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Keeping Liberian women safe from violence

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Keeping Liberian women safe from violence. Photo: Ken Harper/Flickr

While Liberian women play a huge role in shaping the social, economic and political landscape of the country, it offers a conflicted picture when it comes to gender-related issues. Rates of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), harmful practices (HPs), female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and teenage pregnancy are all high, while access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) is low. Progress in peacebuilding and security over the last decades has not translated into actions to eliminate violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Recently-released data from the [Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index \(SCORE\)](#) shows that gender is strongly associated with socio-demographic risk index in Liberia. In other words, this confirms women's increased vulnerability compared to other groups. Overall, women have significantly less access to education, lower education level (literacy rate is 32% for women against 62% for men), and consume significantly less information, which in turn creates a negative feedback loop on their awareness of existing frameworks and mechanisms as well as their civic engagement that could actually enhance their sense of security physically, politically and economically.

The huge gap in terms of literacy is related to some extent to the belief that education is more important for a boy than for a girl, an opinion shared by more than 12% of the population. This could suggest that at least one in 10 Liberian households would hold their daughters back from formal education. Considering other practices, such as early marriage, early pregnancy, domestic work and violence, as well as difficulties with regards to physical access to schools, this belief is detrimental to girls' education. Interestingly, SCORE Liberia's resilience analysis has identified that information consumption can act as a proxy to education and improve resilience capacities, and as such, it is as a key entry point to address women's vulnerabilities especially in short and medium term while formal education for girls could help bend the curve of inequality over the long term. Liberia ranks 177th out of 188 countries in the Gender Inequality Index.

Moreover, the SCORE Index, a tool designed to measure peace in societies, reveals that about two out of 10 Liberians endorse domestic violence against women and children, and one out of 10 endorses sexual violence, including rape. Also the survey revealed that four in every 10 Liberians believe that women are too soft to be good leaders. Some of these trends find roots in cultural practices and beliefs defended or normalized by both men and women, and hence strongly linked to contextual gender norms. This is also illustrated by the fact that SGBV is higher in rural areas where the SCORE Index found more fragility and higher victimhood. Many SGBV survivors such as rape victims have to bear the trauma and shame in a society where cases of violence against women are most of the time compromised.

It is worth noting that the assessment of SGBV in Liberia does not include female genital mutilation. FGM is considered a normal traditional practice rather than a violent act in Liberia. This opinion is held by many Liberians, including elites, which

makes the issue very difficult to talk about, let alone to address. Due to this differentiation in perceptions, FGM was assessed with a separate indicator. The study found strong support for FGM. Normalization of FGM in Liberia is 4.6. On a scale from zero to 10, where zero would mean that nobody supports FGM and 10 means that everybody supports FGM, a score of 4.6 is concerning.

In line with the Liberian National development plan (2019-2023), the Pro-poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD), the Liberia Spotlight Programme (2019-2022) implemented by five United Nations agencies and programmes (UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP, UNICEF and OHCHR) could be an opportunity to effectively tackle most of these issues provided that it succeeds to achieve its ambitious goals of driving legislative reforms, influencing social norms and supporting women movements and civil society initiatives.

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