

SEXUAL VIOLENCE UPDATE, LIBERIA, April 2009

Responding to and Preventing Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Liberia

About the UN-Liberian Government SGBV Joint Programme

During the fourteen years of brutal conflict in Liberia, women and girls were consistently targeted as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, and instil fear in members of the community. Available data indicates a continuing high prevalence of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), yet the rate of prosecution for these crimes remains low.

To address the situation, the Liberian Government developed a National GBV Plan of Action in 2006 and formed the GBV National Taskforce, as well as a GBV Unit to serve as the Secretariat within the Ministry of Gender and Development. The National GBV Plan of Action prioritises training for health and psychosocial service providers, reform of the legal system, effective responses to issues of violence (not sure what this means), and establishment of outreach services for survivors.

Implementation of the UN-Government Joint Programme on SGBV began in July 2008. This Programme focuses on addressing sexual violence as a manifestation of GBV. It harnesses UN support for the GBV National Plan of Action and builds on existing interventions in a complementary and comprehensive manner. The participating UN Agencies and UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia) work in close collaboration with the Government and in consultation with the GBV Taskforce, NGOs, and community-based organizations.. It is within the context of this partnership that the UN's coordinated efforts on sexual violence in Liberia have taken place.

As this field update will discuss further, the legal aspect of the UN-Liberian collaboration remains the least well-developed, although strategies to strengthen the criminal justice system's response to SGBV are underway.

Programme Management

In February 2009, a Programme Advisor was appointed to head the Joint Programme. She is financed by the inter-agency network, **UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict** (UN Action), and is located within the Ministry of Gender and Development. The day-to-day management of the Programme is the responsibility of a **Programme Management Team**, headed by the Programme Advisor who works closely with two coordinators, one appointed by UNFPA and the other to be appointed by UNIFEM, and supported by a Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist.

The Joint Programme has five pillars, each with a Lead Agency:

- 1) Psychosocial Pillar: **WHO**
- 2) Health Pillar: **UNFPA**
- 3) Legal Pillar: **UNDP**
- 4) Security/Protection Pillar: **UNMIL** (**UNIFEM** alternate)
- 5) Coordination: The **MoGD** supported by the **Joint Programme Management Team**.

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Strategies to Respond to and Prevent Sexual and Gender Based Violence

The Joint Programme strategies, which were developed in consultation with the government and other stakeholders, are comprehensive and systematically promote strong partnerships between government, civil society and the UN.

The **Psychosocial Pillar** aims to **make support for survivors of SGBV available and accessible**. The focus of the interventions is on strengthening systems, building local capacities through training of social workers, community workers and peer groups on psychosocial counselling providing trained trauma counsellors and promoting awareness at the operational level of the psychosocial impact of sexual violence on its survivors. The program aims to provide direct services to at least 500 survivors every year.

The objective of the **Health Pillar** is to address the **health care needs of SGBV survivors**. The strategies focus on two levels: (1) the structural level, through protocols and guidelines, the National Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and the physical refurbishment of health facilities; and (2) the systemic level, through response strategies like nation-wide distribution of rape kits, drugs and clinical management of rape.

Within the **Legal Pillar**, strategies to **strengthen the criminal justice system's response to SGBV** will involve new legislation; the review of different laws that affect women; a review of the Liberian prosecution manual; the appointment of county attorneys; and the establishment of Criminal Court E, which focuses on sexual violence prosecution, and of the sex crimes unit at the Ministry of Justice. The judiciary, police, media, and community leaders will be trained in survivors' legal rights. Direct legal services and endowment funds are also part of this pillar.

The strategies under the **Protection Pillar** aim at **operationalizing security and protection systems for the prevention and management of SGBV**. The strategies here focus on sensitizing security and protection service providers, media and

teachers; revising codes of conduct; and revising Standard Operating Procedures for safe homes. The training and gender sensitisation of newly-inducted UN Police and Liberian National Police personnel, and reaching out to security actors nationwide with the support of UN Military operations, is also an important part of the programme strategy.

The Joint Programme **establishes coordination and management mechanisms to prevent and respond to SGBV**. Key strategies include improved GBV information and data management systems at national and county levels, as well as a strengthened GBV Unit at the MOGD.

In an effort to combat **Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA)**, the UN in Liberia has taken measures to prevent, report, and investigate SEA cases, and to impose sanctions against the perpetrators. One such measure was the development of the In-Country Network (ICN). The ICN is a network of representatives from the UN and international NGOs that serves as the primary body for coordination and oversight on prevention and response to SEA among the humanitarian community. Since its establishment in 2005, the ICN in Liberia has taken steps to ensure enhanced accountability, coordination, and communication relating to the prevention and response to cases of SEA by personnel working for the UN, its affiliated partners, international NGOs and other humanitarian assistance workers.

Working in close collaboration with the Government of Liberia and local partners, the ICN has enjoyed a significant level of success in setting up mechanisms to implement international standards and policies relating to the prevention of SEA. In this regard, the SGBV Government-UN Joint Programme has also incorporated strategies for campaigns and sensitization on SEA, as the issue is not treated independently from other forms of gender violence.

While tremendous effort has gone into creating environments free of sexual

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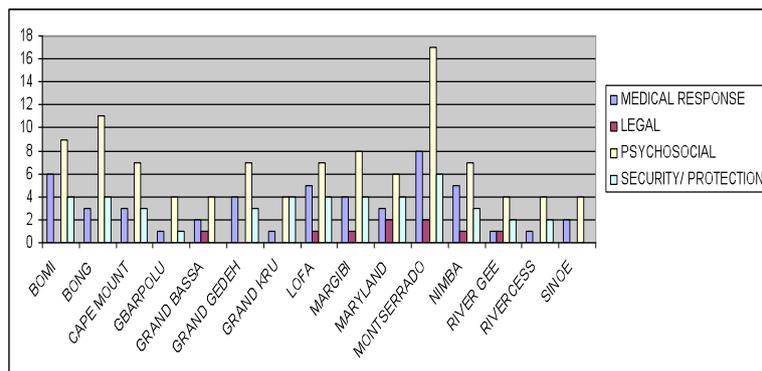
exploitation and abuse, more can be done to enhance the confidence of communities to report cases of SEA.

Recent Initiatives of Strategic Importance

(1) Mapping of agencies

Figure 1 maps 37 service providing agencies, excluding UN agencies. 14 were international agencies, while the majority were local agencies. At the national level, the largest number of service providers reported working on psychosocial aspects of sexual violence—28, including the Ministry of Gender and Development (MOGD). 12 reported working on health and medical aspects, 11 on security protection issues, and finally only 7 agencies, including the Ministry of Justice, reported working on legal services. At present, the legal pillar of UN efforts concerning sexual violence is therefore the area in need of most growth.

Figure 1: Distribution of Service Providers and Locations



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Strengthening the Criminal Justice System to effectively address GBV in Liberia

Anu Pillay, the gender advisor to the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), has found that women who participated in the TRC's Community Dialogue Process were still traumatized not only from their wartime experiences with sexual violence, but also from ongoing SGBV within the country, and from the very real fears that came from living with the unpunished perpetrators of sexual violence. As such, building the judicial system's capacity to rapidly and effectively handle GBV cases is an integral part of rebuilding a civil society and state shattered by conflict.

UNFPA is currently executing a project in exactly this area, working to strengthen the judicial system's capacity to handle GBV cases swiftly and efficiently. A central aspect of the project is supporting Criminal Court E, which will be directly responsible for handling cases of SGBV. The court is located at the Temple of Justice in Monrovia, and has national jurisdiction over gender-based crimes. One of the main innovative features of the court is that it will conduct *in camera trials* involving rape cases with support of audio-visual equipment, to protect the identity of victims and witnesses during their testimonies. This is in line with international standards.

Criminal Court E is operational throughout the year in two terms of court of six months each, which will speed up the dispensation of justice for sexual violence

(2) Sexual Assault and Abuse Prosecution Handbook

In January of 2009, the Ministry of Justice of Liberia distributed the first printing of its *Sexual Assault and Abuse Prosecution Handbook*. *The Handbook* is designed to be a tool for prosecutors handling sexual assault and abuse cases, but its contents are accessible to readers without legal training as well. Users of *The Handbook* are guided through each phase of a sexual assault case from reporting to post-trial appeals. The introduction to *The Handbook* provides an

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overview of the Liberian criminal justice system's response to sexual offenses and discusses the role and responsibilities of prosecutors, the rights of victims and defendants, and inappropriate responses to gender based violence. Also included in *The Handbook* are the Liberian criminal offenses applicable in sexual assault, abuse and exploitation cases, along with international instruments prohibiting gender based violence. These contents make it possible for a prosecutor to prepare a case from start to finish using *The Handbook* as a guide. The Ministry of Justice has developed a training program that introduces participants to using *The Handbook*. All County Attorneys have received the training and additional trainings are planned.

The Ministry of Justice's *Sexual Assault and Abuse Prosecution Handbook* was created as part of the Ministry's larger project to improve its response to sexual offenses through establishment of a specialized prosecution unit to handle sexual assault, abuse and exploitation cases. **The Ministry of Justice's newly created Sexual and Gender Based Violence Crimes Unit** has begun operations and, along with prosecution of cases, will be facilitating training and public education to combat sexual offenses.

The Ministry of Justice was assisted in the development of the *Sexual Assault and Abuse Prosecution Handbook* by the following **partners**: The American Bar Association, Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia, The Carter Center, International Senior Lawyers Project, Pacific Architects and Engineers (PAE) Justice Sector Support for Liberia, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and UNMIL. Copies of *The Handbook* can be requested from the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Liberia, Ashmun Street at Center Street, Monrovia, Liberia.

(3) National Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) Developed

All actors who prevent and respond to SGBV have agreed upon Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to facilitate joint action; these actors' organizational representatives were involved in the development of the SOPs. These SOPs focus on enabling a collaborative, multi-functional, inter-agency and community based approach; establish clear procedures, roles, and responsibilities for each actor involved in the response to SGBV; and clarify objectives and standardize operations in order to establish a framework of accountability. The National SOPs will also seek to strengthen coordination/referral procedures.

At present, the key challenge facing the successful implementation of these SOPs is that they have not been disseminated at the national level, making it difficult to hold ministries accountable to the standards outlined. The key coordinating ministry responsible for dissemination is the Ministry of Gender and Development.

The National SOPs seek to achieve the following:

1. Guide the implementation of the County SOPs
2. Standardize GBV response mechanisms
3. Establish a framework for accountability

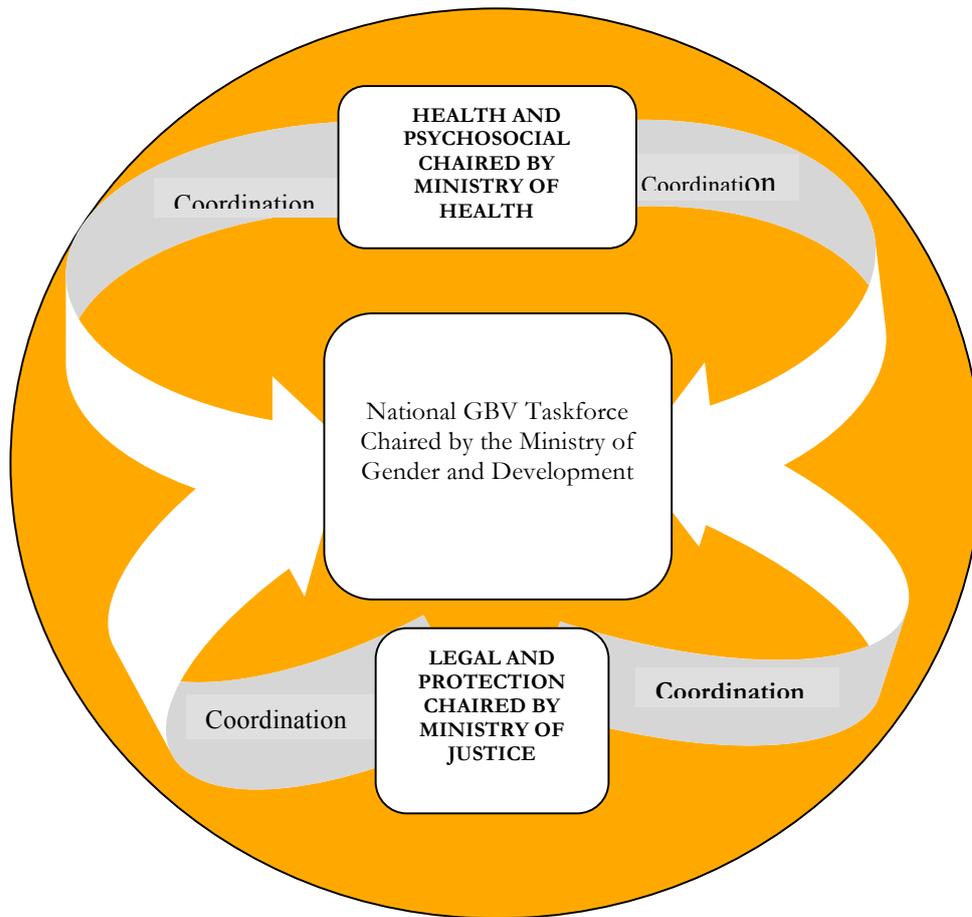
Existing Coordination Mechanisms

National Level Coordination

The Ministry of Gender and Development (MOGD) has the overall responsibility for the coordination of all GBV/SEA activities in the country. This is done through the National GBV Taskforce, which the Ministry chairs. The goal of the National GBV Taskforce is to coordinate inter-organizational cooperation and collaboration among all sectors to effectively operationalize the National GBV Plan of Action launched in 2006. Taskforce members include UN agencies, Ministries, NGOs and INGOs working on GBV. A similar coordination structure exists in all the fifteen counties of the country. The gender coordinator from the MOGD chairs the taskforce meetings in the counties.

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Figure 2: National Coordination on SGBV



Upcoming Events

- Joint Field Assessment to establish a baseline for the Joint Programme
- 2nd Phase Anti Rape Campaign
- Contextualise Victim Assistance Mechanism for survivors of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
- Results of the Assessment of GBV Taskforce Coordination Mechanisms in counties