys and girls social skills to fulfil their expected gender roles. Young boys were reportedly taught skills such as hunting, ‘brushing the bush’, how and when to initiate sexual activity and how to provide for their prospective families. The initiation process for girls was focused towards teaching her to take care of the home and children, to satisfy the needs of and to abide by the rules or decisions of a prospective husband. As part of this initiation process, groups of adolescent girls or young initiates reportedly underwent cutting of their genitalia, purportedly to keep the young woman ‘clean’. Completion of the initiation process was seen to mark a young girl’s eligibility for sexual liaisons and marriage.

The ideal woman was submissive, obedient, non-assertive, and respectful to her husband and other male relatives. Her role was mainly confined to bearing and taking care of children, cooking, washing and other household tasks. By virtue of dowry having been paid for the woman, she was considered the man’s property and therefore expected to remain subservient to him. Whatever power a woman could appropriate was derived from the males in her family. For example, in polygynous marriages, the woman’s rank or status within the marriage was reportedly determined by the number of boy children she bore. Similarly, in the event of a serious domestic dispute, her power to challenge household decisions could reportedly be bolstered by the number of boy children she had or if her father was a chief. In the event of a husband’s death, the widow is ‘inherited’, usually by a male relative, along with all other properties the marital couple might have jointly acquired. As a respondent explained in the quote below, the woman is expected to accept this arrangement. Only on rare occasions, if the woman comes from a wealthy, influential family or if she has borne boy children, will she feel sufficiently empowered to challenge such inheritance arrangements.

“When the man dies, the woman has to marry the man’s brother because the woman is considered property of the man’s family. If a man has two wives, one with boys and another with girls only, the wife with girls will not have any access to his property. Our tradition exists that when you are married, the woman has no right over her own property. The man’s family will come in and unless the woman is strong or her family has money and she has her family behind her… in that case, the man’s family might share.’

Outside the household, however, women had very little, if any, recourse to challenging decisions affecting them. Other than the women elders who operated within the parameters of the Sande
society, ordinary women were reportedly excluded from all community structures or decision-making forums. According to female respondents, ‘women did not have the right to sit in meetings with men or to take decisions in the palava’. They were reportedly expected to carry out whatever was agreed upon and never to oppose family or clan decisions, irrespective of how such decisions might affect their own lives. As a female respondent noted:

> When the men are having meetings, the women cannot attend. You cannot even send your own girl child to school. Women must always be the least. Your voice cannot be heard over the voice of the man.

The ideal man was one who had undergone the rites of passage into manhood. This entailed successful completion of the initiation rites within the traditional Poro society, including accomplishing the social skills to enter into courtship and eventually marriage. His suitability to marry was determined by his ability to pay dowry; to provide for his family; and his physical strength and his ability to hunt, farm or engage in other traditional occupational skills. As in the case of women, fathers were expected to pass onto their sons skills such as hunting, farming and other activities that would prepare them for their future roles as husbands and fathers. Typically, a man was considered the breadwinner and provider for the family. As a respondent put it, ‘the man was fully responsible to take care of the family. Those were normal days...people were working. The father would bring the money straight to the mother because the mother is expected to take care of the home’. In other instances they contributed to the upkeep of the household through hunting or farming. His access to or control over household resources, reportedly bestowed on him an elevated position of power and status as the ‘first decision-maker’, not only in the household but also in the wider community. This status, among others, reportedly qualified him to hear and resolve conflicts, even those occurring outside his own household – a responsibility which is not usually given to single or unmarried men. In the words of a male respondent:

> ‘The men had more power. They were in control of resources and decision-making in the home and in the nation. Not every man is called for marriage case, except a married man’.

**Marriage Practices**

Respondents referred back to a time when, throughout most rural communities, marriage was contracted under customary mores. Throughout most of Liberia the practice of polygyny was fairly widespread, with an estimated 38% of women in polygynous marriages. Though such unions were prevalent across all age categories, older women in rural areas (44%) were more likely to be in polygynous marriages. Marriage was seen as an arrangement between families, or at times between clans, rather than a relationship between two consenting adults and was usually concluded by way of payment of bride wealth to the female’s parents.

The customary wife was considered the husband’s personal property, essentially there to procreate, care for the family and support the husband in his own productive activities, be it farming or hunting. Alongside other markers of wealth, such as land or livestock, the number of wives, and consequently, the number of children, not only conferred social and economic status but also served as a ready pool of unpaid workers. Like all other properties, wives could be accumulated, put to work and disposed of at the behest of her husband. As a result, men of financial standing...
could accumulate up to 5 or 6 wives with no regard for the views of the newly-acquired ‘bride’ or the other women in the marriage relationship. In practice however, the wherewithal to pay bride wealth or dowry was mainly in the hands of chiefs or ‘big men’ with the financial means to do so.

According to female respondents, the practice of bride wealth -sustained by a combination of growing impoverishment and increasing deference to traditional power – degenerated into a situation where even unborn children were ‘spoken for’, as seen in the comment below:

‘It was like forced marriage. When the child is still in the woman’s stomach, the chief can pay dowry for the unborn child. I, myself was paid for but because I am a Christian I could not agree to it. I had to pay back US$40’.

Not many women were by the means to ‘buy back’ their freedom. For most families, the ‘marriage’ of their daughters was reportedly not only seen as a means out of poverty, but also as an opportunity to improve their own social prospects and status.

‘From 15 to 17 years the girl was ready to get married. The Clan Chief can say he wants the girl. Because the parents want to honour him, they give him chicken and the 15 year-old girl. They took everything to be the best thing’.

‘A chief can look at any child and because of fear parents will agree. Because of the position the chief had, the parents want to give their daughter to the chief so they can get some power’.

While the institution of bride wealth payment clearly benefited a portion of the male population, it must be noted that it excluded a significant section of men, especially among the poorer social classes. Young men without the financial resources and who, themselves were often beholden to chiefs or ‘big men’, were most affected. Respondents cited instances where impoverished young men were required to do ‘bride service’ in lieu of the usual bride wealth payment. This reportedly entailed working for the young woman’s parents for a stipulated time period before the marriage could be formalised. Describing the practice of bride service within her own family, a respondent recounted, ‘if you are a hunter and can provide meat…because the hunter was strong…my sister was forced to go to the hunter because he could feed the whole family’. Another respondent explained the practice of ‘engaging belly’ as a win-win situation for the wealthy and powerful.

‘Before 1989, for example, like me, people used to engage belly on a woman. If a woman delivers, if it is a girl, she is my wife. If it is a boy, he is my friend. Either way you will work for them’.

Sexual and Gender based Violence

Gender based violence, especially domestic violence, was said to be prominent in many households. The general tendency was reportedly for the parties concerned to deal with the issue discretely, by way of a mutually ‘acceptable’ arrangement. In instances where domestic violence or other forms of gender violations did come to the fore, such cases were usually settled ‘the country way’. This typically entailed taking the case to traditional chiefs or elders to settle the matter in accordance with customary norms and practices.
‘Before, the issue of rape was not really known, even if an old man takes a girl of 11. Sometimes he can be taken like an outcast but most of the time the families get together and settle the matter.”

‘Rape existed. People used to take it to the Sande bush and the matter was closed. When your husband beats you, the matter will be suppressed. In the married home, women had no rest. Whether you agree or not, the man can just take you because it was customary that women cannot comment. Our mothers were suffering because their eyes were not open. They were blind’

Female respondents were more likely to speak of their experiences and/or memories of domestic violence. Many of them spoke of the violence against their mothers and their own lack of understanding of the significance or consequences of such violence. As can be seen from the quotes below, even in the minds of young children, the presumption is that the woman’s behaviour is errant and therefore deserving of punishment.

‘I can remember 1980-81, my mother does wrong to my father, and we all turn against her. Pappy beat her. We the children were not happy, because the woman disobeyed. Beating used to happen with good understanding’.

In almost all conversations, female respondents linked violence against women to women’s lack of access to educational opportunities and their lack of knowledge of their basic human rights. Several spoke of the educational disadvantages they experienced and the disempowering effect this had on their ability to assert their rights, not only as wives but also as mothers. Traditional beliefs prescribed that young boys and girls attended initiation or ‘bush’ schools for up to 3 or 4 years, consequently skipping the foundational years of elementary schooling.

As a number of female respondents pointed out, there was an expectation that after completing their stint in the ‘bush schools’ of the Sande society, rather than going to formal school, young girls would assist their mothers in the household until they were of the age to fully take up their matrimonial and child-rearing duties. While many lamented the educational handicaps this system imposed on their own lives, they were often reflective of their role in enforcing this practice on their own daughters. They attributed their complicity with a practice they now see as disempowering, to their own lack of knowledge and their fear of defying social expectations.

‘Even education too is power for us as women. Before they say women must just be housewives and be there to serve men. We could not send our girls to school because we didn’t know our role as women. Anything the man says, we will say “yes” to it…because of a lack of awareness’.

Male respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to minimise the prevalence of gender based violence, often arguing that it is a phenomenon that emerged only during the conflict. From the comment below it appears that while males were more likely to portray convivial relations between males and females, the underlying message invariably conveyed the sense of ownership that males reportedly felt over their wives, viewing them as a commodity that can be purchased and possessed.

‘My wife, when I take her, she is mine. I worked hard to get her. My wife and I never used to make confusion. The relationship between husband and wife used to be very cordial. Raping women was not
Ethnic Tensions and Violence

For most respondents the disintegration of social relations started long before the country’s descent into open conflict in 1989. For many, the killing of more than 100 people during the 1979 Rice Riots and the subsequent heavy-handed suppression of popular discontent signalled the country’s slide towards what a respondent referred to as ‘the dark era of Liberia’s history’. Following the 1980 coup d’état led by Samuel Doe, sections of the population reportedly nurtured the hope of a new inclusive dispensation, responsive to the needs and aspirations of the indigenous majority.

Figure 2: Human Rights Violations 1979 to 1989

Indigenous Liberians were tired with the rule of Americo-Liberians and it was a period they wanted to take over leadership, reported a respondent. Soon after seizing power, however, Doe and his allies embarked on a brutal crackdown, plunging the country into a human rights crisis (detailed in Figure 2 below) that was to culminate in the 1989 invasion and eventual civil war.

Amid pervasive mistrust, terror, intimidation and fear, ethnic groups reportedly turned against each other. In the words of a respondent: ‘The war brought a lot of development setbacks – maybe it began to
define who we are. Previously the fight was against the Amelco-Liberians but during the 1980-1989 period, the indigenous people started fighting among themselves. It brought one tribe against another and that was the birth of tribalism.

PART 2: DURING THE CONFLICT

By the time Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) entered Nimba County on 24th December 1989, a large section of the population had reportedly already been browbeaten, socially fragmented and cowered into submission. ‘Before we used to forget what tribe you were. The war that was fought in this country – if people knew what the consequences would be they maybe would not become involved. But because of the high rate of illiteracy, people don’t understand and somebody like Charles Taylor comes along and people just follow. If two elephants fight, the grass gets trampled’. Manipulating ethnic cleavages, within months Taylor commanded a huge irregular army, made up of mainly Gio and Mano ethnicities. What followed was a brutal, relentless conflict, spanning the length and breadth of the country. Figure 3 below, details respondents’ timeline of the key events of the conflict period.

Despite attempts by the international community to broker the establishment of an Interim Government of National Unity and the subsequent installation of a West African peacekeeping force by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Liberia plunged into a total humanitarian and human rights crisis. In August 1995, after six years of unrelenting civil war, the Abuja Accord was signed and two years later, on 2nd August 1997, Taylor was elected as President of Liberia.

In 1999, a second civil war began when the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a rebel group alleged to be supported by neighbouring Guinea, entered Northern Liberia.
Over the next four years, amid renewed, intensified fighting against the Taylor government, a second rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) emerged in the south of the country. From their respective northern and southern bases, LURD and MODEL pillaged their way across the country, eventually leaving the Taylor government in control of less than 30% of the country. In 2003, under mounting international and domestic pressure, Taylor resigned, paving the way for the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the official cessation of the Liberian civil conflict.

Figure 3: Time-Line of the Conflict 1989 to 2003

The Conflict and its Impact on Communities

By the time the conflict ended in 2003, approximately 300,000 people had been killed, about 700,000 had been forced to flee to neighbouring countries such as Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana and an estimated 1.4 million people had been internally displaced. Thousands were forcibly abducted, arbitrarily detained or assaulted and countless others were forced to witness or to take part in horrifying acts of violence, including rape, indiscriminate killings, torture, amputations and other forms of physical maiming. Yet, it is the scale and sheer ruthlessness of gender based violations, especially sexual violence that defined the conflict and its aftermath.

Gender based violations, especially sexual violence, occurred in homes, in villages, in public spaces, in front of family members, in the fields and the forests, during looting expeditions, as people were fleeing to safety and as others were forcibly recruited. Violations took on all forms, including rape,
multiple rapes, gang rape, rape with objects, sexual mutilations, arbitrary beatings, as well as sexual torture. By the end of the conflict, an estimated 40% to 45% of the population, 61% to 77% of whom were women and girls, had been subjected to sexual violence. A 2003 International Rescue Committee study carried out among Liberian refugee women and adolescents, living in refugee camps in Sierra Leone, found that 74% of those surveyed had been sexually abused prior to being displaced and a further 66% had experienced sexual violence during displacement. World Health Organisation (WHO) SGBV assessments conducted in selected IDP camps in 2004 concluded that nearly 80% of women surveyed had experienced sexual violations during the conflict. Likewise, a 2008 study indicated that among adult female former combatants, 42.3% had experienced sexual violence.

Figure 4: Perceptions of the Effects of the Conflict
Although primarily directed at women and girls, sexual violence was also inflicted on men and boys. A 2008 adult household–based population study carried by Johnson et al showed that of a sample of 1666 respondents, approximately one third (32.6%) of adult males associated with fighting forces and 7% of civilian males were subjected to sexual violence. Many more were forced to commit or to witness sexual violence, including rape, rape with objects, mutilation or branding against others, often involving family members, the elderly or fellow clan-folk.

The nature and extent of sexual abuse and torture had and continues to have serious physical, psychological, social and reproductive health consequences for women and young girls. The 2008 Situation Analysis found that among women and girls who had been raped, the physical trauma associated with the violations continue to cause serious reproductive health problems, including irregular menstruation, amenorrhea and sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS. Research also shows that experience of sexual violence creates intense feelings of helplessness, insecurity, acute reactions of shame, humiliation, self-loathing, poor self-esteem, and poor self-confidence - the impact of which can have short- and long-term implications for the mental health and psychosocial well-being of survivors. Exacerbating these, are an array of societal dynamics, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions that reinforce the vulnerability of SGBV survivors and put them at greater risk of social isolation, ostracism and further threats of violence inside and outside the home. Despite evidence of sexual violence against men in Liberia, very little literature is available. However, according to the 2008 study by Johnson and colleagues, the psychological effects of sexual violence against men is not very different to that experienced by female survivors of sexual and gender based violence. Her research shows, for example, that 81% of male former fighters who experienced sexual violence, displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Male former fighters who experienced sexual violence were reportedly also more likely to show symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation and had worse mental health outcomes than other former fighters or civilian men who did not experience exposure to sexual violence.

Displacement

Forced displacement accounted for 36% of violations, making it the most frequently reported violation type reported to the Liberian TRC. Over the span of 14 years and across the length and breadth of the country, more than two-thirds of the population were violently uprooted - many being displaced several times. A detailed analysis of human rights violations committed during the conflict period showed close parallels between displacement patterns and spikes in the escalation of the conflict, with large scale displacement featuring prominently during 1990, 1994 and 2003. It also revealed close correlations between waves of population displacement and the killing of males, especially older men; and the forced recruitment of young people. Other forms of human rights violations that drove the conflict and ensuing population displacements, included looting, destruction of property; and all forms of sexual violations, rapes, gang rapes, public rapes and sexual torture. According to a Situation Analysis, 62.5% of women surveyed reported personal experiences of sexual torture, including being stripped naked; grievous assaults on pregnant women; and the forceful insertion of objects in their vagina. It also shows that in addition to rampant gender based violations, males and females endured horrific torture, including witnessing someone being killed (62.2%); bayonet or cutlass injuries (29%); burning with molten plastic (20.4%); landmine injuries (24.6%); and hanging (19.4%), among others.
No group of persons was spared from the violations; men, women, children and the elderly were deliberately targeted by all the warring factions. In all communities surveyed during this study, respondents had either directly experienced human rights violations or witnessed the commission of human rights violations. They described how rebels would randomly divide communities: one group to be subjected to abuse and a second group to witness the abuse. On other occasions the rebels would randomly select a community member, who under threat of death, would then be forced to commit a violation against a fellow co-ethnic or family member.

‘A lot of raping was going on. They take everything, from the football field all the way to the clinic. They say people must line up and they rape the women. There were divided groups – they have Mandingos and Krahn…I say men don’t respect women and vice versa because she takes the gun. Because they take the gun, men and women, we can get no understanding’

‘During the war, five men can sleep with one woman by force- some come from Guinea, some from Bong County. The rebels, they forced women to kill people. One time they say ’fire the boy’. The body spent the whole day in the sun. Then they cooked that body and you must eat it’.

Respondents described the various tactics used by rebel groups to instil fear and intimidation before they carry out the mission that they had come to do – be it abductions, looting or sexual crimes. In the comment below, a female respondent described the sheer brutality with which rebels forced the displacement of an entire village and how, while in flight they ambushed and raped her and gang-raped others.

‘After the 1990/1993 war, we started running into the bush. The rebels killed someone in front of me. In 1994, they raped me – the whole town was captured and started running into the bush and that was when they raped people. Maybe one woman was having 13 to 15 men – whether you are a grandma…it does not matter. They fire someone in front of you, grab you and rape you.

Another described a killing she was forced to witness.

‘In town here, they buried one man alive in front of me. He was crying, begging…but they buried that man alive. He kneels down, begging. Myself, I was shedding tears. They say “Pappie kneel down”. They show respect but they still buried him’.

Respondents recounted experiences of fighting factions entering villages, looting their rice kitchens, raiding agricultural plots, killing livestock, destroying property and generally cutting off all sources of livelihood. In the midst of growing destitution and dwindling food sources, the prices of basic commodities and food supplies reportedly sky-rocketed, dramatically increasing household poverty. Describing the combination of fear and helplessness that gripped entire communities, a respondent recounted the events that forced hundreds into neighbouring countries.

‘In 1989 we just heard a rumour and from then our peace was disturbed. There was no free movement – especially for the Gio and Mano. The war entered from Bhattu and people started losing their lives. We hear people saying ”dead people are lying on the streets”. That’s how people fled and went in to Guinea – especially the women and children. People started losing their property and we started seeing different,
different rebels in this town’.

Changing Roles and Survival Strategies

Men’s Roles

As part of their destabilization agenda, fighting factions targeted men for abductions, killings and forced recruitment. While younger men and youth were more likely to be targeted for abductions and forced recruitment, older men were reportedly more vulnerable to public beatings, torture and killings. Unable to protect themselves against rebel attacks, civilian men were consequently largely confined to their homes. In the words of a respondent, ‘there was a time some men became brave and challenged the gunmen, yet they were victimized’. Their enforced confinement effectively restricted their ability to work their farms, hunt or conduct whatever form of trade or employment that could contribute to meeting their families’ household needs. Whereas men were previously regarded as the ‘provider of the family’, this responsibility now shifted to women.

‘They take over the whole plantation and you cannot do anything. Men were no longer brave to look for food. It was the women now who were going out to look for food because men were not that exposed to the public during the war’.

‘Because men were targeted women are taking the leading role in the home, providing. They become the source of income because they could move from place to place. But men were highly hunted and they are not having any power. So men and women started sharing the power’.

While the loss of men’s economic power clearly had a very destabilizing effect on household dynamics, the deeper psychosocial dimensions of this loss cannot be ignored. In group discussions, male respondents spoke at length about their sense of shame and powerlessness. A group of males recounted their flight to Guinea. Once there, they reportedly had to spend hours in queues waiting for food rations, under the watchful eyes of the Guinean security forces, who, from time to time, would whip them into line. They described their indignation at the treatment they received, saying they were dealt with ‘as though we don’t have a country’. Another, who had also sought refuge in Guinea and later returned to Liberia, commented:

‘People started building houses but when we came back the houses were destroyed. The government came and listed all the people and gave them green IDs but to us, they gave us blue ID cards’.

For most male respondents, the changes imposed by the conflict brought about not only economic hardship, but in fact the loss of their social status as husbands, fathers, protectors and providers. A respondent summed up the position of males as: ‘any man who was not in arms play the role of the woman and the woman plays the role of the man’.

Changing Roles of Women

Under the strain of growing insecurity and resulting restrictions on men’s mobility, and increasing household poverty, women were obliged to seek out opportunities to provide for their families’
financial and food needs. Though they lived under the constant threat of abduction and/or sexual violence, they reportedly could move from place to place with relative ease. Many women reportedly resorted to petty trading in order to generate money for family survival. However, in the face of shrinking livelihood opportunities, the only viable option was reportedly for women to use their sexuality as a means of earning an income or securing food for their families. Respondents explained that some women deliberately set out to establish sexual relationships with rebels. Such relationships served several purposes and were reportedly carried out with the acquiescence of their husbands or partners. In some instances, relations were transacted with the explicit aim of securing money. A male respondent explained: ‘Women used to love by will and by force. If you cannot provide, your woman can go to other men or the rebel who can give.’ At times relations with a rebel fighter was reportedly seen as a ‘protective’ strategy against sexual violations by opposing rebels. For instance, young women during the conflict would become the ‘girlfriend’ of a rebel fighter in order to avoid torture, rape, forced labour or abduction. At other times, it was to secure protection and to procure a constant supply of goods or money for the family. Women reportedly sought out high ranking rebel leaders, relying on their perceived ability to protect them and provide money or food from their ‘conquests’ in villages under their control.

‘Women take risks to make love to strong, strong fighter and in that way she can bring something for the family. You know whenever the fighter comes back from the field; she knows that he will bring something for her’.

Impact on Marital Relationships

While extra-marital affairs were reportedly tolerated and to some extent even encouraged by husbands during the conflict, it has become a major source of tension within the spousal relationship, often leading to divorce. According to male respondents, while the circumstances of the conflict forced them to acquiesce to relations between their wives and other men, they are unable to cope with the negative feelings such liaisons now evoke. A male respondent summed it up: ‘You were not happy but you were forced. Most men and wives are not together now. The feelings started showing after the war because we could not accept it’. Female respondents, on the other hand, felt that they have had to forego their honour and dignity to feed their families but their sacrifices are now not being recognised. In the words of a female respondent: ‘They turn our value around to make us feel like nothing’

‘Women were feeding their whole family and they were using their bodies by force to save her family’s lives and to provide food. But this resulted in families breaking up now’.

‘When people were refugees there was no source of income and women were forced to get into affairs to get food. This resulted in family break-up because if woman brings in money, the man has to cook and clean. Men used women as breadwinners’.

Effects of Sexual and Gender based Violence on Men

From male respondents’ accounts, one of the most humiliating, disempowering and traumatizing effects of the conflict was the enforced witnessing of human rights violations against ordinary civilians, and the public raping of women, the elderly and children. Forcing husbands, sons and
fathers to witness the violent rape of female relatives was reportedly commonplace and frequently took place during rebel attacks on villages and towns, in the forests where people sought refuge or during flight. In the words of a female respondent: ‘Sometimes they tie your husband and they will have sex with you in front of him’. As in other conflict situations, the objective was invariably not only to inflict humiliation, fear and shame on the female victims, but also to punish and demean their male relatives. Several male respondents spoke about their emotional trauma as a result of being forced to witness public acts of sexual violence. They all referred to the sense of powerlessness and shame they experienced, especially because they felt they were unable to do anything to protect themselves and their female relatives.

‘It was bad most especially in a difficult situation like the war. Witnessing sexual violence created a sense of powerlessness, weakness, hopelessness and shame, beyond someone’s ability to act, because of the availability of guns in the hands of those perpetrators’.

‘There was a lot of raping. Many of us were forced to see… to witness this raping of our women. It makes men feel powerless, especially because they had the gun. It brings a kind of shame on us as men. It was a kind of disgrace, even when we tried to challenge it. That was the first time I saw homosexual acts brought into this country’.

Though only a few male respondents directly addressed the matter of sexual violations against males, from the comments below (and the earlier comment) is seems evident that the threat of male rape was always lingering. Only one of a handful of respondents willing to speak on the issue of sexual violence against males: ‘It was during the civil war, homosexual act was broadly seen. It had me worried because it could have happened to me or my family members’. Although not directly referring to sexual violence against males, another respondent intimated that both male and female fighters could order the rape of a male civilian.

‘The gun changed everything. We found ourselves fighting… now we are enjoying this fragile peace. But during the war women were disgraced. When I use the word disgraced, I mean women had no power. Boys were taking guns… even girls take guns and you know a person in arms can tell you anything…they can tell any person ‘you be with me’. Almost with men it was the same case. If you do not want to take the gun, you are the enemy. You have to do anything they want you to do’.

Women in the Fighting Forces

It is estimated about 25,000 to 30,000, or roughly between 30% and 40% of all fighting forces in the Liberian conflict were women and girls. By the time the disarmament and demobilisation phase was completed in 2004, approximately 22,000 women and 2,740 girls out of a total of about 103,000 ex-combatants had been demobilised. Research by Amnesty International and Specht show that the majority of women and girls were forced to join the fighting forces. Others joined voluntarily’ reportedly to avenge the killing of a relative, for survival, or for protection. One of the most common forms of coercion was to force women and young girls into ‘marriage’. Such ‘marriages’ became the ruse for all types of sexual violations, including repeated rape, often over prolonged periods. Various fighting factions used such ‘marriages’ to isolate women and girls from their families and social support structures and to break them down emotionally, psychologically, and at
times, physically. Often too fearful to escape, women became increasingly dependent on their captors, relying on them for protection and material welfare. In the comment below, a respondent described the circumstances under which she was taken captive and ‘married’ to a rebel commander. By creating total fear and terror, the rebels were able not only to subjugate and violate the women in an entire village, but once ‘married’, also forced them to carry out activities to sustain the livelihoods of their captors.

‘The CO (Commanding Officer) comes in town and just tells the girl to go with him. Even the town people can give him a woman. In Compound 4 all the women were caught and put under the control of the CO. He married all the women in the town. Even me, I was given to the smallest wife. She forced me to plant rice’.

Once under the control of rebels, women and girls’ proximity or access to guns, bestowed on them a power and status that they had not previously experienced. All respondents cited the power – real or perceived- that accompanied women and girls’ involvement in fighting forces. According to respondents, the majority of women and girls were mainly confined to traditional roles such as cooking, washing, carrying weapons or serving as sex slaves. The tendency within the communities we surveyed, however, was to speak of the ‘power of the gun’ of all female combatants, irrespective of the actual roles they fulfilled within the various rebel structures. From respondents’ comments it seems apparent that they were aware of such power structures, however, in their lived experiences at the hands of female fighters, the power of those in higher ranks, clearly predominate. In the comments below, respondents described how the higher ranking fighters used their power over those on the lower echelons.

‘During the war only women who had arms had power. We used to call them “Wise Gals”. They had power...sometime they can order you to carry their loads...guns...anything’.

‘For those involved in the war, the power was in balanced level because they all had guns. Some men were generals and other women were also generals. Women can even serve as the town chief or the sergeant major and men and women must do like menial tasks like cooking and washing for the rebels’.

**Children and Youth in the Fighting Forces**

Alongside hierarchical power relations between males and females, traditional Liberian society has for generations been marked by strong age-based relations in which children and youth were expected to show deference to their elders, particularly older males. This system of social relations was deeply entrenched in all political and socio-cultural institutions, especially with respect to hierarchies within chiefdoms and in the Poro and Sande sodalities. The involvement of children and youth in fighting forces consequently represented an added destabilising dimension to conventional gender relations, not only along male-female lines but also in terms of socially prescribed age-based social interactions. Though number vary, some estimates put the number of children involved with fighting forces at about 15,000 to 20,000.65

As in the case of women associated with the fighting forces, many young boys and girls were forcibly recruited, often when schools or villages came under attack or when children were separated
from their families during flight. However, research by Specht and others also reveal that a large number of children reportedly joined ‘voluntarily’, most often driven by basic survival instincts to protect themselves or their families. In the face of growing impoverishment; the breakdown of family and social structures; massive displacement and brutal onslaughts against entire villages or towns, especially for women and young adolescents, joining the fighting forces must be seen as a critical self-preservation strategy rather than the exercise of volition.

Children and youth carried out a multitude of roles. While some reportedly served as fighters, spies, porters, cleaners or cooks, others served the more esteemed positions of ‘by-pass’ – based on their knowledge of the local conditions in a particular area. A respondent described his motives for joining a fighting faction, explaining that even within the same faction rebels frequently attacked fellow fighters from other regions to avenge destruction and violence wreaked on their villages or family members.

‘Me, myself, I take arms. In the first war I was still young… maybe 6 years but in the second war, I say “so if Lofeans can beat us here, we too can take arms and go to Lofa and do the same thing”. Even those who were government forces, you can go to a government controlled area in a different area like Lofa. We can also beat up people and even those in government forces from Lofa because they beat us. So even though we are fighting rebels we are also fighting government forces.

Some respondents portrayed a situation in which parents felt powerless in the face of wide-spread abductions and the apparent willingness, at least on the part of some young adolescents, to join fighting forces. In addition to wide-spread forced recruitment of young people, generalized poverty, mass-scale displacement and the resulting separation of families were seen as some of the main contributory reasons for the perceived loss of parental authority and control.

‘We used to hear rumours that rebels entered the country. Children including the women decide to take arms. In doing so, there was no better understanding. The house was turned upside down’.

‘The boy child used to be trained by the males and things were put into place. But during and after the war, things were in disarray because of the dislocation, children could not be controlled. People were in different locations and they could not uphold their culture and the children just did what they want to’

Many respondents cited the general breakdown of law and order, economic incentives and the allure of acquiring material items as the reasons behind the association of youth with fighting forces. Several others spoke of the shift in power from parents and elders to a new generation of fighting youth, spurred on by the ‘power of the gun’. Roles and responsibilities within communities changed as youth, empowered with weapons challenged chiefs, elders and local officials for power and influence. In the words of a respondent: ‘traditions were violated because people felt that they could not get help from culture’

For others, young people were drawn into fighting forces by the lure of material goods.

‘For children, especially boys’ responsibility shifted. Children abandoned the farms and shifted their focus is on the gun. Even girls, when the war came, they join the fighting group – sometime not to fight but to get
the big, big man or rebel chief because the material demands were too high. Girls sell themselves in that way. War could determine who could get which girl, who can get married, who can get rich. War was an instrument of marriage.

Notions of Masculinity

Based on the field research, we found there was no singular notion of the ideal man. Even when describing the conflict period, respondents had different ideas about the attributes or expectations of the ‘ideal male’. Depending on the age, location (urban – rural) or social disposition of respondents, perceptions of ‘typical’ and desired male attributes varied. Some said, in the context of the conflict, the ‘ideal male’ would be someone who is seen to be brave, strong, intelligent and who has the ability to organise other fighters behind him. They qualified this by stressing that the attributes of bravery, strength or intelligence was always based on the knowledge of the local area and the ability to ‘by-pass’ potential trouble spots. Bravery, specifically, was reportedly not necessarily linked to steadfastness of character or moral courage but rather to the daring to pillage and sow destruction.

On the other hand, respondents in Lofa County outlined the ideal attributes for someone belonging to the ‘single-barrel men’, described as ‘not rebels but town boys protecting the town against harm’. The ‘single-barrel men’ reportedly earned the name because of their ingenuity and dexterity in converting hunting rifles or government-issued rifles into more effective weapons used for the protection of the community. Key requirements were that they must be dexterous in the use of a hunting rifle and willing to sacrifice their own safety for the security of the town. They must also be able to act fairly and for the good of the community.

Respondents added, however, that notions of masculinities held during the conflict are no longer applicable.

‘Rebels are not counted in the community because they are not having the full powers like before. The changes took time but immediately after the war while they still had arms, some still had power. But with time, after disarmament, their power disappeared. Those who did wrong during the war have now left the community.’

In some quarters, among some young men, notions of manliness are reportedly determined by the young man’s ability to attract and maintain multiple sexual partners. He would typically maintain a flamboyant lifestyle, with fast cars, lots of money and have a tendency to ply his girlfriends with gifts and luxury items. According to respondents, young men aspiring to these ideals would want to ‘do all the big things on the social level.

Male respondents pointed out, however, that a significant proportion of young men do not subscribe to such notions of ‘maleness’. For them, the ideal young man is someone who is dependable, reliable and willing to contribute to and take responsibility for his family. Importantly, they stressed, the ‘ideal young man’ must be ‘development oriented’. They defined ‘development-oriented’ as the ability and willingness to contribute to decisions and actions that would benefit others – young and old, rich and poor, male and female – in the community.
Similar traits were identified for older males, emphasising that ‘Before they can call you a man, you have to have the patience to put people together because people can come to you to find out what is right and what is wrong. A man must be able to investigate and even if there is tension, you must be able to be fair. For a man to be given this title, he must be able to sustain his family and bring peace in the community’. Stressing patience and fairness, the ‘ideal man’ was seen as someone who has respect for his wife and a demonstrated willingness to act to the benefit of his family and the community.

**PART 3: AFTER THE CONFLICT**

**Measures to Address Sexual and Gender based Violence**

Since the inauguration of the new government in 2006, the country embarked on a massive recovery and reconstruction programme to consolidate peace and security. Basic social services are being restored, roads and infrastructure is being rebuilt and institutions of governance are being re-established. The Government has also put in place a range of measures to address gender equality and sexual and gender based violence, in particular. At the international level, it has demonstrated its steadfastness in attending to provisions and obligations set out in CEDAW, as evidenced in its detailed status report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Liberia is 1 of only 6 countries in Africa and 22 countries worldwide to have developed National Action Plans for the Implementation of the UNSCR 1325. The Liberian National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 and UNSCR 1820 recommends, among others, the harmonization of the statutory and traditional justice systems to enhance the rule of law and to promote accountability and women’s improved access to justice; women’s increased participation at all levels in political and decision-making processes; and the enactment and full implementation of laws for the prevention of all types of gender based violence, including rape; domestic violence; harmful traditional practices; human trafficking; and the sexual exploitation abuse of young girls.

On the domestic front, the Liberian Government has also passed a raft of legislations to promote and protect the rights of women, among others, with respect to ownership of property, marriage and cohabitation. Notably in 2003 the Government passed the so-called Customary Marriages law, closely followed by the Amended Rape Law of 2006, both of which increased the age of sexual consent from 16 to 18 years. In terms of the new Act to Establish the Devolution of Estates and Establish Rights of Inheritance for Spouses of both Statutory and Customary Marriages (2003) or so-called Customary Marriages law, the wives of customary marriages now have, among several other rights, the right of entitlement to one-third of the husband’s property upon marriage or upon his death; and right to seek redress in a court of law for any violation of her human rights.

The Government has also enacted legislation to amend the Penal Law Chapter 14 Section 14.70 And to Provide for Gang Rape (2006). Designed to ensure non-repetition of the sexual violations committed during the conflict period, the 2006 new Rape Amendment Act expands the definition of rape to include gang rape; rape against minors; rape resulting in serious bodily harm; and rape using a weapon and provides for custodial penalties up to lifetime imprisonment depending on the degree of the rape. The Act also requires in-camera hearings for all rape cases.
Recognising the prevalence of sexual crimes against the school-going population, the Government has also drafted provisions for the punishment of sexual offences into key pieces of education-related laws. For example, while the new Education Law provides for compulsory schooling for all children between the ages of 6 and 16 years, it also provides for administrative and/or criminal punishment for seduction or impregnating of female students; sexual abuse or sexual molestation by or of students, teachers, professors, school administrators, or any persons from outside the school that contravenes the provisions of the Education Act.

Its commitment to address the high prevalence of sexual and gender based violence is also reflected in its 2008 – 2011 Poverty Reduction Strategy, seen as the foundational framework for the achievement of gender equality, women's and girls' empowerment, and equitable access to resources. Additional efforts to address sexual and gender based violence include the National Plan of Action for GBV; the National Plan of Action for Women; the establishment of a GBV Unit in the Ministry of Gender, responsible for the collection of information, coordination of activities and direction of policy interventions relating to the implementation of national action plans to address SGBV. UN Agencies are also supporting the Government of Liberia (GOL) to implement four joint programmes that complement the Liberia National Action Plan. These are:

- The UN Joint programme to Prevent and Respond to Sexual and Gender Based Violence, signed in June 2008, providing a holistic framework for addressing SGBV;
- The UN Joint programme on Food Security and Nutrition, targeting groups of women farmers in order to improve their livelihoods and their agriculture production capacity;
- The UN Joint Programme on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment to support policy development and programme implementation to achieve gender equality in Liberia; and
- The UN Joint Programme for Employment and the Empowerment of Young Women and Men to promote their skills development and absorption into the employment market.

Other developments include the setting up of a specialised court to prosecute sexual offence cases; the establishment of a Sexual and Gender based Violence Unit at the Ministry of Justice to persecute sexual offenses; and the establishment of Women and Children Protection Sections (WACPS) in 13 of the 15 counties.

**Current Socio-Economic Situation**

Despite the substantial gains achieved over the past 5 to 6 years, the majority of Liberians remain mired in poverty. According to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, 1.7 million Liberians or 63.8% of the population presently live below the poverty line. Of these, about 1.3 million people (48%) are living in extreme poverty, with poverty levels in the rural areas at 67.7% and 55% in urban areas. About three-quarters (73%) of the poor are found in rural areas. Poverty levels are highest for those engaged in fishing, crop farming, mining, the unemployed or those who are economically inactive, with farmers, hunters, female-headed households, returnees and the disabled in rural areas.
perceived to be the poorest. Though there are small differences in poverty measures between male- and female-headed households (65% of male-headed households compared to 62% of female-headed households live below the poverty line), women are more likely to experience economic disadvantage. Concentrated largely in the informal sector, women are more likely to be involved in low productivity, unpaid activities.

Though women constitute the majority of smallholder agricultural producers, generating approximately 60% of agricultural products, they are more likely to farm on rented land (19%) compared to 2% of males farming on rented land. Evidence shows that women hold land in much lower proportions than men. Today, only 56% of female-headed households own land, compared with 68% of male-headed households, and almost double the number of men (33%) compared to women (16%) owned land in 2006. Similarly, though nearly two out of three (59% of women compared with 78% of men) women are reportedly employed—mainly in petty trading or in the fishing industry—nearly one in three women (28%) is in seasonal jobs. Liberian women are still disproportionately clustered in the least productive sectors with 90% employed in the informal sector or in agriculture, compared to 75% of working men. Men are more than three times as likely to be employed by the civil service, an NGO, international organisation or public corporation. With 56% of women (against 39% of men) never having attended any school and one-quarter (25%) having only primary level education, the likelihood that they will be confined to low productivity unpaid or seasonal work remains relatively high.

Marriage Patterns

Despite the passing of new programmes, policies and laws, changes in early marriages and related marriage patterns remain negligible. Almost two-thirds of women, aged 15 to 49 years, are currently married—42% are formally married and 22% are reportedly in co-habitation arrangements. Of these, approximately 16% are in polygynous marriages, with almost twice as many polygynous marriages found in rural areas compared to those in urban areas. According to the LDHS, almost one-half (46%) of girls in Liberia are married before the age of 18, with about 6% having married at 15 years of age or younger. It also reveals a significant rise in early childbearing, especially in rural areas where an estimated 42% of adolescents, below the age of 19, have either had children or were pregnant. With a reported increase from 29% to 32%, among women aged between 15 and 19 years, early childbearing has escalated over the past decade.

Perceptions of the Prevalence of Sexual and Gender based Violence

Generally, most respondents felt that there is greater awareness about sexual and gender based violence. Though there may not necessarily be a decrease in the incidents of gender based violence, women were reportedly more informed of their rights and the avenues available to them to deal with the problem. Citing changes in legislation; women’s involvement in local development initiatives; increased access to education; and the growing presence of government and non-government organisations, most female respondents attributed the emphasis on women’s empowerment and the current efforts to address sexual and gender based violence to the leadership of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.
‘From the time Ellen came to power, we see NGOs coming in. They took us to hospital…they brought us awareness. Just for the raping, I cannot vote for any of these others. Now I have the right to talk. These days I can have the right to tell anybody anything. You can walk in town and people just say “you come here’. But these days I have the right to say “I don’t agree”. All over they were raping our girls but Ellen put that thing under control’.

‘We the women, we not get respect by men. For now if someone does something, I can carry them to the law. Now I know my rights as a woman. Now, if they rape, you don’t have to compromise… you can carry them straight to the jail. Even if your husband beats on you, you can carry him to the WACPS’.

Others spoke of women’s increased involvement in local level development initiatives and, in particular the encouragement they derive from their participation in the County Development Forums. As seen in the quote below, many cited the opening up of social and political spaces as important avenues for changing attitudes towards the needs of women.

‘Now Liberians are involved in the development process. We try to transform and elected the first woman President in Africa. She became our role model and it changed parents’ perceptions that the girl child is not property. Now they can see that the girl child must be educated.’

Similarly, respondents expressed the hope that the full implementation of laws such as those dealing with inheritance and customary marriage rights would bring relief and remedy, particularly to rural women who have borne the brunt of property disinheritance and abandonment. Noting how men had previously used their power and control over land to dispossess women, a respondent explained: ‘It is because of the lack of recognition by men that women have rights. Men think that women are just there to bear children and women do not have the right to speak out. In those days land was not bought but allocated according to traditional demarcations. The woman works with the man but the woman’s name is not on the papers and once the property is established, the man puts the woman out’. With the implementation of the 2003 Customary Marriages law, she continued, such discriminatory practices are being curtailed and women now have greater recourse to sharing in the benefits of properties jointly obtained during the marriage: ‘Under the new law, if you are married traditionally the property must be divided. The same manner that the man got you is the same manner that the marriage must be dissolved. The man must settle you’.

**Domestic Violence**

The 2007 Demographic Health Survey revealed that 18% of women surveyed have ever experienced some form of sexual violence, while 45% say they ever experienced physical violence since they were 15 years old. Of those who had experienced sexual violence, nearly a quarter (22.3%) are in the 25 to 29 years age bracket, followed by women between 30 and 35 years (22%) and those in the 15 to 19 years age bracket trailing at 13.1%. The LDHS also found that 10% of women surveyed who have ever had sexual intercourse reported that their first sexual encounter was forced against their will. Physical and/or sexual violence within marital relationships are particularly pronounced, with 38.6% of ever-married women in the 15 to 49 years age bracket having experienced physical and/or sexual violence. During 2007 and 2008, 38% of the protection cases reported by UNHCR/NRC monitors involved sexual violence. Of these, more than a quarter (26%) had been subjected to domestic violence.
Despite changes in the law and an increase in awareness, however, violence against women persists. When asked who they perceive as the main perpetrators of gender-based violence, female respondents pointed to husbands, boyfriends, neighbours, relatives or persons known to members of the community. From respondents’ accounts, domestic violence almost always involved an intimate partner— a husband, a boyfriend or a long-term partner in a co-habitation arrangement. This corroborated the findings of the 2007 LDHS survey that, among ever-married women who have ever been abused, almost 80% reported that the main perpetrators of violence against women are current or former husbands, partners and other close relatives.

‘GBV is not like before…it’s not finished but it is not like before. Now GBV is mostly by neighbours…people that you know. Some of them are former fighters but the majority is not’.

‘Many people still come with the war mentality. Women do all the work and men demand the money. The women do the work while the men are in town to get drunk. But at night they demand sex. If the woman refuses, the problem arises. Men have no respect’.

The persistence of domestic violence, female respondents argued, is directly linked to the increased status of women, on the one hand, and men’s perceived loss of power and authority, on the other. Women’s growing association with rights awareness programmes and local women’s groups, coupled with widely-held perceptions that women have greater access to economic, skills development and income-generating opportunities, is reportedly creating tensions within spousal relationships. Amid growing unemployment among men, women are increasingly stepping out of their traditional roles to become the breadwinners and providers for the family. With the shift in
their economic power, women are reportedly also demanding a greater role in household decision-making. However, some men are reported to perceive this as an encroachment on their sphere of influence. According to female respondents, this is resulting in a trend towards alcohol abuse, aggression and increased domestic violence. In the words of female respondents:

‘Most men are jobless and that makes their power to be small now. Women are the ones who have the power now because they are working and men are jobless. But this is causing a lot of suspiciousness and jealousy and this is causing conflict’.

‘After the war they built clinics and women were no longer dying of child-birth. We elected Ellen and women became more powerful. Men can feel their power going down and now they want to get back at us’.

Some male respondents, on the other hand, felt that with the emphasis on women’s empowerment, the needs of males are neglected. A respondent summed it up: ‘After the war men have become so violent. Men are beating their wives and killing children and there is a lot of drug abuse. But the NGOs are focusing on the women and the men are feeling marginalized’. In the words of a respondent: ‘When men are not working they feel their power broken because they cannot contribute’. According to a group of males in Gbuyee, Nimba County, the only source of income for men in the area is reportedly charcoal burning. However, with the over-concentration of males involved in tree-felling and charcoal burning, forest areas are rapidly depleting, threatening the livelihood opportunities of sections of males in the area in the near-future. For several male respondents, their dwindling contribution to household income is reportedly resulting in a corresponding loss of parental control. A male respondent described his diminishing authority in his household, saying that when he reprimanded his children, they simply ignored him. Claiming that his weakening role is directly linked to his inability to contribute to household income, he reported feeling embarrassed and ‘not a man’ because of his inability to provide for his family. Like other men in the area, he has reportedly sought out other employment opportunities to no avail. Tucking at his shirt, he asked: ‘Look at me. Who do you think can employ me looking like this?’

**Child Sexual Abuse**

Most respondents cited lack of economic and livelihood opportunities, as well as chronic poverty, as the main underlying causes for the on-going exploitation and abuse of children and young people. Owing to growing unemployment, parents reportedly are becoming more dependent on children to provide for the family. In the words of a respondent: ‘The younger ones are now left vulnerable. Before the war, it was not so. The war brought new and ugly things. The war brought in hardship and unemployment. Therefore parents allow their children to become bread winners’. However, with little or no education and/or skills and severely limited livelihood opportunities, children some as young as 6 or 7 years, often resort to street selling to augment the family income. According to respondents, young girls involved in street selling are particularly vulnerable, not only to robbery but also to sexual exploitation. Respondents in Buchanan, Grand Bassa County recounted incidents in which men would reportedly buy the entire stock of goods on sale in exchange for sex. Often under pressure from parents to generate as much income as possible, young girls reportedly get caught in a cycle in which they would seek out ‘clients’ to buy their stock in bulk in exchange for sex. A respondent put it as follows:
‘There must be strong focus on child labour. If children are selling at 8pm or 9pm, then it creates the conditions for the exploitation of young girls. This child labour promotes child prostitution. It’s because of poverty…parents cannot provide for their children and there is a lack of parental guidance about sex’.

A study carried out by UNMIL’s Legal and Judicial System Support Division in 2008, found that rape is a crime committed primarily against young people and that victims are predominantly young women between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Of the respondents who said they knew someone who had been raped, 39% were between 10 and 14 years while 20% were below 10 years old. These results are largely consistent with the findings of other studies into the sexual abuse of children. The Government UN GBV Joint Programme, for example, reported that 46% of rape cases reported to the Liberian National Police in 2007 involved children under the age of 18 years. Similarly, a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) study at a hospital in Monrovia, found that an estimated 85% of the 658 rape survivors, reporting to a hospital in Monrovia, were below 18 years, while almost half (48%) were aged between 5 and 12 years and the youngest sexual violence survivor was only 21 months old.

Respondents reported that the rape of children is almost always committed by persons known to the victim or her family. Children are reportedly most likely to be raped by step-fathers, uncles, cousins, older brothers or fathers. Such rapes reportedly almost always occur in conditions of overcrowding where parents and children or children and male family members are forced to share a common sleeping space. In instances where a child is raped by a person other than a relative, the perpetrator is reportedly most likely to be a person of wealth and influence or someone who is seeking to acquire wealth and power.

According to respondents, traditional beliefs and practices are the main reasons for the perceived increase in sexual violence against children. The rape of pubescent or pre-adolescent girls is most often motivated by the ‘belief that once a girl receives her menses (menstrual period) she is ready for sex’, explained respondents. While this may account for the rape of older girls, the sexual violation of younger children is reportedly linked to the belief that the blood of a young child can bring power and prosperity. The tendency towards raping very young children and babies is purportedly derived from the belief that the blood of younger children is purer and therefore more potent. Consequently, men who rape children would seek out the youngest children for ‘cutting magic’ or ‘ritualistic’ purposes, believing that a sample of the child’s blood, when treated by an experienced sorcerer, would imbue them with all manner of rewards - more money, bountiful harvests, increased authority or political power.

In addition, respondents pointed out, the tendency among some parents to accept payments from the perpetrators in order to quash or ‘compromise’ cases not only perpetuate sexual crimes against children but also complicates the investigations and follow through provided by service organisations. While pervasive poverty is said to be one of the main reasons, parents purportedly agree to ‘compromise’ cases because of the fear of shame and the dishonour it might bring on the family. In Grand Gedeh County, however, respondents also reported that medical personnel are increasingly implicated in accepting bribes from perpetrators in order to ‘compromise’ reported rapes. As seen from the comments of a community-based protection officer below, medical personnel deliberately spoil medical examination forms, thereby thwarting any follow through by service organisations.
‘It’s for ritualistic purposes…men are raping young children. Sassywood used to be there to protect, but now there is no protection and there is no system in place to punish the perpetrators. Even if cases are taken to the hospital, doctors put a different diagnosis and say “no penetration” and the case cannot go forward. On 8th January, I had a case where the child was raped by 4 persons. The doctor told me I must identify myself and he refused to treat the child. I took the child back and tried to follow up but by then the community had already compromised the case’.

Other respondents attributed the perceived increase in sexual crimes against children to the purported weakness of justice system to bring perpetrators to book and the reported erosion of traditional mechanisms to punish socially deviant behaviour. Claiming that incidents of misrepresentation or perceived miscarriages of justice would have been dealt with more effectively by the customary justice system, a respondent explained: ‘Another justice system came in called the Nhia (meaning as sharp as a razor) which was mainly for anti-witchcraft activities. If you deny that you are involved in witchcraft they would give you something to eat and the real truth will come out…the sorcerers and magic in this country is too much and the government is not doing anything about it. That’s why we say this country is not free. We are still in slavery in this way’.

**Perceptions of the Key Drivers of Sexual and Gender based Violence**

Despite the substantial changes that have taken place, sexual and gender based violence is still a major concern. In addition to domestic violence; disinheritance; and rape, the sexual abuse of children and the sexual exploitation and abuse of adolescents have reportedly become more prevalent in recent years. While the victims may vary from one form of violation to the other, the main drivers of sexual and gender based violence are reportedly not dissimilar (illustrated in the diagram below). These include widespread perceptions that gender based violations can be perpetrated with impunity; poverty; power inequality that favour men, especially those with money and influence; historical and current human rights violations; a legacy of neglect of the educational needs of the majority, especially of women and of youth; and traditional values and practices that disadvantage women.

The effects, however, of sexual and gender based violence during the conflict and presently, as the country is attempting to restore social stability and security, are far-reaching. Respondents reported that past and on-going gender based violations have destroyed the social fabric of their communities. It has disrupted community networks and traditions; reinforced old and created new inequalities; increased the transmission of disease (especially HIV/AIDS), and escalated new forms of gender based violence such prostitution, child labour and sexual violence against young children and babies.

For many, violence has reportedly become an effective way of resolving interpersonal conflict and a means to making a living. While some women and girls have reportedly developed alternative coping strategies and taken on new decision-making responsibilities, others have become more vulnerable to sexual or gender based violence. Having been deprived of education, employment and training during the conflict period, many, especially among the youth, have reportedly become addicted to alcohol and drugs and are increasingly engaging in anti-social behaviour within their families and communities, thus perpetuating the cycle of social and sexual violence.
Respondents cited the lack of education as one of the root causes of the conflict and of sexual and gender-based violence. In the words of a respondent: ‘Everybody does not have access to education. The majority who don’t have education are masterminded by the few that are educated’. When they spoke of ‘education’, it was not only in the formal sense of the word but also in terms of general social and political consciousness and, specifically, an awareness of their Constitutional rights. For most, the intentional neglect of the educational needs of the majority of the population was a major contributory factor to the pervasiveness of sexual crimes and other human rights violations committed during and after the conflict. Respondents pointed to the role of socio-cultural values, beliefs and practices in shaping the dominant social relations between males and females and their relative access to education. Many argued that the low levels of enrolment in formal education can be attributed to several factors, not least of which was the influence of socio-cultural practices and the value attached to informal education imparted through the Poro and Sande societies in the ‘bush schools’. While the impact of generations of educational neglect cannot be undermined, the tendency, especially in rural communities, was to prioritise traditional teaching methods above formal education.
Consequently, successive generations of young children, especially young girls, were expected to forego formal education in favour of initiation or ‘bush’ schools. This practice, respondents argued, set the stage for the subjugation of women and young girls. Confined mainly to performing household chores and child-rearing duties, from early childhood women had been socialised into subservience and powerlessness. The majority of females attributed their tolerance and, at times, acceptance of domestic abuse, inheritance abuse and other forms of gender based violations to
socially reinforced notions of the superiority of males and their lack of access to education.

Many, including female respondents, justified the subservience of women not only in terms of tradition but also on religious grounds. A female respondent concluded: ‘for me, men’s overly sense of power stems from the Bible because in the Bible it says that men were made first and women made second’. Similarly, several male and female respondents stated that women and girls are responsible for the rampancy of sexual violence, arguing that through their ‘dress code’ women and girls ‘encourage’ sexual assaults in order to extract money from males. In the words of a respondent: ‘you go in the street now, women’s dressing are harassing men and men are going to jail for it’.

Likewise, in all communities, respondents expressed strong condemnation against the rape of children, arguing that it is ‘against our culture’. However, when asked about the apparent tolerance towards other forms of gender based violence, some respondents argued that the ‘rape caused by females in the way they dress is different from raping children of 2 to 3 years’.

Other respondents attributed present occurrences of gender based violations to the general acceptance of violence during the conflict, and the widely-held perceptions that violations would go unpunished. Prolonged exposure to and involvement in violent conflict, reportedly created a level of tolerance and acceptance of violence that has permeated not only everyday social interactions but also sexual relations. Violence fuelled by a general climate of lawlessness and the widespread use of alcohol and substance abuse during the conflict, has reportedly created a mindset among some that gender based violence was a means towards asserting power and influence. ‘During the war a lot of people were under the influence of drugs and because of that they had courage to do terrible things’, explained a respondent.

According to respondents, present-day incidents of gender based violence are almost always carried out by men as a means of achieving power. In the words of a respondent: ‘the war gave authority to men’. Attitudes towards gender based violence and violent behaviours learnt during the conflict are reportedly plentiful, not only in the wider community but also in the home. According to some respondents such attitudes are predominantly aimed at devaluing women – be it in the home or in public. As a result new generations of young adolescents and children grow up believing that it is acceptable to commit gender based violence. The widespread use of alcohol and drugs reportedly fuels such attitudes and the commonly-held perceptions that perpetrators of gender based violations will not be punished.

‘What all we talking derived from the rebels. Our children joined them and frightened you with gun. It was encouraging for some of them. Rape thing derived from narcotics even if they take the gun from them. This raping begins to escalate. The main cause for this is: what you teach the child is what the child will practice. The child was taught to handle arm. They can go to video club and watch the same way people can fight war. All types of raping …and our parents did not show raping to us. We were restricted. The people are educated to it, so they practice it’.

‘Men had more power than women. The prevalence of SGBV was very high because there was no law and order, women were not recognized and the war gave authority to men. Lawlessness- no law and order, drugs and substance abuse was widespread. Also the gun, fighters and their commanders - both men and women gave them power to do whatever they wanted to including rape and sex slaves’.
Other respondents were of the view that sexual and gender based violence must be attributed to the perceived erosion of traditional values and the reported loss of power of traditional structures and authority figures. Several respondents attributed the disintegration of traditional sanction-mechanisms and the apparent loss of control of elders over the youth to the changes brought about by the conflict.

‘The way the country is going now, people are getting into confusion. If we compare the way of our ancestors with the way it is going today... the country is no longer following that history. My brother’s children are not my children anymore. And now the flirting population is too much. If we want to organise ourselves, we must go back to our ancestors’.

The situation is exacerbated by general mistrust in the formal justice system to deliver justice to the majority. Despite extensive legal and infrastructural changes to make the formal justice system more accessible, perceptions persist that only the poor are held accountable for their crimes. Respondents recounted their own experiences or the experiences of people known to them who had been pressurised into ‘compromising’ sexual and gender based violence-related charges against ‘big men’. In the majority of cases, the alleged perpetrators would ‘buy’ his way out of the situation, either through bribing justice or police officials or by ‘settling’ the matter with the family concerned.

In the words of a respondent: ‘If a big man rapes nothing happens. If a poor person rapes, if you don’t have money, that’s the end for you. There are no equal rights’.

**Accessing the Customary Justice System**

In most rural communities in Liberia, customary justice institutions have and continue to be the preferred route for the resolution of disputes, including matters of domestic violence, rape and other forms sexual violations. The structure of customary justice institutions still reflects the pre-war structure, by which cases are referred up a hierarchy that starts with heads of kinship groups, up through a hierarchy of chiefs. Parties in dispute can appeal matters from one hierarchical rung to the next until it reaches the Council of Chiefs. In all instances, irrespective of where a matter is heard, a particular process is established. Both parties are encouraged to speak the truth and to bring witnesses to attest to their version of events. Depending on the complexities and severity of the matter, the chief may also ask traditional women representatives and youth representatives to ‘investigate’ the matter. Only once they have established the facts of the matter and produced the ‘evidence’ to support their positions, a final decision is taken. The next step involves hearing from the parties concerned if they are interested in ‘harmonising’. This process of reconciliation entails an admission of wrongdoing, a public apology and in most instances, the imposition of a fine.

The customary justice mechanisms continue to be useful in Liberia for a number of reasons. They are quick, accessible, cost-effective and remain socially and culturally relevant in the lives of most communities in Liberia. However, their ‘jurisdiction’ over sexual and gender based violence cases cannot be understood in isolation from the traditional beliefs, values and practices that legitimise and, therefore, perpetuate violence against women. Many elders and chiefs presiding over cases are unaware of what constitutes sexual and gender based violence. Besides, they are likely to approach
cases with a mental orientation reflective of a highly patriarchal system based on the rigid gender norms and values. Consequently, matters such as forced marriages, rape, domestic violence or widow disinheritance are yet to take into account the rights of the survivor. For example, under the 2006 New Rape Law, sexual relations with a person under the age of 18 years, constitutes statutory rape. However, in traditional communities marriage and sexual relations with girls under the eighteen are commonplace. Despite its emphasis on restorative justice and the provision of compensation to survivors of sexual and gender based violence, the payment of ‘reparations’ is most often made to the family rather than survivor herself, in total disregard of the violations which survivor had suffered.

**Constraints in the Formal Justice System**

It must, however, be noted that there are objective constraints in the functioning of the formal justice system, much of which relates to the destruction of the country’s infrastructure and governance institutions during the conflict. The UNMIL SGBV case tracking exercise, for example, has revealed that in substantial numbers of SGBV cases, there is no record of them being forwarded to either the magisterial or circuit courts. For instance, the SGBV data as updated at end of December 2010 indicated that in 36% of reported SGBV cases there were no records of the LNP sending the case to court. Some of the constraints in following up on cases relate to the ability on the part of investigators and prosecutors to travel to more remote areas to carry out proper investigations and mount effective prosecutions. In many counties outside Montserrado, witnesses come from remote areas, and poor road conditions and lack of telephone communication means that witnesses cannot be notified of hearing dates. Poor record keeping, lack of coordination between different components of the justice system (such as the courts and the prosecution or corrections) makes it difficult to keep track of what is happening to cases. It also makes it more difficult to prove allegations against officials accused of corruption or misconduct, given that often no records can be found. In some cases, allegations are made that the police, prosecutors or the courts have ‘compromised cases’, in other words taken bribes to discharge them before trial. These allegations are difficult to prove and exacerbated by poor record keeping and lack of coordination. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that a number of cases dropped at police stations or the magisterial court level are not dropped due to lack of evidence, but rather due to payments made to justice system officials by alleged perpetrators or their families. Unlawful fees are also requested from victims or their families from justice system officials for cases to be brought to trial.

Furthermore, the 2006 Amended Rape Law provides that rape cases be held in camera. However, research conducted by UNMIL revealed that apart from three counties (Cape Mount, Grand Bassa and Rivercess), all other counties held their rape trials in open court. In some cases it was due to the lack of appropriate facilities. In other cases, however, it must be attributed to a lack of knowledge of the law and insensitivity to the rights of survivors of sexual and gender based violence.
SECTION 4:

INTERPRETING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section we reflect on the key research findings with a view to uncovering the main reasons for the high incidence of sexual and gender based violence in Liberia today. We commence by addressing the question: how, if at all, have gender relations changed? In doing so, we take a snapshot of underlying power relations in the socio-cultural context and how these interact with gender relations before, during and after the conflict. Specifically, we comment on changes that may have occurred in four key aspects: gender roles; gender identities; gender institutions; and gender ideologies. Secondly, we explore notions of the ‘ideal man’ and constructions of masculinities in contributing to sexual and gender based violence. Based on the examination of these issues, we then look into the underlying causes which motivate sexual and gender based violence.

How, if at all, have gender relations changed?

Gender roles

‘Gender roles’ refer to the roles and activities men and women are expected to perform within their households and in communities. These roles and activities shape and are shaped by a number of factors in the wider social, cultural, economic and political environment and can change over time and from one situation to the next. The concept ‘gender roles’ also incorporates men and women’s relative access to and control over resources and opportunities as well as the privileges and limitations ascribed to men and women, based on societal values, beliefs and customs.

The findings indicate that while considerable shifts in gender relations have occurred, underlying power relations between men and women remain largely intact. Though both men and women have made adjustments in their economic roles, adaptations were mostly situational and have not resulted in sustained changes in gender roles. Arguably, the most dramatic shifts occurred as a result of women’s involvement with fighting forces. Over the course of the conflict thousands of women and girls joined or were coerced into joining fighting factions. Of these, a relatively small proportion actively participated in combat, with some achieving high-ranking military positions. The majority, however, were generally confined to stereotypical pre-conflict gender roles such as cooking, cleaning, washing or carrying ammunition. Their low status positions rendered them particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence as thousands were raped and many more were held captive as sexual slaves in violently enforced long-term sexual relationships. Since the end of the conflict, the vast majority, including some who had occupied influential combat positions, have returned to gender roles and status positions which existed before the conflict.

While it is true that women were generally more resourceful and that a sizeable proportion acquired new skills during the conflict, the findings indicate that only a small percentage, mostly urban-based women, are able to utilise their skills to exploit emerging social and economic opportunities. Women in larger towns such as Zwedru, Buchanan and Ganta, for example, are more likely than rural-based
women to gain access to resources and outlets to incorporate and sustain the skills they learnt during the conflict years. As a result, they are more likely to be engaged in some form of income-generating activity and to achieve a degree of economic independence. Their improved opportunity and capacity to contribute to household income give them greater access to and control over family resources, thus strengthening their role in household decision-making. Whereas there is markedly greater awareness and willingness among the majority of females to assert their rights, the evidence shows that urban-based, economically active women are more likely to act in defence of their rights, within the household and in the wider community. Their exposure to or participation in community-based projects, rights awareness initiatives or women’s self-help groups, enable them to play a more active role in community affairs, including participation in community-based political processes such as community development forums.

However, the role and status of the majority of rural women remain largely unaltered. Since the end of the conflict, Liberia’s government has taken significant measures towards building peace and security and creating a sound environment for economic growth. Despite considerable positive growth, socio-economic advantage and opportunity have not trickled down to the mass of the Liberian population. Contrary to widely-held perceptions, especially among men, that women have achieved greater economic integration, the lived reality for nearly one-third of working women is that their employment is of a temporary, seasonal nature. Combined with high levels of illiteracy and low skills levels, women, particularly rural women, remain vulnerable to economic and social marginalisation. Access to and control over resources is still largely vested in gender- and age-based hierarchies that continue to wield considerable influence in socio-cultural institutions and value structures. In spite of women’s preponderance in agricultural production, for example, their ownership of customary land decreased from 60% before the conflict to 46% in the post-conflict period. Women are eight times more likely than men to farm on rented land and only about half the number of women, compared to men, own land. Compared to urban-based women, rural women are more likely to be in polygamous marriage arrangements in which traditional gender roles are still rigorously enforced. Largely confined to the role of housewife, care-giver and the bearer of children, the majority of rural women have limited opportunity and agency to challenge the status quo. Their economic dependence on their husbands, often exacerbated by prolonged exposure to abuse and/or poverty and low levels of self-esteem, severely constrain their capacities to take on the complexities of change.

The position of men, on the other hand, seems to be more complex and, at times contradictory. There is a considerable body of men who negotiated the political changes in the country with their role and status unchallenged. While many may have wielded power and authority before and/or during the conflict, others evidently acquired influence in its aftermath. Said to hold sway in political office and key social institutions such as the secret societies and as traditional chiefs, they are seen not only to sustain patriarchy and the subordination of women, but also to wield substantial power over other men, especially the poor.

For the majority of men, though, the conflict and its after-effects have imposed intense, and often, radical disruption and adaptation. Men’s heightened exposure during the conflict to gross human rights violations, coupled with the loss of traditional resources such as land and properties, presented serious challenges to their sense of vulnerability and masculinity. Amid growing insecurity,
poverty and unemployment, many men were forced to take on child care and other domestic tasks while their wives took on the role of breadwinners and providers for the family. While many reportedly acquiesced to this shift in household responsibilities, the findings indicate that for most men the experience caused deep psychological distress and resentment. In the context of the conflict, men’s inability to provide for their families often meant that their wives had to resort to extramarital affairs or sexual liaisons with rebel fighters as a strategy to put food on the table. Many were forced into sexual partnerships in return for the families’ physical and economic survival. According to male respondents, though they tolerated such relations, their sense of masculinity was profoundly offended. Feelings of emasculation and powerlessness were reportedly so deep that they are only now, years later, beginning to process their anger and bitterness towards their wives and the situation that gave rise to these behaviours. Moreover, the majority of men reportedly received little or no psychosocial or other forms of support to assist them in dealing with the effects of prolonged exposure to human rights violations. Besides their own experiences of violations such as beatings, torture or the destructions of their properties, most male respondents reported their trauma of having to witness sexual violence against wives, daughters, mothers and other family members.

The general sense of disempowerment among men is aggravated by the high rates of unemployment in the current post-conflict recovery phase. With almost three-quarters of the poor found in rural areas, the effects of unemployment and declining livelihood opportunities are particularly acute among rural men, traditionally tied to hunting, fishing and agricultural-based income-generating activities. In the absence of traditional sources of income, households are reportedly becoming increasingly dependent on the labour potential of youth, children and women. According to respondents, one of the outcomes of this new role re-arrangement is that the traditional power and authority of men is gradually being replaced by those who provide for the family. The evidence shows that most men find it difficult to interpret and deal with these changing circumstances: the majority of males still perceive of themselves within their traditional role as providers and protectors of their families yet their lived realities suggest otherwise. As a result, rather than adapting to the new conditions and creating alternative livelihood opportunities, they view their loss of role and social status as a threat to their manhood. This tension between what is and what they hanker after reportedly causes enormous strain, not only for the men affected but also within the household. Respondents’ accounts suggest that to re-assert their power, men are increasingly inclined towards alcohol abuse and domestic violence – seen as some of the principle reasons for the perceived increase in divorce cases.

**Gender identities**

Gender identities are the expected or idealised characteristics and behaviours of men and women. Idealised notions of appropriate behaviour for males and females are inculcated throughout the life-cycle of an individual, usually through stories, songs or teachings that reflect the social values of the society. Institutions like schools, religious or socio-cultural institutions play a major role in transmitting notions of gender identity. There is also an expectation that these should be reinforced at home by parents, grand-parents and other relatives.

The research findings suggest that notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ have not been altered
significantly. Though the findings indicate that there is not a singular notion of the ‘ideal male’ or ‘ideal female’ and that such constructions are situational, the overarching characteristics of male-female notions remain the same. Among both urban- and rural-based youth and older men, current notions of the idealised male are not unlike that which existed before the conflict. As in the past, men are still expected to use their power and resources to protect and provide for their families. Skills in conflict mediation and resolution and an ability to bring divergent individual and community perceptions together, form a major ingredient in commonly-held expectations of the ideal male. In a number of groups, notions of ‘rights’, ‘development’ and the ‘common good’ were introduced, perhaps beginning to signal a greater awareness of the role of the male in relation to others. Groups of young student teachers in Zorzor, for example, were emphatic that the main characteristics of their conceptualisation of the ‘ideal man’ can only find relevance if the identified traits are applied in relation to and for the greater good of others. Among older and rural based males, however, there is almost a glorification of ‘the way things were’ with an expressed yearning to return to social relations as they were before the conflict. Older, rural-based males, for example, were most likely to speak about the disintegration of traditional community values, the break-up of the family unit, the insubordination and lack of morality among the youth, and the need to return to the ‘way things were’. They were also more aware of and vocal about what they perceive to be contradictions in social behaviours, especially among the youth. Several attributed what they perceive as ‘the problems in society’ to the loss of traditional authority and the alienation of the youth from traditional values and customs.

Similarly, the dominant view among males and some female respondents was that women are still expected to be ‘home-makers’, to provide care and nurturing and to be responsive to the physical, emotional and sexual needs of her husband. Though such expectations evoked divergent views among women, it must be noted that after generations of socialisation into male-dominated systems and values, some females have come to integrate and accept the subservient position of women. Several women, for example, inferred that women’s secondary status to men is predetermined by the Bible and, consequently, not amenable to change. As a result of their unique socialisation, some women are still complicit in discriminatory social practices, often evoked in the name of traditions and religion, which undermine the dignity and rights of other women. Traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, that are injurious to the health and development of young females, are almost exclusively carried out by women.

**Gender institutions/power structures**

Gender institutions or power structures are traditions, customs, societies or establishments which control resources within the household and at the wider community level. Providing support, status, resources or protection to men and women, these social institutions are critical in the formation of socially acceptable attitudes, behaviours and, consequently, gender identities. Typically such social institutions include schools, the state and, in the case of Liberia, customary institutions, such as the Poro and Sande societies and traditional chiefdoms.

The research findings indicate that while some of the power and influence of the Sande and Poro societies and traditional chiefdoms may have diminished, key aspects remain intact. As it has been for generations, the Poro and Sande societies remain highly organised, hierarchical institutions, with
clearly delineated roles, norms, values and expectations for males and females. These societies fulfil a combination of political, social and cultural roles, including the resolution of gender based violations. The Poro and Sande societies still command considerable influence and support, especially among older men and women and rural-based communities. Among women, for example, the Sande society is generally seen as an immediate, accessible resource and an important ‘go-between’ women and male-dominated community-based social structures. Senior members of the Sande society represent women in gender based violence cases before the customary justice institutions and play a significant role in mobilising critical social, emotional and often financial support to women generally and to survivors of sexual and gender based violence in particular.

The Poro and Sande societies have an elaborate rotational power-sharing arrangement. In terms of this rotational system, the Poro society ‘holds the bush’ for a period of 4 years after which they ‘hand over the bush’ to the Sande society for a period of 3 years. At the end of the Sande society’s 3-year period, ‘the bush’ is handed back to the Poro and the rotational cycle begins anew. In the view of several respondents this rotational system assists the Sande society in counterbalancing power within the Poro society and the wider male population. However, in spite of such socio-cultural precedent, there is little evidence that these societies have instituted fundamental changes in gender power relations – both within the respective secret societies and in the ways they transmit and uphold social and cultural values in the wider society. The Sande society’s extensive involvement in women’s everyday lives has not necessarily translated into greater awareness of or respect for women’s rights among their male counterparts in the Poro society or the customary justice institutions.

In most rural communities the Poro and Sande societies are still regarded as the main institutions to initiate young boys and girls into adulthood and to induct them into the social and cultural values of the community. As a result of changes in educational policies and laws and the efforts of international and community-based organisations to ensure compulsory education to all children, the duration of initiation schools have been reduced from several years to a few weeks. Though this has seen phenomenal increases in primary school enrolment, parents are reportedly still expected to send their children to the initiation or ‘bush’ schools, where values and practices which obtained before the conflict are being still taught.

There are, however, indications that the influence of both the secret societies and the customary justice institutions has been reduced, especially among urban-based young people. Two key trends seem to have emerged. One the one end, there is a section of the youth seen to be alienated from traditional systems and values. Invariably regarded as defiant of traditional authority, these youth are said to engage in criminal or socially-deviant behaviours such as armed robberies, community violence and substance and alcohol abuse. At the other end, we encountered a youth contingent who value and are keen to contribute to democratic change.

The findings show that in most rural communities in Liberia, customary justice institutions have and continue to be the preferred route for the resolution of disputes, including matters of domestic violence, rape and other sexual and gender based violations. The structure of the customary justice system still reflects its pre-war configuration. Almost completely dominated by males, this system has and continues to exercise gender- and age-based control over critical social aspects such as
labour and marriage. Specifically with regards sexual and gender based violence the customary justice institutions do not necessarily exercise the law in accordance with international and national legal standards and the country’s national human rights framework and principles. For example, under the 2006 New Rape Law, statutory rape is defined as sexual intercourse, including consensual sex, with a juvenile under the age of eighteen years. However, in traditional communities marriage and sexual relations with girls under the age of eighteen years are commonplace, with ineffectual or no apparent punitive consequences under customary law.

Lastly, given its centrality in the perpetuation of patriarchy and women’s subordination, it would be remiss not to comment on the social institution of marriage in Liberia. The findings reveal that one-third of Liberian women – or one out of four Liberian rural women – are currently in polygynous marriages. Though there has been a slight decrease from pre-conflict levels, the proportion of women in marriages where men could have up to 5 or 6 wives, is perhaps a fair indicator of the extent of change in gender relations. Inextricably linked to the notion of women as chattels, female respondents unequivocally regard polygynous marriage as one of the most archaic and repressive instruments for their subjugation. The findings also show that presently almost one-half of married women did so before reaching the age of 18 years, with about 6% having married at 15 years of age or younger. Culturally and socially sanctioned as an ‘acceptable’ practice, forced or early marriage has massive immediate and long-term implications for the re-alignment of power inequalities between men and women. As females’ testimonies reveal, early marriage has profound long-term physical, psychological, emotional and educational ramifications. Though the government has put in place measures encouraging young pregnant girls to attend evening classes or to return to school after giving birth, for the vast majority educational opportunities are lost forever. Their inability to develop the full potential of their intellectual capacities not only limits their abilities and opportunities to find gainful employment and assert their personal freedom and independence. It also severely restricts their abilities to develop and articulate emotional and social skills required to negotiate adult life, including their right to assert their rights.

**Gender ideologies**

Gender ideologies form part of the value system which supports a given set of gender roles, identities, and power structures. Gender ideologies – be it at the individual, household, community or institutional level – reflect the degree to which values have been internalised and given expression to in norms, beliefs and practices.

The evidence from the field study points to emerging changes in gender roles among some females. However, the proportion is as yet negligible and mainly manifest among urban-based females. While they may have the internal resilience and determination and the support of a small network of like-minded individuals or community-based organisations, dominant gender ideologies in the wider context militate against sustained change. The findings show that for the mass of Liberian women very little has changed. Even where women have taken on greater responsibilities, this is by and large in line with previous expectations of their role, namely, to attend to her husband’s needs and to fulfil her reproductive role. Historical inequalities; lack of economic, social and educational opportunity and agency; and the power and forcefulness of traditional institutions and values
continue to thwart opportunities for change, especially for rural women. Underlying values in some of the main socio-cultural institutions and practices are particularly resistant to change. Literacy rates for women in rural areas, for example, is staggeringly low at 26%, compared to 61% for urban women and 60% and 86% for rural and urban men, respectively. Despite massive advances in increasing access to education, the gender gap in secondary school attendance is particularly high in the rural areas with a female attendance ratio of approximately one-half of that for males. With financial problems being cited as one of the main obstacles to female school attendance, indications are that, in the face of household economic difficulties, preference is still given to boy children. The evidence suggests that rather than advancing their educational needs, young girls are often forced into relationships and/or marriage with older men in order to bring economic relief to parents. Despite progressive legislation and nation-wide campaigns and programmes to address gender inequalities, women remain subject to burdensome labour conditions and traditional male dominance.

In returning to the question, how, if at all, have gender relations changed? The answer reveals there are complexities of change rather than a straightforward ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Social and economic changes imposed by the conflict created opportunities for significant change in the roles of men and women. While some were able to embrace and sustain such changes at the individual level, others struggled against the weight of dominant social values and expectations. Significant changes in awareness of women’s rights are in evidence in most of the communities surveyed. For the vast majority, however, this has not necessarily translated into changes in their economic and household roles. Underlying power inequalities in key social institutions such as traditional societies, traditional chiefalties and the institution of marriage, for example, continue to negate women’s ability and agency to effect sustained change. Likewise, for the majority of poor or rural-based males, their realities have shifted from being the provider and breadwinner to currently being unemployed and idle. Despite changes in the socio-economic environment, social expectations still dictate that males continue in their previously-held roles. Rather than enabling men to transition to the new realities, the reported lack of social support and safety mechanisms, reinforce a mind-set that seeks to rearrange or return to old patriarchal ideologies.

**How, if at all, do notions of masculinity contribute to sexual and gender based violence?**

At several points during the field research, when asked about the reasons behind the high prevalence of sexual and gender based violence, female respondents would reply: ‘it’s a way of getting power’. In an attempt to understand the notion ‘power’ and draw out the possible connections, if any, between ‘masculinity’ and ‘sexual and gender based violence’, we start off this analysis with a brief discussion of some key concepts.

Power is broadly defined as ‘the capacity to make decisions or the ability to influence control’. There are different sorts of power, most of which is positive. For example, one may be given the ‘power to’ accomplishment a task or exercise ‘power with’ others to achieve a community project. Power is directly related to choice. The more power, one has, the more choices are available and, conversely, the less power, one has, fewer choices are available. This brings us to the next sort of power referred to in this context – ‘power over’. In the context of this study, ‘power over’ refers to the control over both symbolic as well as material goods, including the ideas we hold about
men and women, their ‘appropriate’ roles, capacities, characteristics and the access they enjoy to material resources. With regards, gender based violence, for example, through the use of physical force or other means of coercion, men exploit their power over resources to obtain sexual favours from a woman, who is perceived to weaker or more vulnerable. In other words, ‘power over’ is always in an inverse relationship to the ‘other’. If, however, the woman were to regain her power, the man would lose his and is likely to make every attempt to stop the erosion of his power.

Masculinity refers to the expected or idealised characteristics and behaviour of men, typically conceived of within a socio-cultural narrative (through cultural or religious beliefs, social institutions or societal values) that positions males as superior to females. Notions of masculinity are invariably constructed around characteristics, behaviours, roles and responsibilities that are the binary opposite (actual or imagined) of femininity – the idealised notions of appropriate behaviour for females. These gender identities are important in understanding power relations, since they shape men’s view of themselves and their relationship with women, and vice versa. More so, different people may have different ideas about what it means to be the ‘ideal male’ or the ‘ideal female’. However, cultural values tend to prioritise some identities over others, giving rise to a hierarchy of dominant and non-dominant identities, which in turn may have different levels of access to power.

Closely linked to masculinity, is the concept ‘patriarchy’. Patriarchy refers to a system of social organisation which is fundamentally organised around the principle of male power and superiority. Irrespective of their actual power, all men gain from the benefits of the system even though some may gain more than others.

Returning to the question, how, if at all, do notions of masculinity contribute to sexual and gender based violence, the findings reveal that there is not a singular, but multiple notions of ‘the ideal man’. Dominant notions of the ‘ideal man’, during the conflict period, have evolved from ‘someone who is seen to be brave, strong, intelligent and who has the ability to organise other fighters behind him’ to current conceptualisations that more closely represent the pre-conflict constructions of masculinity. However, even in the current period, there are at least three sets of constructs. Among some youth, the ‘ideal man’ is said to be ‘someone who can maintain a flamboyant lifestyle, with fast cars, lots of money, multiple sexual partners, and the ability to ply his girlfriends with gifts and luxury items’. When this conceptualisation of masculinity was put to other groups, it was dismissed outright on the basis that it only fits men who want to ‘do all the big things on the social level’.

The other two dominant constructions, with slight variations, describe a man who ‘is able to provide for his family, possesses skills in conflict mediation and has the abilities to bring divergent individual and community perceptions together’.

Reflecting on prevailing notions of the ‘ideal man’, we are challenged to enquire whether they describe what is or what should be. It can be argued that the current constructions still vest men with access to and control over power and resources. By and large, current constructions of masculinity are fundamentally organised around the principle of male power and superiority. In light of the current state of gender relations, this finding is not unsurprising. The evidence indicates that the main social institutions and underlying gender ideologies remain largely unaltered. Throughout the field process, males, particularly older and rural-based males, were vocal about
their desire to return social relations to the ‘way things were’. In several different contexts, males generally attributed their loss of role and status to the perceived erosion of traditional authority, customs and values. Respondents’ accounts, however, suggest that the desire to return to previously enforced social relations is closely tied to men’s perceived loss of access to and control over resources and power, including their perceived lack of authority over their wives and children. Yet, the forcefulness of patriarchal ideologies and notions of male superiority are such that they continue to shape societal expectations of men and men’s perceptions of their identities. Under the current circumstances of economic hardship and unemployment, however, indications are that men are unable to fulfil their responsibilities in accordance with societal expectations.

This apparent mismatch between what is and what they believe should be, is reportedly creating enormous distress. As shown elsewhere in this report, with unemployment among men, especially rural-based men, on the increase and many having lost properties or land, women and children are forced to take on income-earning activities to provide for their families. From respondents’ accounts, this has created feelings of humiliation and emasculation among men and a sense of loss of control within their households at not being able to fulfil their traditional roles as providers and breadwinners. Their inability to meet societal expectations in an overbearingly patriarchal system potentially poses a threat not only to their ability to remain part and parcel of a dominant system and ideology but also to their own sense of identity and self-worth. The findings suggest that in order to deal with the disconnect of what is and what should be, many may seek out alternative avenues for fulfilling societal expectations, including recourse to harmful or self-destructive behaviours such as alcohol abuse and violence. We return to this point again in the section below.

**Reasons for the High Incidence of Sexual and Gender based Violence**

The legacy of structural violence, exacerbated by the conflict – both in terms of widespread sexual violence and the changes in gender roles brought about by violence and displacement – continues to bear influence on the nature and extent of gender based violence in Liberia today. Despite significant changes in the law to promote and protect the rights of women, the incidence of gender based violence is closely linked to institutionalised gender inequalities, particularly within the main socio-cultural institutions and value systems. With little or no discernible shift in gender identities and ideologies, socially reinforced notions of the superiority of males still persist. This socialisation of gender roles not only sanctions the perceived power of men over women, but also encourages the widespread lack of respect for women’s dignity, value and contribution.

Both historical and existing contextual factors have been identified as the key drivers for the current levels of sexual and gender based violence in Liberia. As discussed elsewhere in this report, among others, these include historic injustices; long-standing social and economic inequalities; educational neglect especially of women and rural communities; the alienation of large sections of youth from traditional values; traditional practices such as forced marriages, female genital cutting and early child-bearing; lawlessness and an increase in alcohol and substance abuse; and a climate of impunity that fosters the perpetuation of human rights abuse.

Poverty has been identified as the single most critical contributory factor. While it can be said that poverty in and of itself does not explain the prevalence of sexual and gender based violence, we
argue here that poverty creates the conditions in which the problem of gender-based violence thrives. The findings reveal that wide-spread household poverty, coupled with growing insecurities in the wider socio-economic environment, present one of the most immediate and urgent challenges to efforts to eliminate sexual and gender-based violence. For the majority of women, their dependency on men for their sustenance increases their vulnerability to male aggression and abuse. The conditions of economic dependency leave many women with little option other than to stay in abusive relationships, including risky and exploitative relationships in order to ensure access to food, shelter and to take care of their children. Impoverished households are under increasing pressure to succumb to risk-taking survival strategies, often requiring young adolescents and children to go out to work to supplement or provide a family income. The effect, however, is not only considerable disruption to family dynamics, but also a rearrangement and, at times, dislocation of parental roles. The evidence suggests that women and girls have been better able to embrace alternative coping strategies to adapt to the changing circumstances and resulting role adaptations. Men, on the other hand, are reportedly more likely to perceive this as a threat to their traditional power and authority, within their households and also in terms of their role and social positions in wider society.

An examination of the root causes of gender-based violence requires of us not only to understand the enabling factors but also what motivates the perpetration of the crime of gender-based violence. Since the end of the conflict, the general profile of perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence has shifted from rebel fighters to civilian men. The evidence shows that the main perpetrators of gender-based violence presently are males known to the victim. This may include husbands, boyfriends, neighbours, relatives or persons known to members of the community.

It raises the question of why ‘ordinary’ men commit sexual and gender-based violence. While there are no clear-cut answers to this question, some obvious, yet plausible explanations cannot be dismissed. It is not inconceivable that in the post-conflict phase gender-based violence is indeed committed by demobilised fighters. Nor is it improbable that ‘ordinary’ men aspire to the control and power exacted by fighters during the conflict. It is also reasonable to suggest that heightened awareness of, improved reporting and increased access to information, in the post-conflict phase now put the spotlight on sexual and gender-based crimes.

The validity of such arguments notwithstanding, it still leaves us with the question as to why some men – and some women, albeit a minority, commit sexual and gender-based violence. Dolan explains that a strongly normative model of masculinity – where men have significant power over women, take priority in education and other benefits, provide materially for their wife/wives and children, and earn their protection by the state – has contributed to the high levels of violence in Northern Uganda. He argues that in a context of conflict and impoverishment, men’s inability to live up to this normative model has led to frustration, humiliation and resentment, which in some cases has provoked men into acts of violence. The evidence from this study tends to corroborate this view. While further research is required, the findings suggest that there is a link between men’s ability to meet social expectations and their propensity to sexual and gender-based violence.
SECTION 5:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that acceptance of violence as a means of sustaining patriarchy and the subordination of women permeated political, economic, cultural and social structures and relationships long before Liberia descended into open conflict. An intricate network of normative systems, including patriarchal customary institutions and secret societies reinforce the roles of men as providers and women as bearers of children and home-makers. These long-standing power inequalities pervade all aspects of social relations, including sexual relations, which were often characterised by aggression and open violence. The evidence reveals that though not spoken about openly then, violence against women was a common feature in pre-conflict Liberian society.

The scale and extent of sexual and gender based violence witnessed during the conflict, grossly amplified social, political and economic power differentials which existed prior to and, in some instances, even heightened during the war. The evidence shows that two out of every three Liberian women were subjected to sexual and gender based violence, including rape, gang rapes, sexual slavery, forced marriage and forced impregnation, among others during the conflict. Although overwhelmingly directed at women and girls, sexual violence was also inflicted on men and boys, often with the sole objective of men exercising power and control over other men. While some experienced violations such as rape or mutilations of genital organs, a significant proportion of males were forced to witness the violent rape of female relatives, including wives, mothers and daughters. Perpetrated overwhelmingly by men or boys involved with fighting forces, sexual and gender based violence was not only an outcome of the conflict, but indeed became an objective of the conflict in and of itself. It was used as a brutal terror tactic to instil fear and intimidation to induce the mass displacement of civilian populations. In turn, the forced dislocation of entire villages and towns was used as a ruse to commit sexual violations; to coerce women and youth into joining fighting factions; and to break down the social relations and values systems that build communities’ cohesion.

While considerable shifts in gender relations have occurred, underlying power relations between men and women remain largely intact. Though both men and women have made adjustments in their economic roles, adaptations were mostly situational and have not resulted in sustained changes in gender roles. Underlying power inequalities in key social institutions and gender ideologies continue to act against substantial and long-term changes in gender relations. Despite changes in the socio-economic environment, social expectations still dictate that males continue in their previously-held roles. Rather than enabling men to transition to the new realities, the lack of social support and safety mechanisms reinforce the yearning among men to rearrange or return to old patriarchal ideologies.

The findings suggest there is a link between men’s rigid adherence to gender roles and expectations and the incidence of sexual and gender based violence. Their inability to meet societal expectations in an overbearingly patriarchal system potentially poses a threat not only to their ability to remain part and parcel of a dominant system and ideology but also to their own sense of identity and self-
worth. The findings suggest that in order to deal with the disconnect of what is and what should be, many may seek out alternative avenues for fulfilling societal expectations, including recourse to harmful or self-destructive behaviours such as alcohol abuse and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.

However, it cannot be concluded that there is no scope for lasting change. Though limited as yet, changes in consciousness among women and men are in evidence, and can be built on. The pressures of economic realities, evolving social and political processes, and an overall awareness of human rights imperatives necessitate a realignment of gender roles and social relations.

**Recommendations**

**Focus on primary prevention based on a human rights framework.**

Gender-based violence— as part of a wider spectrum of human rights violations committed during war and in the current post-conflict recovery phase—can best be addressed by eradicating conditions in the social, political, economic and cultural environments that spawn social and economic inequalities; social exclusion and marginalisation; injustice; impunity; and violence. In the Liberian context, the complexities of past and current gender-based crimes are compounded by socio-cultural beliefs and practices that perpetuate unequal gendered power relations, fuelling perceptions that gender-based crimes can go unpunished.

Long-term change requires focusing on prevention and promoting human rights. Preventing gender-based violence will involve addressing the root causes of such violence and challenging communities to examine the assumptions and norms that perpetuate it, including women’s lower status and inequality within male-female relationships. In this context it is especially urgent to connect prevention and response strategies with community initiatives that support peace, social justice, and development, and which address current misperceptions about the national agenda based on human rights principles. A key step in mobilising understanding of and support for the national human rights agenda entails rebuilding community-based structures and capacities. This will facilitate the construction, at community level, of an environment in which women’s inherent right to equality and dignity can be respected, allowing them to claim those rights and holding the community accountable for any violations. Specific activities to this end may include:

- Making human rights an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all gender-based programming.

- Identifying and developing the capacity of key individuals in community-based structures and traditional institutions, including the customary justice system and the secret societies to champion human rights and to promote rights-based approaches within customary justice practices.

- Including human rights sensitisation in life skills and livelihoods support for women and girls to reduce their risk of having to adopt survival strategies such as forced marriages, prostitution that expose them to additional risks of human rights violations.
Reach out to and engage all stakeholders in the community.

Prevention begins with respecting the community’s capacity to make positive change. Efforts need to be premised on understanding a community’s views on gender based violence as a framework for strengthening its response to such violence. Prevention should recognize the multifaceted relationships between community members and socio-cultural institutions and acknowledge the complex history, culture and experiences that shape each community. Initiatives should seek input and participation from a cross-section of individuals, women’s groups, traditional structures and secret societies to galvanize momentum for action. While NGOs and local authorities can play an important role in catalysing support for Preventative action, the process must ultimately be spearheaded and sustained by community members. Activities may include:

- Conducting periodic risk assessments through community mapping exercises, in close collaboration with community groups, traditional and religious leaders, men, youth and survivors of SGBV, to identify high-risk areas where sexual violations occur with a view to mobilising community-based strategies and resources for response.

- Building short- and long-term training programmes to strengthen the capacities of local resources (community groups, traditional and religious leaders, men, youth and survivors of SGBV) to identify, create awareness of and put in place community-based strategies and resources for response.

- Putting in place a sustained community dialogue or palava hut process to promote ‘safe communities’ and to promote community cohesion.
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According to UNMIL’s Research on Prevalence and Attitudes to Rape in Liberia, September to October 2008, A WHO study conducted in 2004 in Montserrado and Bong counties found that 77.4% of women were raped during the conflict. In 2005, a similar study in Lofa, Nimba, Grand Gedeh and Grand Bassa counties estimated that 72.1% of the women had been raped during the war. Another WHO study in 2006 in four counties in Liberia found that 61.4% of the respondents had been raped during the war.

The impact of conflict on women and girls in West and Central Africa and the UNICEF response


Amnesty International, Liberia: A flawed process discriminates against women and girls, AI Index: AFR 34/004/2008


It is estimated that about 68% of women and girls were coerced into joining fighting forces. Cited in Amnesty International, Liberia: A flawed process discriminates against women and girls, AI Index: AFR 34/004/2008


Other African countries with National Action Plans for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in place, are Cote D’Ivoire, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda and more recently, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Liberia Poverty Reduction Strategy

Fact Sheet: Empowering Women in Liberia: Joint Programme on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment


According to County Development Agenda Reports, including CDA Reports for Nimba, Grand Bassa, Grand Cape Mount, Bong and Margibi counties, rape is the most frequently reported serious crime in Liberia. During 2007 and 2008, 38% of the protection cases reported by UNHCR/NRC monitors involved sexual violence, with domestic violence trailing at 26%.


Research on Prevalence and Attitudes To Rape in Liberia, September and October 2008, UNMIL.

Government and UN Joint Programme to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Gender Based Violence, Republic of Liberia.


Accessed on http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/content/country/liberia/childrens-situation

Written response from the UNMIL Rule of Law Group

Research on Prevalence and Attitudes To Rape in Liberia, September and October 2008, UNMIL. Cited in written correspondence with the UNMIL Rule of Law Group

These for key elements are identified by Judy El-Bushra, J & Sahl, I.M.G. Cycles of Violence: Gender Relations and Armed Conflict, Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development (ACORD), May 2005
