

Sexual Exploitation of Children in Liberia
Submission
for the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights situation in Liberia

Submitted by

Defence for Children - Liberia

and

ECPAT International

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Liberia

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In 2009, DCI-Liberia was created an established in order to promote and defend the human rights of children. It develops its own programs according to Liberian children's needs and priorities and is registered in accordance with the Liberian NGO Law. Today, several actions are undertaken in the following priority issues:

- *Child labour and child trafficking*
- *Sexual exploitation and abuse of children*
- *Juvenile Justice*
- *Human rights and children's rights education and education on Gender-based violence*



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ECPAT International is a global network of civil society organisations working for the eradication of all forms of sexual exploitation of children. For the past 29 years, ECPAT has acted as the international watchdog, monitoring States' response to sexual exploitation of children, and advocating for robust international measures to protect children from sexual exploitation. ECPAT International currently has 111 network members operating in 97 countries.

Justification for submission

1. The purpose of the present submission is two-fold: (1) to serve as an update on the progress that has been made by the Government of Liberia (GoL) to end the sexual exploitation of children (SEC) in the country, and (2) to assess the level of implementation of the UPR recommendations relating to SEC made in 2015.¹
2. During Liberia's previous UPR in 2015, the report of the Working Group contained 34 recommendations related to children's rights,² of which 12 are related to SEC.³ Seven of these recommendations encouraged Liberia to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (OPSC),⁴ three recommendations addressed SEC in general,⁵ and two recommendations addressed child and early marriage.⁶ One recommendation addressed the trafficking of children but did not mention sexual exploitation as an element of the trafficking.⁷

Methodology and Scope

3. The content of this report is based on country work experience by Defence for Children-Liberia and desk research by ECPAT International.
4. The scope of this report is limited to SEC and its different manifestations, including exploitation of children in prostitution,⁸ online child sexual exploitation (OCSE), child sexual abuse materials (CSAM),⁹ child trafficking for sexual purposes, sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism (SECTT)¹⁰ and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

Current status and developments of the sexual exploitation of children in Liberia

General overview of country conditions for children

5. Though there has been no reported case of a child with Ebola since 2017,¹¹ the epidemic of 2014-2016 continues to have a severe socioeconomic impact in Liberia, with household income and agricultural output dropping during the outbreak.¹² Education was severely disrupted during the epidemic, with schools closed for seven months.¹³ Existing child protection issues were further exacerbated, such as infant mortality and severe malnutrition.¹⁴
6. Liberia is classified as a "low-income" economy by the World Bank with a GNI per capita of \$1,025 or less in 2018.¹⁵ The decline of the Liberian dollar with US dollar was another driver of poverty, which has an impact on the Liberian economy.¹⁶ UNICEF's 2018 Country Office Annual Report notes that with regards to children's health and education, some progress has been made on immunization, birth registration and access to basic education.¹⁷ However, children in rural areas experienced large inequities in WASH services, where only 6 per cent of Liberia's population in rural areas had access to basic sanitation.¹⁸ The low functionality of water facilities remained a major problem in the country.¹⁹

Sexual exploitation of children in Liberia

Exploitation of children in prostitution

7. The law in Liberia prohibits the sexual exploitation of children in prostitution. The minimum age for consensual sex in Liberia is 18;²⁰ However, research shows that exploitation of girls exists. According to a study conducted in 2017, a pattern emerged of sexual exploitation of female students by male teachers, which was “a normative and often encouraged method for girls to obtain resources in the school setting”.²¹ The research, *Passing the Test*, reports “almost 18% of school girls and just over 13% of school boys were asked for sex to get a better grade”.²²
8. According to a 2015 study on the worst forms of violence against children and youth in Liberia, some of the factors leading to child exploitation are “poverty with financial vulnerability, living with adopted or foster parent and poor education system”.²³

Online child sexual exploitation (OCSE)

9. The share of Liberians with a mobile phone rose from 4.5% in 2005 to 81.1% in 2015 and the internet access rose from 1.5% in 2010 to 30.8% in 2018.²⁴ According to UNICEF, Liberia has almost 2,000,000 network subscribers.²⁵ As a primary mode of communications in Liberia, 75% of youth have one or two mobile phones.²⁶
10. As of the date of this report, there have not been any recent studies examining the scope of the online child sexual exploitation. However, there has been efforts to tackle CSAM in Liberia. In February 2019, DCI-Liberia collaborated with the Internet Watch Foundation Liberia network and opened a reporting portal, where Liberians anonymously and confidentially can report child sexual abuse and exploitation material.²⁷

Sale and trafficking of children for sexual purposes

11. Men, women and children in Liberia are subjected to transnational trafficking in western African countries, including Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Nigeria.²⁸ According to the report by Independent National Commission on Human Rights Liberia in 2016, 213 children were trafficked for sexual purposes, of which 147 (69%) were trafficked from outside of Montserrado Country but were brought to Monrovia by a relative or a family/friend.²⁹
12. It has been reported that parents with low economic background who do not have financial means to support children's educational needs send them off to live with their relatives.³⁰ Due to financial constraints and lack of opportunities, many children in Liberia do not live with their biological parents rather live in formal and informal foster care or kinship arrangements.³¹ However, there is evidence, which show that children living in those situations experience exploitation and discrimination.
13. In Liberia, children are more vulnerable to trafficking and are less likely to return to their original place because of the lack of official birth registration documents.³² According to UNICEF, the

country reports one of the lowest levels of birth registration in the world, with less than one quarter of all births registered.³³

Sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism

14. Liberia is increasing diversification in the number of destinations and the international tourist arrivals in emerging destinations are expected to grow at double the rate (4.4%) of advanced economy destinations (2.2%).³⁴
15. Data on sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism is scarce, as is information on the policies addressing SEC. However, studies reveal that there is a rise in SECTT in the region, which increases the vulnerability of children living in the region. A study on sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa notes that there are a number of non-traditional infrastructures facilitating the exploitation of children identified in the region. Those include “the phenomenon of volun-tourism; impact of foreign direct investment; military bases, camps, detention centres and peacekeeping missions; adult entertainment industry; along with online platforms, internet technology and electronic devices.”³⁵
16. Some of the identified potential causes which expose children to SECTT are “structural inequalities, including social and economic inequalities and their power dynamics; informal cultural practices and norms, such as child marriage; festivals and inheritance practices; debt bondage, family ties and wealth/status inequality; child labour; kinship ties by relatives or caretakers”.³⁶

Child, early and forced marriage

17. According to UNICEF, between 2010 to 2016, 9% of the women aged 20-24 were married by age 15 and 36% by 18,³⁷ with the lowest median ages of marriages in Lofa, Bong and Bomi.³⁸ These statistics reveal that early marriage is a common practice in Liberia despite the law that guarantees children under 18 cannot enter into marriage.³⁹
18. The driving causes of child marriage include poverty, level of education, traditional customs such as female genital mutilation and violence against girls.⁴⁰

Legislative framework on prohibition of sexual exploitation

Children’s rights framework and sexual exploitation of children

19. Domestically, the GoL has enacted a number of instruments and laws that include provisions related to SEC such as the National Constitution(1986),⁴¹ An Act to Establish the Children’s Law of Liberia (2011),⁴² Rape Amendment Act (2006)⁴³, An Act Establishing Criminal Court “E”,⁴⁴ National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Management of Gender Based Violence (2006),⁴⁵ Decent Work Act (2015),⁴⁶ National Child Welfare and Protection Policy (2017),⁴⁷ An Act to amend the penal Law regarding Extortion, Environmental Crime, and Illicit Trafficking in Human Beings and Migrant Smuggling Act (2012)⁴⁸ and An Act to Ban Trafficking (2005).⁴⁹

20. Article three of Section 21 of the Children’s Law states that “every child shall have the right to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation including prostitution and pornography.”⁵⁰ Further, the sub-section stipulates the provisions in the penal code and other legislation “whose intent is to protect the child from sexual exploitation shall be construed with the child’s best interests as the primary consideration.”⁵¹

21. However, the country has yet to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. The ratification of this Protocol would be a first and important step to make sure national legislation is in compliance with international agreed standards, to guarantee that children are protected from sexual exploitation and hold offenders accountable.

Recommendations to the GoL

- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and amend national legislation accordingly.

Implementation

National policies and programmes

22. Currently, there is no dedicated national plan of action on SEC in Liberia.

23. Plans and policies, which partially address SEC and its manifestations include the National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Management of Gender Based Violence in Liberia 2006,⁵² the National Human Rights Action Plan of Liberia 2013 – 2018,⁵³ and the National Action Plan against Trafficking in Persons 2008.⁵⁴

Coordination and evaluation

24. The National Child Welfare and Protection Policy is implemented within a government framework of the National child Welfare Council.⁵⁵ The Policy outlines the involvement of various ministries and stakeholders in the child protection system. The Child Protection Policy is coordinated with Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MGCSP), Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, the Senate/ House, National Human Rights Commission, Community/ traditional leaders, and Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information.⁵⁶ The policy provides the roles and responsibilities of various civil society organizations, parents and caregivers, and the role of children in decision-making processes.⁵⁷

Recommendations to the GoL

- Develop a comprehensive national plan of action on sexual exploitation of children;
- Allocate budget for the implementation of activities included in the Plans, particularly the National Plan against Trafficking in Person 2019 – 2023.

- Streamline different national plans and policies in order to avoid redundancies and to provide clarity to stakeholders in implementation;
- Update outdated policy frameworks and other policies that have outlived their usefulness.

Prevention

25. The inclusion of a detailed section on prevention in the National Child Welfare and Protection Policy of the Republic of Liberia 2017 highlights the importance of the implementation of the child protection policy through family strengthening approach (preventive approach).⁵⁸ This approach is aimed at effective prevention, which “focuses more on the prevention as it aims to address the underlying causes of child abuse, neglect and exploitation and the welfare and protection needs of children and their families”.⁵⁹
26. With respect to child participation, the National Child Welfare and Protection policy of the Republic of Liberia mentions that there needs to be a meaningful and effective child participation.⁶⁰
27. DCI-Liberia in collaboration with the UK based Internet Watch foundation launched the campaign against online child abuse images, which was a part of the ‘WePROTECT’ model national response.⁶¹ The campaign launched the reporting portal, mentioned above, whereby “anyone in Liberia who comes across suspected images of online child sexual abuse can anonymously send the address of the web bearing the content to IWF in Cambridge where the imagery will be assessed and removed.”⁶² The DCI mandates to promote and protect the rights of children in Liberia and serve as a watchdog in fulfilling its obligations under the international and national laws.⁶³
28. Though a significant number of prevention programmes have been implemented, a number of issues hinder their effective implementation, including a lack of financial and human resources, weak enforcement measures, and harmful cultural practices.

Recommendations to the GoL

- Allocate sufficient human and financial resources towards prevention programmes, particularly for programmes outside the capital.
- Ensure that children are involved during the drafting of policies and plans directly affecting them.

Protection

Measures adopted by the GoL to protect the rights and interests of child victims

29. Some of the agencies dealing with SEC issues include the anti-human trafficking and migrant smuggling unit and a specialized unit called the Liberia National Police (LNP) within the Women and Children’s Protection Section (WACPS). The anti-human trafficking and migrant smuggling unit is a newly created unit by the Liberian Immigration Service (LIS) to investigate transnational

trafficking.⁶⁴ The LNP has been established in over twenty location in Liberia “to investigate, prosecute and document cases of child rights abuse/violations, domestic violence and sexual offences”.⁶⁵

30. With respect to the judicial system, act establishing Criminal Court “E” of the Criminal Assizes of the First Judicial Circuit Court, to also be called “Sexual Offences Court”,⁶⁶ which has the jurisdiction over all cases of Sexual Offences, including SEC.

31. The Anti-trafficking task force working group of the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection (MOGCSP) is responsible for coordinating victim care.

National complaint mechanisms

32. A specialized unit, the Women and Children’s Protection Sections within the Liberia National Police was created for the investigation and prosecution of sexual abuse.⁶⁷

33. The Children’s Law (2012) established the Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) as a way of establishing specialized mechanisms to advance the protection and welfare of children at the local level and the state level.⁶⁸

¹ Human Rights Council. (2015). [Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Liberia](#). A/HRC/30/4, 13 July 2015.

² See Human Rights Council. (2015). [UPR of Liberia – Second Cycle – Thematic List of Recommendations](#).

³ Human Rights Council. (2015). [Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Liberia](#). A/HRC/30/4, 13 July 2015. Recommendations 100.16, 100.9, 100.10, 100.12, 100.14, 100.15, 100.11, 100.63, 100.68, 100.70, 100.133, 100.147.

⁴ Ibid., Recommendations 100.16, 100.9, 100.10, 100.12, 100.14, 100.15, 100.11.

⁵ Ibid., Recommendations, 100.63, 100.68, 100.70.

⁶ Ibid., Recommendations 100.133, 100.147.

⁷ Ibid., Recommendation 100.134.

⁸ In line with the recently and widely adopted Terminology Guidelines, ECPAT prefers the term “exploitation of children in prostitution” instead of “child prostitution.” ECPAT International (2016). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, Adopted by the Interagency Working Group in Luxembourg, 28 January 2016](#), 29. Bangkok: ECPAT.

⁹ In line with the recently and widely adopted Terminology Guidelines, ECPAT prefers the term “child sexual exploitation material” or “child sexual abuse material” instead of “child pornography.” Ibid., 39.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ UNICEF. (2017). [UNICEF Annual Report 2017](#). Executive summary.

¹² Healio. (August 2018). [Ebola outbreak has lasting impact on Liberians’ livelihood](#).

¹³ UNICEF. (2019). [The situation for children in Liberia](#).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The World Bank. (August 2019). [World Bank Country and Lending Groups](#).

¹⁶ UNICEF. (2018). [UNICEF Annual Report 2018 Liberia](#).

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

²⁰ Adolescent Girls Advocacy and leadership Initiative. (2016, September 24). [Policy brief rape laws in Liberia](#).

²¹ Parnarouskis,L., Stevenson,A., Lange,B.C.L., et al. (2017, March 08). [The impact of transactional sex with teachers on public school students in Monrovia, Liberia- a brief report](#). *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 12 (4), 328-333.

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- ²² IBIS, Concern Worldwide, Norwegian Refugee Council and Save the Children. (2014, February). [Passing the test- the real cost of being a student.](#)
- ²³ Search for Common Ground. (2015, April). [The worst forms of violence against children and youth in Liberia.](#)
- ²⁴ World Bank Group. (2018, May 21). [Republic of Liberia- systematic country diagnostic.](#)
- ²⁵ UNICEF. (2018, July 12) [Information and communication technologies for development.](#)
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ UK Safer Internet Center. (2019, February 15). [Liberia marks Safer Internet Day with crackdown on online child sexual abuse image and videos - supported by UK's IWF.](#)
- ²⁸ Defence for Children International. (2016). [Overview of trafficking in SL Liberia and Guinea.](#)
- ²⁹ Independent National Commission on Human Rights Liberia. (2016). [Annual report 2016](#)
- ³⁰ Search for Common Ground. (2015, April). [Worst forms of violence against children and youth in Liberia.](#)
- ³¹ Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. (2017, September). National Child Welfare and Protection Policy of the Republic of Liberia.
- ³² Defence for Children International. (2016). [Overview of trafficking in SL Liberia and Guinea.](#)
- ³³ UNICEF. (n.d). [Liberia- child protection.](#)
- ³⁴ International Trade Centre. (2015). [Liberian national export strategy on tourism 2016 - 2020.](#)
- ³⁵ ECPAT International, ACPF and Defence for Children. (2016, June). [Global study on sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism. Regional report Sub-Saharan Africa.](#)
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ³⁷ UNICEF. (2017). [The state of the world's children 2017.](#)
- ³⁸ Girls Not Brides. (n.d.). [Child marriage Liberia.](#)
- ³⁹ Republic of Liberia. (2011, September). [An act to establish the children's law of Liberia 2011.](#) Article 6, Section (4).
- ⁴⁰ Girls Not Brides. (n.d.). [Child marriage Liberia.](#)
- ⁴¹ Republic of Liberia (1986). [Constitution of the Republic of Liberia.](#)
- ⁴² Republic of Liberia. (2011, September). [An act to establish the children's law of Liberia 2011.](#)
- ⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2006, January 17). [Rape Amendment Act.](#)
- ⁴⁴ Liberian Code of Laws Revised. (2008). [Sexual Crimes Court, new Chapter 25.](#)
- ⁴⁵ Republic of Liberia (2006, November). [National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Management of Gender Based Violence in Liberia.](#)
- ⁴⁶ Republic of Liberia (2015). [Decent Work Act 2015.](#)
- ⁴⁷ Republic of Liberia. (2017). National Child Welfare and Protection Policy of the Republic of Liberia.
- ⁴⁸ Liberian Legislative Acts (2013). [An Act to amend the penal Law regarding Extortion, Environmental Crime, and Illicit Trafficking in Human Beings and Migrant Smuggling Act.](#)
- ⁴⁹ Republic of Liberia (2005, July 5). [Act to ban Trafficking in Persons Act.](#)
- ⁵⁰ Republic of Liberia. (2011, September). [An act to establish the children's law of Liberia 2011.](#) Article 3, Section (21).
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Article 3, Section (21.2)
- ⁵² Republic of Liberia (2006, November). [National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Management of Gender Based Violence in Liberia.](#)
- ⁵³ Government of Liberia. (2013). [National Human Rights Action Plan of Liberia 2013 - 2018.](#)
- ⁵⁴ The Liberian Child Rights NGO Coalition. (2013). [Report on the Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.](#)
- ⁵⁵ Republic of Liberia. (2017). National Child Welfare and Protection Policy of the Republic of Liberia.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ Front Page Africa. (2018). [Liberia: Pro-Children advocacy group launches campaign against online child abuse images](#)
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ The Liberian Child Rights NGO Coalition. (2013). [Report on the Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.](#)

⁶⁶ Liberian Code of Laws. (2008). [Sexual Crimes Court, new Chapter 25](#)

⁶⁷ The Liberian Child Rights NGO Coalition. (2013). [Report on the Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.](#)

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*