

Review:

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A situational analysis of the women survivors of the 1989-2003 armed conflict in Liberia – A research report written by Isis WICCE in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender and Development in Liberia and the Women in Peacebuilding Network Program of the West Africa Network for Peace (WANEP).

Sixty-three per cent of the women respondents interviewed in this study were found to have suffered some form of sexual torture with other torture experiences also reported. These included *single episode rape, gang rape, sexual comforting, attempted rape, forced marriage, abduction with sex, defilement, forced insertion of objects in the vagina and forced widow inheritance* amongst others. This is the chilling reality presented by this research report.

The report follows a situational analysis of the women survivors of the 1989-2003 armed conflict in Liberia carried out in four counties of Liberia namely, Bong, Lofa, Maryland and Grand Kru, between March and April 2008. The overall aim of the research and documentation was to inform decision-makers, policy makers and activists and enable them to access appropriate information to effectively respond to the strategic and practical needs of women in post conflict Liberia.

The first chapter provides an introduction and background on Liberia and outlines the nature and extent of the conflict, while the second and third describe the research process and methodology. The impact of the demographic status of survivors is clearly outlined in the report as are the psychological, medical and social consequences of the experiences of torture during the conflict. The final chapters of the situational analysis delve into the economic, reproductive health and gynaecological consequences of the armed conflict on survivors. The research report concludes with recommendations.

The situational analysis differentiates the impact of sexual and gender based violence on socio demographic and economic status and separately examines various sectors such as education, marriage, women and child headed households, agricultural sector, employment, transport and

communication, housing and the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Re-integration Programme (DDRR). This overview enables the reader to have a holistic picture of the situation of women survivors in post –conflict Liberia. Current and relevant data on the socio-demographic characteristics and economic status of women survivors of the conflict such as provided here allows for the design of better responses during the reconstruction period of the country.

In its breakdown of the violations experienced, the analysis describes unimaginable physical atrocities such as ‘severe tying’, ‘burning with molten plastic’ and ‘suffocation with red pepper’ as having been rampantly practised during the war. Some of the atrocities described are particularly shocking and will indeed be new to many readers. Other forms of physical torture commonly reported to have taken place during this conflict include beatings and kicking’s, burning with fire, being forced to carry heavy loads over long distances and being forced to sleep in the bush or swamps for extended periods of time (Isis-WICCE, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2006; Kinyanda, 2000a).

The report notes that:

“Women suffered severe physical and mental consequences of gender-based violence, were discriminated against, marginalized and sexually assaulted and therefore carried their own burden of shame and many kept silent. In addition, women continue suffering from the effects of sexual violence and other violations due to the absence of functional systems and structures with professional staff for treating and managing the sexual and reproductive health complications, as well as psychological trauma.”

It further notes that:

“The culture of violence that has arisen as a consequence of this long armed conflict has led to the militarization of intimate relations, which has spawned a secondary epidemic of domestic violence, including sexual abuse. Indeed the Liberian National Police today reports that rape and other sexual offences are the number one crimes in this country. The fact that 68% of women interviewed were found to have experienced some form of sexual violation during the war and the situational analysis rape was the number one reported crime in the country at the time of publishing the findings in November 2008 bears testament to the assertion that indeed there is no aftermath for women.”

The findings of the analysis show that the level of sexual abuse undoubtedly escalated the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. Due to all of the above factors, and the fact that women and girl war survivors have urgent reproductive health problems, the report finds it essential to establish special holistic programmes that target women and girls' sexual and reproductive health. It recommends *interalia* that these services should receive adequate funding, be easily accessible and with well-trained health workers. In a very practical way it succeeds in making the interlinkage between HIV/AIDS, Gender based violence and conflict which is one that is often overlooked in post conflict reconstruction. Indeed it notes that the lack of education on how HIV/AIDS infection occurs coupled with high levels of stigma and discrimination that women living with HIV/AIDS continue to experience in Liberia means that ...” *there is likely to be a rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in a very short time.*”

The situational analysis used both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. This approach of mixed method research methodology may be a useful way to bridge the gap between documenting the work of activists on the ground and providing accurate data without losing the voice of the women. Feminists must allow the context and purpose of the research to guide the research design, tools and techniques.

“Indeed, a key challenge for African feminists remains the need to create knowledges which both emerge from the diverse and complex contexts in which we live and work and speak to such contexts with sufficient resonance to sustain innovative and transformative action. Designing research methodologies capable of addressing the questions which compel us constitutes a politics in its right, demanding a re-evaluation of received approaches and sophisticated reflection on the intersections of theory and practice as researchers and writers” (Bennett, 2008: 4)

By using both quantitative and qualitative research approaches this report exemplifies a approach to material on survivors of sexual violence which draws from a feminist lens in a post conflict setting in Liberia. In this sense it is groundbreaking. The challenge for feminist-oriented research is always to identify relevant research methods that will be able to unpack and interrogate the dominance of positivist research methods while simultaneously offering access to credible representations of the lived experiences of women.

Isis-WICCE's research team consisted of 31 people; 16 were research

assistants, three of whom were men. The use of a research team that consisted primarily of Liberian women with the lived experience of the context, already working in peace and reconciliation efforts, allowed the researchers to collect data that may have not been as easily accessible to any other group. There was an emphasis on in depth interviews, group discussions as well as various participatory and action research methods. The experience of the lead organisation in peace building in the country presents added perspective, positioning and theorization in the analysis of the material co-created.¹ Geographically, the research area included previously under-researched regions to gain more in depth information and understandings about the effects of the conflict in the most remote and isolated counties. This approach enabled the inclusion of voices of women survivors who would have otherwise been marginalized.

Collaboration with the Ministry of Gender and Development, University of Makerere and civil society organisations such as Women in Peace building Network (WIPNET) was of added benefit and allowed the researchers to access medical and psychosocial support structures and address mental health issues that have previously been left out in responding to survivors of conflict.

What the report succeeds in doing very well is laying down the stark reality of the experiences of women during the war in a way that has not been previously done. The percentages of women who have experienced sexual violations are shocking to the reader and provoke thought and action. Disaggregation of the data according to gender, age, allows for closer analysis in the different sectors. It provides the widest and most accurate representation of survivors of sexual violence in Liberia available to date.

The analysis provides a valuable addition to the prevailing discourse on the distinct manner in which women experience conflict. The data presented can be used to design reparation programmes that provide redress women more fairly and efficiently and seek to subvert the gender hierarchies that preceded the conflict and continue to hold in the Liberian society.

In conclusion, the report is a multi-pronged advocacy tool that can be used for strategic planning and targeted action by Government, civil society, funders and other relevant stakeholders during the reconstruction phase in Liberia. In addition, this report is undoubtedly a solid historical narrative of the experiences of women during the war; it is indeed a voicing of the women's story in Liberia. It is an excellent resource and is recommended for use in any further work that seeks to address the experience of Liberian

women during the 1989–2003 war.

References

- Bennett, J. 2008. Editorial. *Feminist Africa* 11
- Meintjes, S., A. Pillay and M. Turshen. (eds.) 2001. *The Aftermath: Women in Post – Conflict Transformation*. London: Zed. Books
- Turshen, M. and C. Twagiramariya (eds.) 1998. *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa*. New York: Zed Books, Ltd

End notes

1. Isis Women International Cross Cultural Exchange (WICCE) has worked extensively in Liberia including training Liberian women's organisations and activists in civil society on peace building, running a Peace building Institute for women from 22 countries in Liberia in 2008/2009. Since 2007, Isis WICCE in conjunction with UAF-Africa has also undertaken a project to interrogate the interlinkage between HIV/AIDS, Conflict and Gender Based Violence in Liberia, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

