

## **AN APPRAISAL OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN AFRICA POLITICS, A STUDY OF LIBERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*The Liberia civil war was one of the wars in Africa that shocked the conscience of mankind. The effect of the war on women was more devastating than others. The objectives of this work are to consider the violation of the rights of women in the Liberia civil war, examine the role played by the rebel movement in gender related abuses and find why women are more valuable to rights, violation in armed conflict particularly in Liberia. The term gender denotes the qualities associated with men and women that are socially and currently determined. It includes the way in which society differentiates appropriate behavior and access to power for men and women. The methodology adopted behavior and adopted in this work is based on secondary materials only. Our findings are that women were raped, brutalized and brutally murdered and in some cases abducted and uses as sex slaves.*

**Keywords: Violence against women (VAW), Gender-based violence (GBV), Armed conflict, Liberia civil war, Human rights violations, Sexual violence, Women's empowerment**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Violence against women refers to any act directed at women that results in, or has the potential to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm (Raj, 2022; Türkkan and Odacı, 2024). This includes threats of such acts, as well as the imposition of arbitrary restrictions or the deprivation of fundamental freedoms (Modise and Modise, 2023; Dabagh et al., 2023). These actions may occur in both private and public spheres, during times of peace as well as in situations of armed conflict or war (Art. 1) (Fowmina and Rabbiraj, 2023). The Maputo Protocol defends violence against women (VAM) in a comprehensive way, to include acts or threats of violence in both private and public spheres, in peacetime as well as during war and armed conflict (Mukumbiri, 2023; Haynes, 2024). Provisions cover all spheres in which women experience violence that is, in the family, in the community (i.e. at school and at work) and at the hands of the state (Meler, 2023). This understanding is firmly grounded in and further specifies the understanding of VAW as articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women (DEVAW) (1993), which was the first international instrument to explicitly define VAW. DEVAW defined VAW as 'all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private (Art.3) (Mubaiwa, 2022; Ada, 2023). The term VAW is often used interchangeably with the term gender-based violence (GBV) (Desai and Mandal, 2022). The latter underlines that violence directed at and experienced by women and girls is a manifestation of gender inequalities and power relations (Modise and Modise, 2023). GBV is hence closely linked to women's subordinate position within families, communities and states (Di Matteo and Scaramuzzino, 2022). The term GBV emphasizes that women and girls experience such violence because of their sex and in the context of these unequal gender relations (Muzvidziwa, 2022). This is recognized in the understanding in CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 (1992) of GVB as 'violence that is directed against women because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately' (Farhin, 2024). Important to note is that GBV encapsulates forms of violence against both men and women deriving from unequal power relations and structures between men

and women (Applin et al., 2023). The term violence against women underlines that women and girls are that ones that most frequently experience violence often perpetrated by men (Türkkan, and Odaci, 2024).

### **Kenyan women demonstrate against rape in Darfur, Sudan: Violence against women is becoming an increasingly public issue across Africa.**

The incident was not unusual in Africa, in December 1998 a Kenya police, Felix Nthiwa Manayo, got home late and demanded meat for his dinner (Owino et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). There was none in the house (Owino et al., 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022). Enraged, he beat his wife, Betty Kavata (Peterman et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023). Paralyzed and brain-damaged, Ms. Kavata died five months later, on her 28th birthday (Owino et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). But unlike many such cases, Ms. Kavata's death did not pass in silence (Owino et al., 2022; Peterman et al., 2022). The Kenya media covered the story extensively (Owino et al., 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022). Images of the fatally injured woman and news of her death generated nationwide debate on domestic violence (UN Women, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022). There followed five years of protests, demonstrations and lobbying by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as by outraged men and parliamentarians (Peterman et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). Finally, the government passed a family protection bill criminalizing wife-beating and other forms of domestic violence (UN Women, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), violence affects millions of women in Africa (WHO, 2021; Peterman et al., 2022). In a 2005 study on women's health and domestic violence, the WHO found that 50 per cent of women in Tanzania and 71 per cent of women in Ethiopia's rural areas reported beatings or other forms of violence by husbands or other intimate partners (Sardinha et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). In South Africa, reports Amnesty International about one woman is killed by her husband or boyfriend every six hours (Sardinha et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023). In Zimbabwe, six out of 10 murder cases tried in the Harare High Court in 1998 were related to domestic violence (WHO, 2021; Peterman et al., 2022). In Kenya, the attorney general's office reported in 2003 that domestic violence accounted for 47 percent of all homicides (Owino et al., 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022).

Domestic violence is a global problem (WHO, 2021; UN Women, 2023). In Europe, estimates the WHO. Violence in the home is the primary cause of injury and death for women aged 16–44, more lethal than road accidents or cancer (WHO, 2021; Sardinha et al., 2022). Indeed, "violence against women," said then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 1999, "Knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. It is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation." And, he added, it is "perhaps the most pervasive" (UN Women, 2023; Peterman et al., 2022).

Violence against women goes beyond beatings (Peterman et al., 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022). It includes forced marriage, dowry-related violence, marital rape, sexual harassment, intimidation at work and in educational institutions, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilization, trafficking and forced prostitution (Peterman et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023). Such practices cause trauma, injuries and health (WHO, 2021; Sardinha et al., 2022). Female genital cutting, for example, is a common cultural practice in parts of Africa (UNICEF, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022). Yet it can cause "bleeding and infection, urinary incontinence, difficulties with childbirth and even death," reports the WHO (UNICEF, 2023; WHO, 2021). The organization estimates that 130 million girls have undergone the procedure globally and 2 million are at risk each year despite international agreements banning the practice (UNICEF, 2023; UN Women, 2023).

Sexual violence is another problem (Peterman et al., 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022). A local organization in Zaria, Nigeria, found that 16 per cent of patients with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) were girls under the age of five, a sign of sexual assault (Sardinha et al., 2022; WHO, 2021). In the single year 1990, the Genito-Urinary Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe, treated more than 900 girls under 12 for STDs (Sardinha et al., 2022; WHO, 2021). Such assaults, observes a WHO

publication, put "African women and girls at higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS) than men and boys" (WHO, 2021; UN Women, 2023). The WHO found that women with at least a secondary education were more able to negotiate greater autonomy and control of resources within marriage, have a wider range of choices in partners and are more able to choose whether and when to marry (Peterman et al., 2022; WHO, 2021). Such capacities have often been associated with lower levels of violence in the home (Sardinha et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023).

Violence against women is the most widely reported violent crime in the West African country of Liberia, affecting hundreds of women, says a new report from the Small Arms Survey (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023). Liberia is unique country in that it was founded by freed American slaves, and was a generally stable sub-Saharan country until the late 20th century, when a series of civil wars, mostly fueled by ethnic strife and political corruption engulfed the country under the leadership of convicted war criminal Charles Taylor, who made rape and sexual violence cornerstones of his tyranny (Kelly et al., 2024; Sardinha et al., 2022). According to Liberian Peace and women's rights activist Legman Ghowce, there is little education, or justice, in the areas of sexual violence and sexual health in Liberia (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023). Although she says the country has done well since the civil war ended in 2003, there's still a long way to go in the country with the worst teen pregnancy rates in West African: 3 out of 10 teenage girls get pregnant, she told students at Northeastern University this week (UN Women, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022). Many believe the violence ended with the peaceful election of the current president, Africa's first democratically elected female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The truth is that violence against women (shortened to VAWAG for the purposes of the brief report) continues in the country, although steps are being taken by both the government and international organizations to end the trend (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023).

#### Objectives of the Study

Based on the introductory discussion, this study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the factors that make women particularly vulnerable to rights violations during armed conflicts, with a specific focus on Liberia.
2. To analyze the prevalence and nature of atrocities committed against civilians, especially women, throughout Liberia's fourteen-year civil conflict.
3. To evaluate the role and effectiveness of government institutions, including security forces and the Ministry of Gender and Development, in protecting women's rights during and after the conflict.

#### Theoretical Frame Work

The theoretical foundation of this paper is the instinctual aggression theory propounded Leonard Bertowitz, Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell (Berkowitz, 2022; Bushman and Anderson, 2024). This theory provides that aggression undertaken as a natural reaction or instinct and that it is equally the outcome of frustration (Docherty et al., 2022; Ellis, 2022). I situation where the legitimate desires of an individual is denied, the feeling of disappointment may lead such a person to express his anger through violence (Docherty et al., 2023; Berkowitz, 2022). Such violence may be directed those he holds responsible or people who are directly or indirectly related to them (Bushman and Anderson, 2024; Ellis, 2022). In aggression theory, the root of war is seen as a vestigial instinct of pugnacity that has survived animal's nature (Berkowitz, 2022; Ellis, 2022). Most conflicts have their roots in male competitiveness and even sati (Docherty et al., 2023; Bushman and Anderson, 2024). Accordingly, the outbreak of war and war abuses against women are traced to biological facto (Berkowitz, 2022; Ellis, 2022). The basic human rights enshrined in many international regional instruments, such as universal declaration of human rights and the African charter on human and people's rights found in the 1991 Liberia constitution (UN Women, 2023; Kelly et al., 2024). A section provided for the equal rights of women (UN Women, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022). Lit also ratified

the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) in 2003 (UN Women, 2023; Kelly et al., 2024).

Though the constitution states that no law should discriminate against person because of his/her gender, in practice, women face structural discrimination under three types of law which co-exist in Liberia- English, Islamic and Customary law (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023). The effect discriminatory inheritance practices are particularly devastating to women and children especially during armed conflict, which has produced many widows (Sardinha et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). It should be noted that Liberia's criminal justice system remains largely dysfunctional due to lack of financial and human resources (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023). While high level of war-related sexual violence have been documented by the PIIR study and by other organization documenting human right abuses, evidence also suggests that domestic violence against women and children is also common though it is not generally recognized as a societal problem (Sardinha et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023).

### **Violation of Human Right during the War**

Those involved in the war have committed a range of serious human rights abuses against the civilian population, other groups, and members of their own groups including, extrajudicial killing or summary execution, sexual violence including rape, abduction, amputation, destruction of property, disappearance, torture, violations of humanitarian law and rebel forces have been of a particularly heinous nature (Sardinha et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). In addition to the practice of amputation of limbs and other body parts of men, women and even infants, there are reports of pregnant women disemboweled, and women and children raped and made to witness torture and murder of relatives and neighbors (UN Women, 2023; Bushman and Anderson, 2024). More recently, since the November 2000 ceasefire between the government and the Ruf, rebel abuses have apparently been on the decline (Kelly et al., 2024; Sardinha et al., 2022). Again, the resulting culture is one where rape and outrageous forms of sexual violence are incredibly prevalent (UN Women, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022). Reports differ, but somewhere between 60 and 70 percent of women in Liberia have suffered some kind of sexual violence, and Time magazine reports the number could be as high as 90 percent (Kelly et al., 2024; Sardinha et al., 2022).

The Small Arms Survey report, *Liberia Armed Violence Assessment: Peace without Security*, which compiled data based on nearly 3,000 interviews in both urban and rural areas of Liberia, "indicates that the majority of victims are young girls who are on average just under 19 years old. However, the victims are sometimes far younger. A rape counselor at the Duport Road clinic in Monrovia observes that most of her rape cases involve girls and young women between five and 17 years old. The report includes excerpts from interviews with survivors, some of whom have not yet reached adolescence. Survivors of sexual violence tend to be far younger than survivors of domestic violence and other violent crimes, averaging 16 years of age," says the report. However, rape of girls less than 10 years old is not uncommon (UN Women, 2023; Kelly et al., 2024). This compares to an average age of 27 for survivors of domestic violence and 28 for survivors of all other violent crimes (Sardinha et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023).

It's difficult to know why this particular part of wartime culture has endured, because there is no existing study on perpetrators of sexual violence that seeks to "gain insights into why they inflict such abuse on women and in particular on young girls—sometimes even on girls below the age of five" (Kelly et al., 2024; Bushman and Anderson, 2024). Economic vulnerability may play a significant role, as women and girls are often sent to live with relatives because their immediate family cannot provide for their welfare (UN Women, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022). Many live in urban areas and beg on the streets in a country where the majority of the population lives below the poverty line (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023).

Some believe gender-based violence stems not only from cultural traditions predating the war, but also "cases are sometimes related to 'ritualistic practices and beliefs that sexual intercourse with a

virgin can lead to professional and financial success," says the Small Arms Survey (Sardinha et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023). During the second civil war, Leymah Gbowee, who won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize along with then-soon-to-be President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, organized the women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace group, which has been noted for playing a large role in precipitating peace negotiations by peacefully assembling the women of Liberia to band together against the violence of men, using sex strikes and other similar threats (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023). The women were successful in ending the war, officially, but there is still work to be done, paying attention to the residual effects (Sardinha et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024).

Gbowee is now an internationally known speaker and activist who runs the non-profit Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WISPEN-A), and said this week at a conference in Boston that the "moral vices in the country are shrinking" and there is still much work to be done in Liberia and Africa in general when it comes to calling attention and finding solutions to problems like VAWG (UN Women, 2023; Kelly et al., 2024). Another large problem is the stigmatization that follows a survivor of sexual violence, which can impact the rest of her life, sometimes to the point of suicidal tendencies and inability to provide for herself and her children (Sardinha et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023).

The situation is marginally improving now, since President Sirleaf implemented a National Gender-Based Violence Plan of Action, which devoted \$15 million between 2006 and 2010 to education, health services, and economic empowerment for women who have been victims of VAWG, as well as legal system reforms, which were badly needed because "available statistics show that 45.3 per cent of rape and sexual assault cases resulting in an arrest end up in court," according to the Small Arms Survey, and most rape and gender-based violent crimes go unreported (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023). International funding helps, certainly, but Gbowee believes the West must set an example through actions, not just money (Sardinha et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024).

"From our perspective in Africa, women in the US and the western countries lead the trends—as they also lead the trends for fashion and style," Gbowee told Global Post at the Millenium Campus conference this week. "There is a lot of responsibility on their shoulders to guide these discussions because the way it is shaped in their countries will help to shape substantially other countries. A lot of the government of countries across the world takes from the US and other developed nations" (UN Women, 2023; Kelly et al., 2024).

Part of the National Plan of Action included setting up UNICEF-trained officers in Women and Children Protection Sections (WACPS), offering services such as safe houses, and medical and psychiatric care in police stations around the country (UN Women, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022). According to the report, "by WACPS units had been opened in all 15 of Liberia's county capitals" and they appear to be working. That said, it is the women who need to fight for themselves, following the example of western women, not just rely on institutions to do the work, especially since international, often Western, aid workers have been accused of perpetuating the problem in a number of African countries, including Liberia (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023).

"If the issue of women's rights is a contentious issue in the US, and if the women who these issues are affecting are almost silent on it, the trend is that we will see some of these things rise up in our communities," said Gbowee, explaining that when African women are silent on issues concerning women's rights, that attitude permeates the developing world (Sardinha et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023). "We also need the media to talk about these issues and speak about the global trends because we need to stop telling our victims back home that this is the trend and this is what we need to prepare ourselves to fight" (Kelly et al., 2024; UN Women, 2023).

### **Peace without Security: Violence against Women and Girls In Liberia**

Violence against women and girls which was a widespread and sinister feature of atrocities committed during Liberia's 14 years of civil conflict has long been a serious problem in the country, both prior to the hostilities and since (Callands et al., 2024; Olajide et al., 2025 ). Peace without Security: Violence against Women and Girls in Liberia is a new issue from the Small Arms Survey's

Liberia Armed Violence Assessment project, jointly produced with the Norwegian Refugee Council (Kelly et al., 2024; Mensah, 2024). The report examines the extent to which women and girls in Liberia are victims of crimes and violence in general, and then focuses specifically on the patterns and characteristics of sexual and domestic violence (Olajide et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2024). The analysis is based on the results of a nationwide household survey conducted by the Small Arms Survey, in collaboration with Action on Armed Violence and the Liberian Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, complemented by data from other information sources, notably the Ministry of Gender and Development's GBV database, set up and managed with Norwegian Refugee Council support (Mensah, 2024; Callands et al., 2024).

### Evaluation and Recommendations

The following critiques of the status quo aim to bring to light possible areas where improvement by government and civil society can be made. Recommendations postulate that more can be done to assist victims, take actions against offenders and promote genders-rights education.

1. Bail too easy and conviction rates too low
2. The horrific case of Nompumelelo Mthembu, mentioned earlier, could have been avoided if her offender not been released on bail. This case exemplifies how easy alleged offenders get bail and are released back into society without any redress or invention.
3. Collaboration between Various Institutions
4. Ensuring that the applicable institutions involved in victim assistance collaborate and communicate effectively is essential in providing meaningful action against perpetrators.
5. Male privilege and consent education
6. Pierre De Vos has recently written about the power problem in which men enjoy uncared privileges because society is structured in ways that privilege men vis-a-vis women.

### CONCLUSION

Legislative reforms undertaken by the parliament have made important strides toward facilitating prosecution for the state and easing the process of filing charges for victims of sexual offenses. However, legal measures alone are insufficient. Meaningful redress for victims requires a fundamental transformation of societal perceptions, cultural norms, and institutional practices. Sensitization of law enforcement personnel, coupled with the prioritization of sexual violence in policy and legislation, must be reinforced by comprehensive education both institutional and cultural. Only through such systemic and societal change can the pervasive problem of violence and sexual assault against women be effectively addressed.

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