

## **STATEMENT: UPR PRE-Session on Liberia**

**March 30-April 3, 2020**

### **On behalf of West Point Women for Health and Development Organization (WPWHDO)**

I thank you for affording me the opportunity to make my presentation on the UPR of Liberia today. I am Nelly S. Cooper, I presently serves as director of this organization and previously served as board President.

WPWHDO is a women led NGO that has been working over the past 14 years against SGBV; advocating for women's, adolescent girls and children's rights in West Point and its environs, providing education, health, empowerment and child's protection through the provision of safe space for survivors. Collaborating with other women rights organizations we advocated for the passage of the Domestic Violence Act.

#### **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence:**

Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) including Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a serious social and health problem that is deeply rooted in the Liberian society that violates the dignity and rights of women and girls. Though SGBV and FGM are largely influenced by social norms, values, and behaviors, the practice is pervasive and lacks criminal accountability because there is no law that explicitly criminalize FGM as compared to rape.

Unlike rape, there are no recent figures on the scale of FGM. However, the 2013 Liberia Demographic Health Survey (LDHS) report indicates that 58% of women in Liberia have experienced FGM and 97% of women were circumcised before the age of 18 years.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Effects of COVID-19:**

With the prevailing COVID-19 situation, Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is on the increase due to the stay-at-home order by government and health authorities. The FrontPage Africa Magazine quoting the Bureau of Correction of the Ministry of Justice report states that more than 600 case of sexual violence has been reported. The statistics from January to July 2020 viewed by the FrontPageAfrica, states there is a total of 450 incidents of statutory rape, 100 cases of rape, 55 gang rape cases and 10 cases involving sodomy.

COVID-19 shattered the livelihood of many petty sellers mostly women, their small businesses were destroyed. The government order mandates people to stay at home limiting movement to an hour within the communities exposing women and girls to increase sexual violence while law enforcers clad with force of power, violates the rights of women and girls. Again, the lockdown becomes harder for women on contraceptives to access Planned Parenthood services, making it critical to take decision on her sexual and reproductive health and rights.

For girls in grade school it is even harder, with the closure of school, the weariness of staying at home makes it difficult focusing on home studies. Meddling with neighborhood friends has increase teenage pregnancies.

In its 2015 UPR review, several states<sup>2</sup> recommended to the government of Liberia to *'increase its efforts to combat SGBV through community awareness, strengthening of the justice system, and increasing criminal accountability by prosecuting alleged perpetrators. The states also called for the eradication of FGM by criminalizing the practice.* The government of Liberia supported these recommendations as an indication of its commitment to improve the conditions of women and girls.

In response to these recommendations, the Government of Liberia, in August 2019, passed into law, the Domestic Violence Act (DVA). The law defines domestic violence as any act of violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, men or children including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life between parties in an existing or former domestic relationship (Section 16.20:5).

Section 16.20:17 specifically defines sexual abuse as any conduct that abuses, humiliates, degrades, or otherwise violates the sexual integrity of the person, including any act or threatened act of sexual violence comprising any behavior that constitutes sexual assault under sub-section 14.77 of the Penal law irrespective of the nature of the relationship between the defendant and survival, which includes forcing a person to witness, maintain or participate in unwanted sexual intercourse by means of intimidation or force that causes the person to commercialize his or her sexuality, that forces a person to be pregnant, or to have an abortion or engage in prostitution.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Government must end violence against women by improving the capacity of health institutions and the police to gather and adequately store evidence to support criminal prosecution of rape cases.
- That the government of Liberia passes a new comprehensive law that prohibits and criminalizes FGM with heavy penalties imposed on perpetrators.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the countries that made the recommendations include Sweden, United States of America, Uruguay, Ireland, Finland, Angola, Madagascar, South Africa, and Benin.

- The enactment of the law should be accompanied by a change of social norms and behaviors through educational outreach targeting local chiefs, traditional women leaders, and communities that practice the act.

#### **Illegal and unsafe abortion and limited access to family planning information and services:**

Abortion is a sensitive and contentious issue with religious, moral, cultural, and political dimensions. It is illegal and makes termination restrictive based on the following conditions:

- ❖ To save the life of the woman
- ❖ To preserve physical or mental health of the mother, or that the child would be born with a grave physical or mental defect; and
- ❖ In the event of rape or incest and fetal impairment.

Under Section 16.3 (2) of the same law, a licensed physician is justified in terminating a pregnancy if he believes there is substantial risk that continuance of the pregnancy would gravely impair the physical or mental health of the mother or that the child would be born with grave physical or mental defect, or that the pregnancy resulted from rape, incest, or other felonious intercourse. An illicit intercourse with a girl below the age of sixteen shall be deemed felonious for purpose of this paragraph.

Teenage pregnancy is often associated with unwanted pregnancy. Restrictive laws coupled with economic hardship drive teenage girls into undergoing abortion procedures that are unsafe. By the age of 15 years, approximately 11% of Liberian girls become pregnant and by the age of 19 years, 62% are pregnant.<sup>3</sup> Teenage pregnancy rate is estimated at 31%, according to the 2013 Liberia Demographic Health Survey (LDHS). A total of 26% of adolescent pregnancies are unintended, while 30% pregnancies among adolescent end in abortions,<sup>i</sup> 90% of which are risky and unsafe and contribute to high mortality rate.

<sup>1</sup> Republic of Liberia: Investment case for Reproductive, Maternal, New Born, Child, and Adolescent Health, 2016-2020, page 26.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Women and girls in Liberia should be given the option to choose motherhood as it relates to abortion, women and young girls be allowed to access safe, affordable and free Planned Parenthood services.

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<sup>i</sup> Republic of Liberia: Investment case for Reproductive, Maternal, New Born, Child, and Adolescent Health, 2016-2020, page 26.

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