



# **A Woman's Body becomes a Field of Battle**

**A survey among women affected by the civil war in Liberia**

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## **Preface**

By the time the peace agreement was finally signed in 2003 Liberia had been torn apart by many years of conflicts. The losses in lives and social structures are not possible to count or measure. The wounds were deep and trust lost.

The Lutheran Church in Liberia (LCL) is running some health facilities. The Phebe hospital is a very important institution in the part of the country where it is situated. During the war the pressure on the hospital and its staff was extreme. A request for support came from LCL. The staff of the hospital was stretched to its limits. Dr Margareta Sidenvall was asked by Church of Sweden if she could make herself available to support the hospital, specifically focusing on the gynecological and obstetrical ward. Dr Sidenvall accepted and put a lot of commitment into the missions she did at Phebe hospital.

In addition to the medical tasks, she was asked to try to get an overview of the health condition of women as a lot of reports were pointing at more or less systematic sexual violence on women. This became one of the more important parts of her work.

A number of years have passed, but the material is important as documentation and possibly use in other contexts.

Uppsala March 2015  
International Programme Director  
Church of Sweden  
Maria Lundberg

## Foreword

When the civil war in Liberia came to an end in 2003, the UN and a lot of different Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) very soon arrived with ambitions to support Liberia in the rebuilding of the country, devastated after 14 years of brutal conflict. Sweden has a history in Liberia mainly through LAMCO (Liberian American Swedish Mining Company). LAMCO is the biggest investment ever made in Africa by Swedish industrial companies and over several decades up to 15,000 Swedes lived and worked in Liberia in the mining industries. During the 1970s Liberia was one of the world's leading producers of iron. Due to the political instability at the end of the 1980s LAMCO was abandoned by the Swedish partner and during the war years everything that had been built up by LAMCO in Yekepa in the north of Liberia was totally destroyed.

Partly through the LAMCO link the Church of Sweden became involved in the country in cooperation with the Lutheran Church in Liberia (LCL). During the war years the Church of Sweden tried to establish support for rehabilitation and reconciliation during the short periods when there was some abatement in the violence. When the final peace agreement came in 2003, the Church of Sweden was ready to accept an invitation to support the peace-building efforts in Liberia.

In 2004 I was invited by the Church of Sweden to take part in the work of rebuilding Phebe Hospital in Bong County which had been badly damaged during the war. Bong County borders on Nimba where LAMCO had been operating. My task was to support the medical work while the hospital was moving from a displaced position about 50 kilometres away. I was impressed by the dedicated work carried out by the staff who themselves in many cases had been badly affected by the war. The Church of Sweden was in the process of deciding which field of the peace-building process they would choose to be involved in. As part of their evaluation, I was asked to try to find out how women had been affected by the war. It was not an easy task, as I was fully occupied day and night with my medical work as a gynaecologist. After discussion with the medical director, the late Dr. Emmanuel Sandoe, we decided to ask a group of student nurses to help in conducting a survey among women in the area. Phebe Hospital had been a very well respected teaching hospital before the war, but the teaching efforts had been reduced to a minimum due to the lack of facilities during the war. Just sixteen student nurses were struggling with their studies in 2004. I was involved in medical teaching sessions with them and we developed a close relationship. I introduced them to my task of investigating the situation of women in the war and they were happy to take a break from their studies to make excursions together with me into the surrounding area. We visited a couple of villages and an Internal Displaced People (IDP) camp in Bong County.

I myself was horrified by the unbelievably cruel sufferings the women had experienced and I was impressed by their strength in coping. After analysing the first part of the study conducted in June 2004, I felt impelled to investigate further the women's experiences and discover more about their ability to survive and cope in the face of such devastating suffering. A second part in the survey was, therefore, conducted about six months later when I had the opportunity to return to Liberia and Phebe Hospital. Again, I got good support from the administration of the hospital and the sixteen students. We visited other areas in Bong County to interview women to deepen our knowledge about their situation during and after the war.

I became fascinated by Liberia and its people, so between 2004 and 2012 I continued to return to work at Phebe Hospital every year. In 2007 I did a follow-up study with in-depth interviews with a few of the women who could be found again.

In collaboration with other NGOs, the Church of Sweden decided to leave the medical field and concentrate on psychological trauma healing work in cooperation with LCL. I was happy that Rotary Doctors Sweden/Scandinavian Doctors Sweden agreed to support Phebe Hospital in their further rebuilding efforts to enable it to recover its position as a major teaching hospital in the area. In 2012, through the support of Medicine du Monde, a new hospital, specially designed for obstetrics and gynaecology, was opened in Gbaranga, a town about ten kilometres away from Phebe. The new hospital relieved Phebe Hospital of a lot of the workload. At the same time Phebe Hospital appointed a permanent gynaecologist.

For nine years in close cooperation with dedicated colleagues and nurses I had the privilege of serving women in Bong County. I feel lucky to have had the possibility of seeing how a country and its people have striven to re-establish normality after a devastating civil war which spared nobody.

## **Historical background of Liberia**

The history of Liberia started in 1821 when the American Colonization Society, after a period of negotiation with clan chiefs in the area around present Monrovia, bought a piece of land. A couple of decades later in 1847 the republic Liberia was proclaimed. The country became the goal for many liberated slaves mainly from the southern states of the United States and their motto became: “The love of liberty brought us here”.

Liberia is one of only two countries in Africa that was never formally colonized, but the way the liberated slaves from United States shaped the country put them in a position as a group of power. There were sixteen different tribal groups living in the country when the new-comers arrived. Between 2.5% and 5% of the present population are descendants of the group of American-Liberians who arrived during a few decades of the nineteenth century. The lifestyle and, to some extent, the education the immigrants had achieved in their former homeland differed a lot from the situation of the original population in Liberia who still lived within tribal groups and with their own tribal traditions affecting their daily lives. Traditionally the original population as a rule lived on good terms and intermarriage was not uncommon. The immigrants were descendants of Africans originating from many different parts of mainly West-Africa and only occasionally did they have very distant family connections with the original population in the area that became Liberia.

Almost 100 years later, in 1944, universal suffrage was introduced by President William Tubman (1944-71). He made efforts to unite the different tribal groups. However, the American-Liberians continued to rule the country in a one party system with the True Whig Party. In the late 1970s opposition to the government started and the first opposition parties were established as a reaction to the decline in the prosperity of the country. This was partly due to difficulties in international marketing of traditional export products from Liberia like rubber and minerals, resulting in a shortage of supplies of imported goods. Finally General Samuel Doe took power and made himself president after a coup d'état in 1980 when the reigning president William Tolbert and many other members in the government were murdered. General Doe used violence to establish rule and this created the breeding ground for the civil war that lasted from 1989 to 2003.

## ***Population density and growth in Liberia***

Liberia is a small country situated in West-Africa just north of the equator. When the country had its first national population and housing census in 1962 the population was estimated to be just above one million inhabitants. In 1984, the last estimation before the war, the population had grown to 2.1 million with a rapid annual growth of 3.1%. After the war the first census was held in 2008 and the estimated population was about 3.5 million.<sup>1</sup> The slowdown in the growth of the population was partly through refugees not returning or permanent emigration, but also direct or indirect war-related deaths had a severe impact. Moreover the ratio of the sexes changed in many counties from 1984 to 2008. For example, in Lofa County, which was very severely affected by the war, the development went from male dominance to female dominance.<sup>2 3</sup>

The population density is highest in the coastal area around the capital Monrovia and in the northern part of the country in the counties Lofa, Bong and Nimba.

## ***The civil war 1989-2003***

On Christmas Eve 1989 the rebel group National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded Liberia from the neighbouring country Guinea. The commander of the group was Charles Taylor, who later became the president of Liberia. A few years before Charles Taylor had gone into exile after a conflict with General Samuel Doe. With the support of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional group of sixteen countries that was founded in 1975, peace negotiations were attempted in 1991, but the peace agreement soon failed and a new rebel group, United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), came into the arena. The group consisted of previous supporters of General Doe who had lived as refugees in Guinea after the execution of their leader. During the following years several peace agreements were tried but they all came to nothing, as additional rebel factions incessantly appeared on the scene. In 1997 UN made big efforts to bring an end to the hostilities and they helped 700,000 refugees to repatriate. Elections were held and the previous commander, Charles Taylor, became the president, getting 75% of the votes. Although observers from abroad regarded the election as fair, many criticized the result because of Charles Taylor's total control over the media. He managed to spread fear among the population that violence would escalate unless he became the ruler.

President Taylor soon made his own group totally dominate the government and most of the prominent leaders of the opposition went into exile. After several disturbances that were crushed by the president a full civil war broke out again in 1999. Again, several new rebel groups en-

1 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2007

2 Johns Hopkins Bloomberg, School of Public Health, 2009

3 Government of the republic of Liberia, 2008

tered the arena, all with names such as Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) sounding very different from the brutal way they acted towards antagonists and civilians.

The war demonstrated all the characteristics of social disorder and disruption within ethnic divides, and rebellious factions affected the whole country and its population. Many women were taken by the soldiers for shorter or longer periods as ‘girlfriends’, traders of war-booty. The same women might also have been raped and kept as prisoners during some period of the war.<sup>4 5</sup> The last big battle was fought in the summer of 2003 in the capital Monrovia when, at the same time, commanders from the different fractions were holding half-hearted peace negotiations in Accra.

Following peace negotiations lasting several weeks, peace was finally achieved in August 2003 and President Taylor went into exile in Nigeria. He was later accused by the neighbouring country Sierra Leone and sentenced by the International Court in the Hague for war crimes committed in Sierra Leone.

Though support and pressure came from UN and leaders of different African countries, the peace process dragged on. Of significance were the efforts of the spontaneous female peace-movement, Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), under their leader, Leymah Gbowee, who through informal methods urged the former fighting parties to reach a settlement to end the war.<sup>6</sup> Under the protection of UN a temporary government was established until free and democratic elections could be held in 2005. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was proclaimed president of Liberia, Africa’s first female president. Both Leymah Gbowee and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.



Picture 1 and 2. WIPNET women demonstrating outside Phebe Hospital in June 2004

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4 Jennings, 2001  
5 Utas, 2003  
6 Gbowee (Mithers), 2011.



## ***Disarming camps***

Under the protection of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) disarming of rebels and soldiers started in December 2003. Disarming camps were established all around the country to force or at least encourage rebels and soldiers to hand over weapons to be destroyed. Money was offered for weapons left voluntarily. There was a time limit for the voluntary procedure and it was announced that all those found with an illegal weapon after the official period of disarming would be punished.



Picture 3. Appeal to soldiers/rebels to register in closest disarming center.

In April 2004 a disarming camp was established a few kilometres from Phebe Hospital and three months later 11,522 soldiers, their attached family members and others had been disarmed. During three days in July 2004, 106 men, 78 women and 11 children were received in the camp. Women might have been soldiers themselves or attached as ‘wartime-women’. Occasionally women had followed their own husbands on a voluntary basis. During the same three days 458 people were sent back for reintegration in the society where they belonged. Some basic equipment was distributed to all returnees in order to facilitate the restart of their civil life in the home area. Undoubtedly this support was welcomed, as many returnees would find their villages severely looted. In a civil war all are losers, including the soldiers and rebels themselves.

The disarming camp close to Phebe Hospital.



Picture 4. Statistics were carefully registered.



Picture 5. Female soldiers or women attached to previous soldiers/rebels lining up to be transported to their homes.

The disarmed soldiers spent about one week in the camp. During this period lectures and discussions were held on subjects concerning reconciliation, democracy and possible ways to reconstruct the society. A need to separate women and men was recognized and lectures were given with gender perspective. Previous child-soldiers, whose childhood had been ‘stolen’, received some weeks of rehabilitation before planning for repatriation.

While working in the hospital, the staff would hear groups of soldiers marching along the road on their way to the disarming camp. All work immediately stopped and everybody approached the windows anxiously to observe the marching soldiers. You could easily understand how the previous sound of marching had created fear in their minds. With relief the staff would hear a big bang at the end of every day. It was the sound of the destruction of the weapons disarmed during the day.

At the disarming camp close to Phebe, medical service was offered by the hospital and though so few doctors were available in the hospital, one was posted for screening in the camp. Priority was given to operations needed by the previous soldiers/rebels. This allocation in favour of the disarmed soldiers seemed to be accepted by everyone in order to achieve normality as soon as possible. The most common operative procedure performed on the former soldiers was for inguinal hernia.

### ***The United Nations***

During the period after the war the UN provided a massive military and personnel support to the country to ensure peaceful development. One UN-camp was posted at Phebe and more than half of the hospital compound was handed over to UN. The hospital could feel safe with this arrangement of close protection.

A temporary UN-hospital was established about ten kilometres from Phebe and occasionally Phebe Hospital was able to get help with equipment or service during its first difficult period of reestablishment.

## ***Internal displaced people (IDP)***

About 500,000 individuals lived in internal refugee camps during the last years of the war. Phebe Hospital helped patients mainly from two camps, Maimu close to Totota with about 50,000 occupants and Salala camp with about 25,000 occupants, in cooperation with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) who were running temporary clinics and a minor hospital. When advanced care was needed transportation was provided by MSF to Phebe Hospital. During the survey Maimu 2 and Salala camps were visited.

Maimu 2 had expanded gradually during the period 2001-2003. The official registration showed that 28% of the occupants were under 18 years and only 3.3% over 65. Women were registered as heading the family in 57% of cases.

Monthly food supplies came from the World Food Programme (WFP). In June 2004 each registered person got 9.6 kg of cereal and 1.5 kg of beans, a little oil and some salt to last for a month. The food supply was, of course, too limited to give sufficient daily calories and many refugees tried to find supplementary ways of maintenance. According to the Chairman of the camp, Mr. Richardsson Sando, 60% of the population had some kind of leasehold for farming paying 10% of the harvest to the landholder. Another 20-25% had some kind of contracting work outside the camp for supplementing their daily need.

The camp was divided into blocks and each expansion had been based on the number of refugees looking for shelter. No accommodation was available on arrival at a camp. Fragments of building material for a house were offered which needed to be supplemented by material collected around the neighbourhood. Established refugees showed newcomers where in the bush they would be able to find building materials and often helped them to construct a shelter.

Only those who were registered in a shelter got food supplied by WFP. Some single women with children faced difficulties as they were unable to build a shelter for themselves. The authorities were strict: without a registered shelter, no share in the monthly food distribution.

Sanitation was limited and each block, with about 2,000 occupants, shared 1-3 dug wells, 5-6 latrines and usually 4 'baths'. A bath consisted of a shelter made of iron-sheets behind which one brought water for a 'bath'. In addition to the wells, MSF constructed two taps that supplied the whole camp with water from a dam. In the dry-season those taps were often the only water supply.

The schools in the camp offered teaching in three shifts with adult education in the evenings. The education provided was primary school and all teachers worked on a voluntary basis. The administration estimated that 40% of the children would attend school. The school had 2,522 pupils which meant that 14% of the population in the camp went to school. Of the pupils 48% were females.

Medical service within the camp was provided by a MSF-clinic. Mother and Child Health (MCH) service was run by two midwives performing about 25 deliveries per month.



Picture 6. The flight could end up in an already overcrowded IDP camp. In front the ‘baths’ available in the camp. One bath could be used by hundreds of occupants.



Picture 7. The food distribution by WFP was important but quite insufficient to satisfy nourishment

**Trauma-healing efforts in IDP camps**

By about a year after the end of the war impressive work of trauma-healing and reconciliation had already been established in the country with the support of many Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). Already during the war the Lutheran Church in Liberia (LCL) in connection with Concerned Christian Community (CCC) was organizing much appreciated work in the field of trauma-healing.



Picture 8. Women shared their stories in a session of trauma-healing in Salala IDP camp in 2004.

Picture 9. Role-playing was found to be a useful instrument in processing horrifying experiences.

I myself was able to take part in sessions of trauma-healing offered to women in Salala IDP camp at the end of 2004 before starting the second part of the survey. With humility, love and professional confidence Vaiba Kebeh Flumo and her team from LCL trauma-healing group guided about 25 women over three days. Vaiba Flumo played a major role in the WIPNET group that had a crucial input in pushing the peace process to a successful end.

The women in the trauma-healing group shared their stories in discussions and role-plays. At first they often told their story in the third person; later the stories were presented in the first person. The leaders recognized that this was a common reaction. Before developing trust in a group the victims often hide their own experiences through a third person's story. It was touching to see old and young women share their traumas and at the same time support each other in their search for trust in the future. It has been shown also from other conflict areas that trauma-healing efforts are an important instrument for women affected by rape.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of 2004 repatriation of the IDP camps had started.



Picture 10. The main street in the deserted Maiumu 2 camp in October 2005 at the time of the first democratic election after the war. Just a few months earlier 18,000 people had lived there.

Picture 11. Only a few single houses remained in the vast camp. Areas of previous neighbours' houses were taken for farming.

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7 Hustache, 2009

## ***Phebe Hospital***

Phebe Hospital is situated in Suakoko district along the main road from Monrovia to Guinea. Phebe Hospital, named after a serving woman during early Christianity, was established in 1921 in Harrisburg close to Monrovia and was later moved inland to serve people in the countryside. In 1965 a place was chosen close to the town of Gbaranga in Bong County with Cottingham University just nearby. The Episcopal, Lutheran and Methodist churches in Liberia in cooperation with the government run the hospital. Support from abroad has mainly been from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA).

Before the war Phebe Hospital was well-equipped with a number of specialists from abroad serving in different fields as a complement to Liberian colleagues. During the war the hospital was destroyed several times and three times it had to be evacuated to a field position. Early on during the war the hospital agreed to maintain its ethical decision to treat anybody in need without reference to ethnical or religious background or political preferences. The hospital had to pay a high price for this openness when in September 1994 it was attacked by a group of soldiers who expected to find some of their enemies among the patients there. During one day more than 150 people were killed; the victims included patients in their beds, relatives there to care for them and more than 30 members of staff.

April 2003 was the last time the hospital was evacuated and it found its way to Salala, 50 kilometres away. The workload for the hospital was intensive as the population in the catchment area had increased due to the establishment of several IDP camps close by. During the period in Salala, the staff-members were hardly better than refugees themselves, living wherever a shelter could be offered. The wards were lodged in temporary tents with an earth floor and a roof-covering that protected against neither the daytime heat nor the heavy rains. Patients had to lie on mattresses on the ground as few beds could be brought from the hospital in Phebe. Most of the equipment at the hospital had been either stolen or destroyed during the raids. In this refugee environment care and medication were still given to patients in need by committed staff-members. The operation room was established in a local clinic building and, despite the primitive environment, lifesaving operations were carried out. The first two successful operations were caesarean sections performed on two women who had gone into labour in Phebe before the evacuation. On a crowded lorry named 'the big blue' and in great pain, they had shared the space with staff, other patients and hospital equipment.

With great difficulty the school of nursing also tried to maintain its teaching during the period in exile for a group of 16 students, the only pupils it had been possible to accept during the last few years of the war due to lack of resources. Classes were conducted in a storage-room without access to blackboard, light or ventilation.

When the hospital was re-established in Phebe the buildings had only partly been reconstructed and students, staff and patients showed enormous patience with the conditions, which were in

many aspects much better than in Salala. With hope and the promise of a brighter future the staff accepted 12 hour shifts and accommodation that might only be a mattress in a ruined house in the war-damaged hospital compound. Often the staff had to cope with the trauma of having their own family members scattered elsewhere in the country or even abroad.

With support from abroad the buildings on the hospital compound were gradually repaired and in 2005 the main building was ready to be used, offering about 150 beds for patients. Slowly the school of nursing was expanded and by 2009 there were 180 students with the following programmes available: professional nursing (3 years), midwifery (2 years), nurse-midwifery (18 months), registered nurse anaesthetist (2 years) and medical laboratory technician (3 years).



Picture 12. Staff and villagers were called to clean up at the environment of the hospital. Picture 13. The reward was a shared meal at the hospital compound.



## ***Villages in the area***

In the survey three villages, Gbondai, Sinyie and Gbatala, and one town, Suakoko, were visited located at a distance of 5-15 kilometres from the hospital.

During our visit to Gbondai the town chief, Natanael Sumo, and town leader, Mulbah Mboi, told some of the history of the village. They had both been elected by the elders who were 16 zone-leaders. Monthly meetings were held with the elders to deal with different matters in the village. The chairlady, Alice Beyan, presented the work of the women's group that also met on a monthly basis to discuss internal matters. The women supported each other mainly in work issues, but could also give each other advice on marital and family problems.

The war had severely affected the village. On three occasions it had been left totally empty after invasion by soldiers or rebels. The exact date of the last attack, 24th August 2003, was easily remembered by a number of people. The town chief had fled out into the bush for a week and survived on wild yam. The final peace agreement had already been signed in Accra when the village was attacked the last time.

In June 2004 people were still continuing to return. At the time of our visit there were far fewer inhabitants than before the war. In the last attack eight houses were burnt down and the majority of the rest of the houses were destroyed and all possessions of any value stolen. The school had been totally demolished, but with the assistance of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) it had been partly renovated and had reopened four months prior to our visit. The pupils still had no access to toilets or water. The school provided teaching from kindergarten up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Out of eight teachers only three were employees and the rest worked on a voluntary basis. Salary for the employed teachers was still only occasionally provided.

In the village there were four churches of different denominations and the town chief estimated 10-15% of the villagers to be Muslims. He saw no hostility between the different groups. According to the village leaders nobody confessed to traditional religion.

Different sources give different accounts of the religious situation in Liberia. According to WIKIPEDIA, the free Encyclopedia, 85% of Liberia's population practise Christianity, Muslims comprise 12% and less than 1% practise traditional indigenous religions. United Nations Common Country Assessment for Liberia<sup>8</sup> gives the following figures: Christians 40%, Muslims 20% and 40% of the population practising traditional indigenous religions.



## Scientific Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, with the ongoing conflict in the Balkans, there has been awareness in the world of the high incidence of gender-based violence (GBV) in war and conflicts.<sup>9 10 11 12 13 14</sup> During the last decade there has been focus on the trauma of GBV during and after conflicts by the United Nations, Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).<sup>15 16 17 18 19</sup> The total incidence of GBV in conflicts is difficult to evaluate but an estimation by UNICEF in 2005<sup>10</sup> shows that in some conflicts more than half the female population is affected. Efforts to explain the background for GBV in wars have been made, and gender and cultural backgrounds seem to be an essential factor facilitating breakdown of social structures and control. A woman's body has become a significant element in the war game.<sup>20 21</sup> During the last few years GBV has been recognized not only as a manifestation of aggression and demonstration of power by individuals or groups of soldiers, but also as a strategic and systematic tactic during armed conflicts.<sup>22 23 24</sup>

Although hostilities towards the civil population have more or less the same pattern in all conflicts, the background is partly specific and knowledge of each situation is essential in the planning of support in post-conflict settings.<sup>12</sup>

This makes it essential to describe the trauma experienced, and the actual needs of the population in each setting.<sup>25</sup> Estimation of the incidence and different expressions of hostilities have been made from several conflict areas in Africa,<sup>26 27 28 29</sup> but very little<sup>30</sup> has been done to spread light over the experiences so as to increase the knowledge of how the trauma affects individuals.

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- 9 Frljak, 1997
  - 10 Hynes, 2004
  - 11 Loncar, 2006
  - 12 Olujić, 1998
  - 13 Ward, 2002
  - 14 Watts, 2002
  - 15 Amnesty International, 2004
  - 16 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 2005
  - 17 Stern, 2006
  - 18 UNICEF, 2005
  - 19 UNIFEM, 2002
  - 20 Gottschall, 2004
  - 21 UNHCR, 2003
  - 22 Trenholm, 2011
  - 23 Brown, 2012
  - 24 Stark, 2012
  - 25 Tankink, 2013
  - 26 Amowitz, 2002
  - 27 Depoortere, 2004
  - 28 Pham, 2004
  - 29 Swiss, 1998
  - 30 Sideres, 2003

As women survivors are crucial to the peace-building process in society, it is essential to have a gender perspective in the evaluation of war trauma and the support offered in the trauma-healing programme in every postwar area.<sup>11 18 31</sup> There is a special need to pay attention to women, not only because of the trauma they have experienced themselves, but also because they are the ones carrying the burden for others in need.<sup>32</sup> Once the high incidence of GBV in war and conflicts has been fully recognized, the need for psychological support to cure traumatized victims is obvious.<sup>33</sup> Due to the enormous number of victims it has been difficult in most settings to find methods and resources to deal with all the women in need. An intervention in the Republic of Congo in 2001-2004, however, showed that just two supportive sessions made a great difference to women, as shown in a follow-up after two years.<sup>3416</sup>

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995,<sup>35</sup> UN has taken several steps in recognition of the specific situation of women in armed conflicts. In 2000, resolution 1325<sup>36</sup> was taken recognizing women as important actors in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. It stressed the importance of female participation in peace-building and called on all parties in armed conflicts to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence in situations of armed conflicts. Resolution 1325 was the starting point for UN to intensify its work in recognizing the special situation of women in armed conflicts. Several resolutions followed, and in 2010 the General Secretary of UN, Ban Ki-moon, appointed the internationally respected Swede, Margot Wallström as UN's Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict. Her great contribution to the fight for women's rights has been the implementation of UN resolution 1960<sup>37</sup> that stresses the responsibilities of states to end impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other egregious crimes perpetrated against civilians. The longstanding conflict in the Democratic republic of Congo and other conflicts have clearly shown the need for the resolution.<sup>38</sup> Previous fighters in countries with long-standing conflicts have been brought to justice as a result of the implementation of resolution 1960. Also in 2010 the United Nations General Assembly created UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. The action 'Get Cross! - Stop Rape Now' – UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflicts is spreading over the world.<sup>39</sup>

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31 Lindsey-Curtet, 2004

32 UNIFEM, 2007

33 Hustache, 2009

34 <sup>16</sup> Stark, 2012

35 Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 1996

36 UN Resolution 1325, 2000

37 UN Resolution 1960, 2010

38 Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2009

39 <http://www.stoprapienow.org/take-action/> \_\_\_



Picture 14. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon and his Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, making the 'Get Cross' gesture.

The organization Women's Rights International (WRI) has been working in Liberia with the explicit purpose of developing methods that can document and address human rights violations against women. The organization has had a crucial role in the peace-building process both during and after the war.<sup>40</sup> WRI initiated a study in Monrovia in 1994 showing that almost half of the female population was affected by GBV during the conflict in 1989-1994.<sup>21</sup> During that time United Nations (UNHCR)<sup>41</sup> started a programme of support for women affected by GBV, but it faced difficulties due to lack of data. A population-based survey in the rural region of Lofa in 2005 showed that 95% of the women had experienced general acts of violence and 31% - 44% various forms of sexual violence.<sup>42</sup> No survey up to now has been found to document women's individual and personal experiences of the civil war in Liberia. It seems essential to get a more profound view of the reactions of the victims and the consequences of their rape in order to increase understanding.

This survey of the effects of the civil war in Liberia was conducted in Bong County in 2004-2005 with a short follow-up in 2007. Bong County is situated in the northeastern part of the country close to the border with Guinea. The target groups were women living in refugee camps, women visiting Phebe Hospital and women living in villages in the area around the hospital. The aim was to find out how the civil war had affected women. The main issue was violence experienced during the war with emphasis on GBV. Other subjects covered were socio-economic background and present social situation, experience of support given and expectations of and need for further support. Issues of how they imagined the future were also included.

The surveys were approved by the administration at Phebe Hospital<sup>43</sup> and supported by the

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40 Jennings, 2001

41 UNHCR, 2001

42 UNFPA, 2007

43 Letter of invitation, 2005. See appendix

Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in Liberia<sup>44</sup>. As women from some nearby villages and from two refugee camps were interviewed, the villages and the camps were visited to inform town chiefs and the administrative leaders of the camps about the survey<sup>45</sup>. They all gave their approval for the study and shared important local information about the situation during the war.

Professor Ulf Högberg, University of Umeå, Sweden gave useful advice concerning the content of the later parts of the surveys. Associated Professor Rurik Löfmark, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden was very helpful in revising the manuscript. My thanks to Kristin Payne, Bristol, England for checking the English wording of the text, except for the quotations from the Liberian women which are exactly as spoken.

The qualitative parts of the survey were analysed with content analysis and open coding, developed by the Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine at Umeå University.<sup>46</sup> The quantitative parts were processed in Excel-program and in SPSS-analyse.

Without the assistance of a group of sixteen nursing students from Phebe School of Nursing the survey would never have been possible to conduct. They performed 1048 interviews in the quantitative part and later 254 interviews in the semi-quantitative part of the study. In a third part of the survey I myself performed in-depth interviews with fifteen women covering the same subjects. Follow-up interviews were done with a few women who could be found again two years later.

A civil war leaves nobody unscathed, so all of the students themselves were victims of war-related crimes. In a separate part of the survey the students answered questions about their own war-related traumas.

In the post-war situation Liberia continues to work intensively against gender-based violence. Rape is still the most frequently reported serious crime in Liberia. A Joint Programme was signed between the Government of Liberia and the United Nations and implemented in 2008.<sup>47</sup> It is designed to support Liberia's National GBV Plan to address the issue of wide-scale sexual exploitation, abuse cases and gender-based violence through the implementation of both prevention and response measures.

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44 Letter of recommendation, 2006. See appendix

45 Letter of recommendation, 2004. See appendix

46 UMDAC, 2007

47 Fact Sheet, United Nations, 2008



Picture 15 – 18. The fight against GBV continues in Liberia. Pictures condemning violence against women could be seen in the streets and pasted on walls in different official buildings.



Picture 19. From a workshop condemning sexual violence. December 2004 in Maimu 2 IDP-camp.

## **How many women in Bong County were affected by the civil war?**

**A quantitative study about the situation for women in Bong County shortly after the end of the civil war**

### ***Study setting***

A cross sectional study was performed in July 2004, about 10 months after the end of the civil war. The study involved 1048 women divided into three groups: patients or relatives of patients at Phebe Hospital (37%), women in Gbondoi village and Suakoko town (34%) and women in the IDP camp Maimu 2, close to the town Totota situated along the main-road going to Monrovia (29%).

As most of the women interviewed were illiterate, the alternative answers in the questionnaire<sup>48</sup> were presented to them verbally. Subjects covered were social background, trauma during the war including gender-based violence, support given, need for further psychological and practical support. The questionnaires were completed in cooperation with the administration and staff at Phebe Hospital. The aim of the study was explained to the town chiefs and to the chairman in the IDP camp. The study was welcomed by the leaders, and the women interviewed expressed appreciation of the interest shown in their stories. The interviews were conducted by nursing students from Phebe Hospital.

The only inclusion criteria were age, and women 15 – 80 years were approached. In Gbondai and Suakoko the students divided themselves between the market place and households. In Maimu only households were visited. Every sixth house was selected in order to get information from women in the whole area. The woman first met in the house was approached. If she refused, which happened only very occasionally, the next house was visited.

The time spent with the informants was around half an hour including initial informative talks. Answers were usually given and missing data occurred for most questions between 1% and 4%.

All the interviews were conducted within Bong County but many women came from the neighbouring Lofa County which was severely affected by the war. In the refugee camp 91% of the women originated from Lofa County and only 3% from Bong County. In the villages 88% came from Bong and 7% from Lofa.

Although the study had a wide range of ages, nearly half were under thirty. Many women were vague about their age but in cooperation with the interviewer almost everybody managed to place themselves into an age group.

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48 Questionnaire 1 see appendix

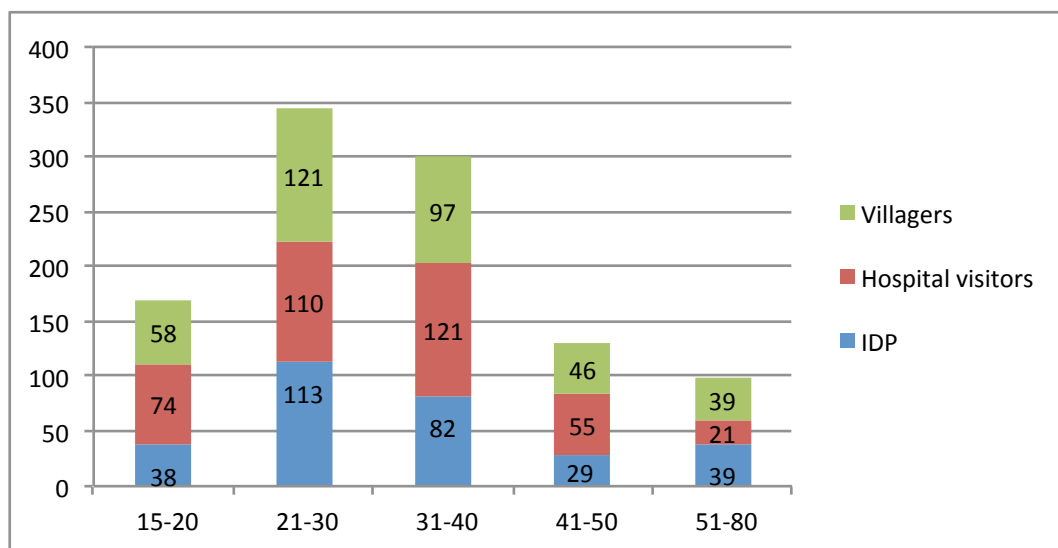


Figure 1: The different groups divided by age. The teenager group covers 6 years and the oldest group 30 years. The ages in the middle cover a 10 year span

As the informant chosen was the first woman that the interviewers met when they approached a house, this might have influenced the selection of informants in favour of young women. In this setting someone seeking care at the hospital or being a caregiver to a patient is less likely to be an older woman.

### ***Social background and present social situation***

In the questions concerning the social family situation 49% said they were single. Singles included widowed, divorced and un-married women. In the refugee group 61% lived as singles. More than one third of the singles did not live together with any family members although the definition of family included grandparents, children, uncles and aunts.

One in five married women did not live together with their husbands. How common this is in Liberian society during peacetime is not known. Many women said that the war had forced the family to be separated.

A question concerning violence within the family was included in the study. This was perhaps a sensitive issue as nearly 30% avoided answering. Violence from a family member was reported by 24% among those who answered the question and violence occurring more than three times was reported by 6%.

## ***Forced to leave home***

The official figures concerning refugees show that about 800,000 fled to neighbouring countries while an estimated 1.1 million became internally displaced within the country<sup>49</sup> during the time of the war. As the hostilities were irregular with periods of relative stabilization, one can assume that the refugee situation varied a lot over the years. At the time of the war the population decreased during some years but was on average around 3 million<sup>50</sup> giving a figure of about 60% of the population living as external or internal refugees during some part of the war. This survey shows a much higher incidence than the official figures for being a refugee during periods of the war.

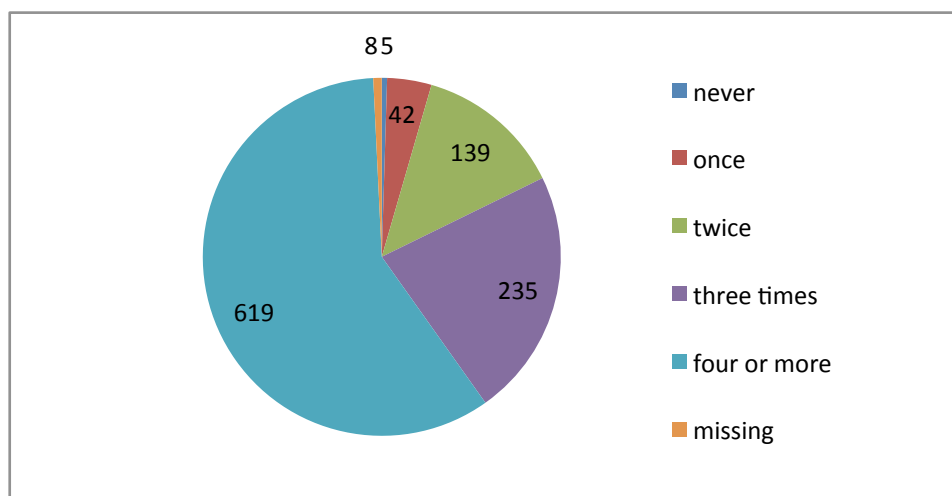


Figure 2: Being forced to leave home

Only five of the women were never obliged by force or through need to leave their homes during the war. This means that more than 99% of the population in Bong County were refugees during periods of the war. As almost a third of the interviewed women were living in a refugee camp, by definition they had left home at least once.

The women explained how they left their homes for shorter or longer periods, living in the bush, before they dared to return to their home village. Other women stayed with friends or relatives in other areas. These temporary refugees are unlikely to have appeared in official figures. Many women talked about the ‘running’ as a dominant pressure during the war. The women explained that their flight was often into the nearby bush, where a temporary shelter was built. The bush shelter had to be abandoned time and again when the sounds of guns coming closer spread fear in the group. New shelters were built and a temporary shelter could be ‘a home’ for a couple days, for weeks or even months. During periods in the bush people from the group would try to return to their village at night in order to fetch equipment or food from home. Otherwise daily food consisted of wild leaves and wild cassava. Women also used to fish in order to increase the food supply. The men would try hunting small animals like ground hogs, squirrels or birds by

49 Johns Hopkins Bloomberg, School of Public Health, 2009

50 World Bank Group, 2012



constructing traps or using a homemade catapult.

When they got back home the majority (79%) found their houses demolished or burnt down. Most women had major belongings stolen during the war and 98% had experienced robbery severe enough to affect their daily lives. It is well known that soldiers and rebels found their livelihood and in some cases got wealthy by devastating and robbing the civil population.

**War-related violence**

In a war violent killing is a reality for the civilians, leaving families without major supporters or without hope for the future through loss of their children. The trauma of lost family members affected the majority of the women, the refugee group more severely.

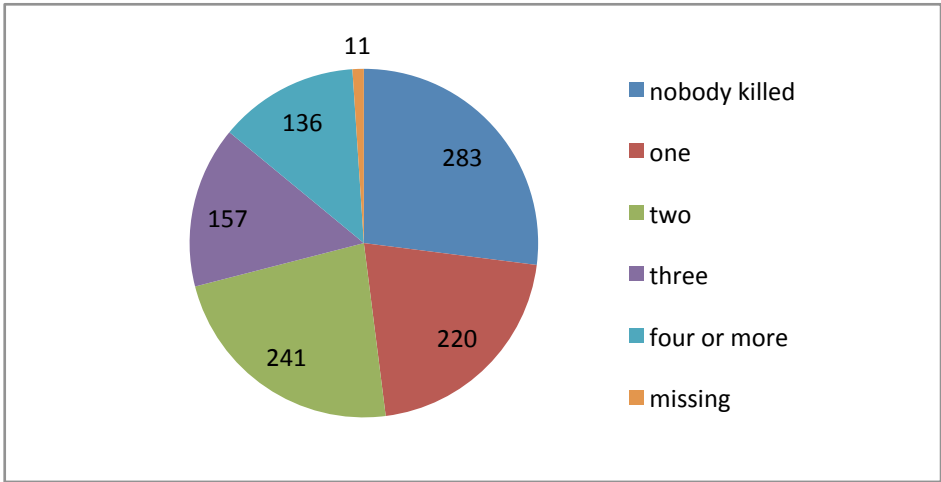


Figure 3: How killing violence affected the family members of the informants

Looking at the women in the refugee group who had lost three or more family members, we were shocked to find that 44% of the informants had to face the future with this huge trauma, and only 9% had been fortunate enough to have the whole family survive. It may be that women with a more intact family situation were less likely to look for shelter in an IDP camp or were able to return to their homes sooner after the hostilities ended. More severely affected families might stay longer in a refuge situation hoping for some kind of assistance before taking the step of returning home and trying to recover their former life. It is well known from other studies<sup>51</sup> <sup>52</sup> that among civilians more men than women are killed while women are useful as prisoners of war. This fact seemed to be true also during the civil war in Liberia, as more women than men were registered as the head of the family among more than 2,000 family groups in the refugee camp.

Three out of four women had experienced physical violence from soldiers/rebels and 35% had suffered at least four times. There were only minor differences among the three groups. The

51 Depoortere, 2004  
52 Brown, 2002

women were attacked when they were forced to leave their homes, in situations of robbery, or combined with sexual violence committed against them in their homes or when moving along the roads to seek protection in another place.

In the whole group 42% had been raped once or several times. Women from the villages seem to have been more fortunate, though almost one out of three had been raped. Maybe they were to some extent protected by a more stable family situation. The group most affected was the hospital group, where 54% had been raped although none of them came to the hospital directly as a consequence of the rape. Rape has a long lasting effect on women’s health. It is found also in peaceful areas that women who have been victims of sexual violence more often suffer from pain with psychosomatic background leading them to request medical help.<sup>53</sup>

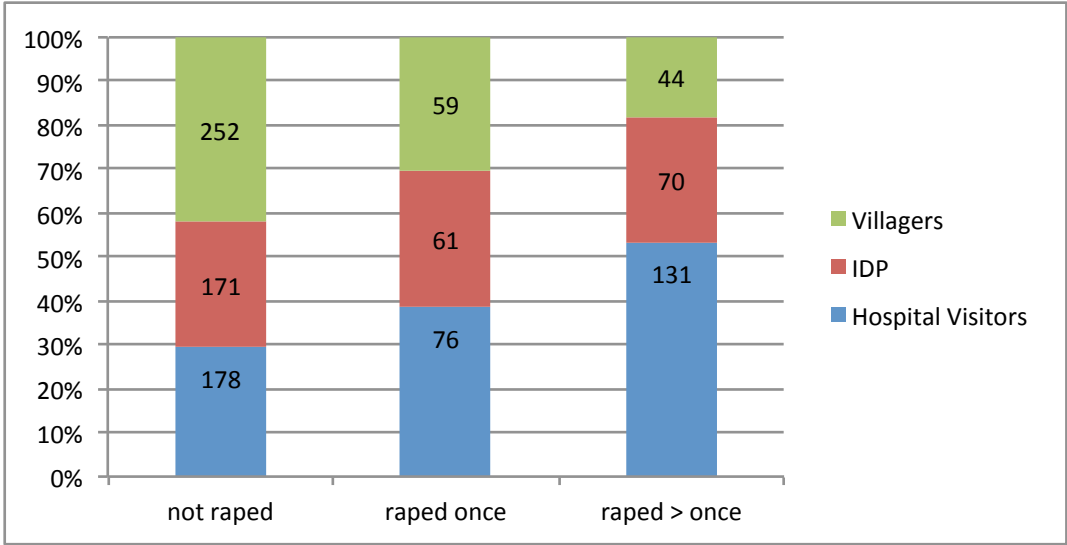


Figure 4: The trauma of rape in the three groups

Rape was reported most frequently in the teenager group (54%). As many of them were still small children in the earlier years of the 14 year long war, one may assume that the majority of the incidences against them happened towards the end of the war. Among the women over 50 not more than 16% shared the destiny of being raped. In this survey there is no report about exactly when the traumas took place during the war. Maybe as time passes the more distant traumas recede from consciousness. If this is so, the real incidence of rape during the war would be even higher than reported in this survey. Other possible explanations could be that younger women were the target group or that the crime of rape was intensified during the later part in the war.

Out of 441 rape victims, who suffered once or several times, 31% reported that they became pregnant. Out of these 62% gave birth to a child. There was no follow-up question about miscarriage or induced abortion and it is not known how many victims solved their problem through induced abortion. The figure of 38% is far too high to be explained only by spontaneous abor-

53 Danielsson, 2005

tions.

The victims of rape had to face reactions from their families. Their judgment was more negative if the rape had resulted in a child, and 61% of the raped mothers did not get support from their families. Even if the rape did not result in a child, still 45% felt stigmatized by their families.

Of the 245 women who had been raped repeatedly, 72% reported physical suffering. As medical examination was not a part of the survey, the reasons for their remaining problems can only be speculated. Inadequately treated sexually transmitted infections might be an explanation of chronic problems. Another possibility could be badly healed physical trauma after brutal force. A third possibility could be psychosomatic related pain as a result of the violation.

Almost half of the women, 47%, reported having been involved in involuntary sexual relationships during a longer or shorter period. They might have been brought into this situation by force or perhaps felt obliged to accept a sexual relationship with one soldier in order to gain his protection from other soldiers. For some women a sexual relationship might also be a way for themselves and their dependents to cope with their daily living in a situation of chaos. This forced them to become ‘wartime women’. Some of them had to pay a double price as later they might be cast off by their own families. A negative family reaction was more likely if the relationship had resulted in a child.

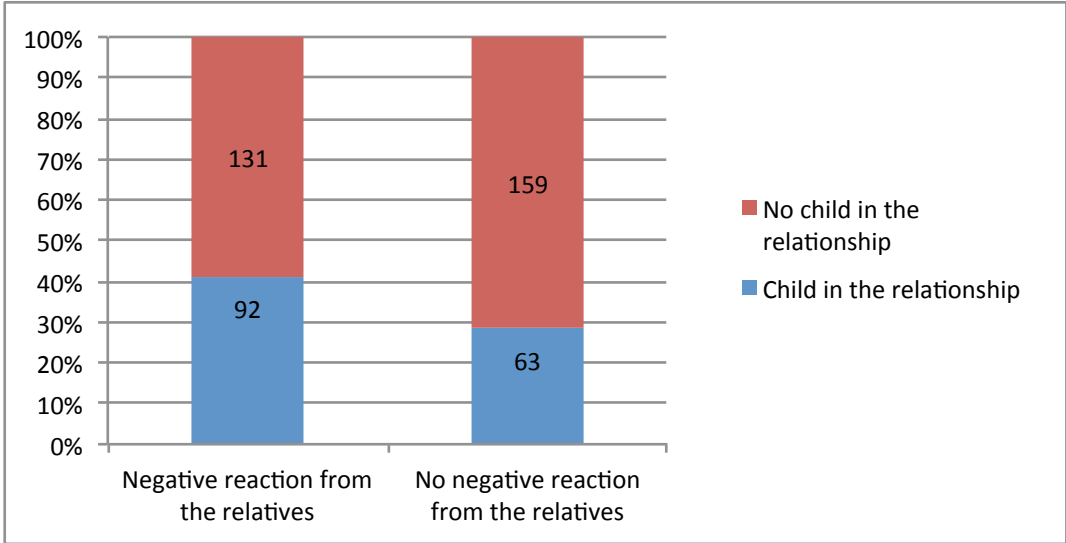


Figure 5: Involuntary sexual relationship and reactions from relatives

It was more likely for a woman to be involved in an involuntary relationship if she had been raped, 56% versus 31% if not raped. According to stories told, it was not uncommon for a raped woman to be forced to stay on with her rapist; how often this was the case was not analysed in this survey.

# Disrupted community services during the war

## Medical service

A civil war affects the whole society and social services are often unobtainable. The issue about available medical service was investigated in this survey. The question was initiated by the administration of Phebe Hospital as they had a special interest in the subject. They had experienced difficulties for the population to get access to medical care caused by the displacement of Phebe Hospital during three periods during the war. Shortcomings concerning equipment and insufficient staffing during the whole period could also have affected the availability of medical care. Another reason for the population not getting medical care when needed could be their periods of escape far away into the bush with access to neither roads nor transportation. The risk of further attacks by soldiers or rebels in populated areas was also another obstacle in preventing people from reaching adequate medical care.

We asked if the war had prevented the women from getting the medical service they needed and found that 83% had experienced this. For more than half of them the lack of care had caused longstanding or permanent negative effects. As an example, two of the interviewed women visiting the hospital had faced great difficulties during childbirth. They lived quite close to the empty hospital buildings during the period of the hospital’s displacement. They both got problems with prolonged labour. No transportation could take them to the remote hospital fifty kilometres away. They both lost their babies and were left with remaining vesicovaginal fistulas, a trauma causing continuous urinary flow direct from the bladder out via the vagina.

## School education

The education level was low and about half of the women had no schooling at all. However, among teenagers almost four out of five girls had gone to school or at least started their school education. In the oldest group only 8% had ever gone to school.

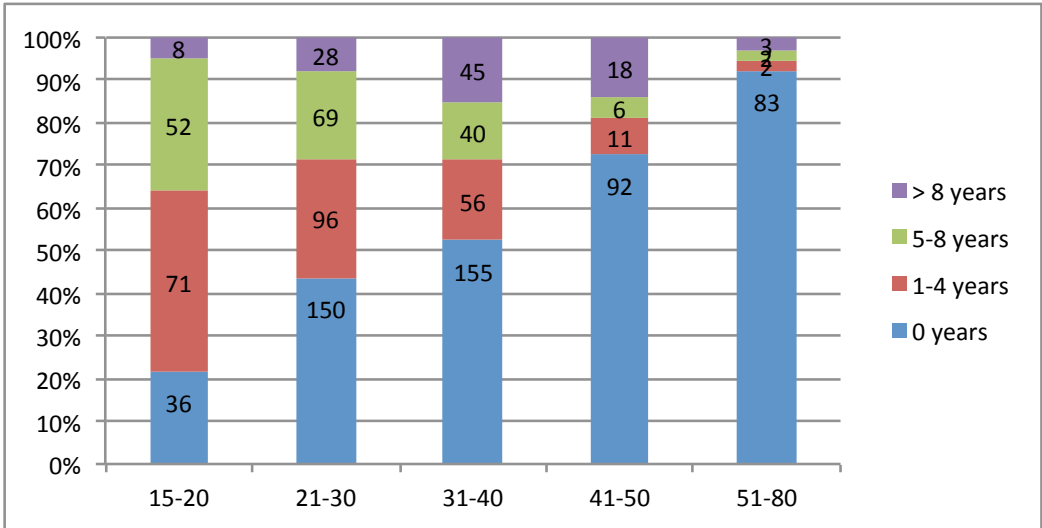


Figure 6: Education in different age groups

In IDP camps, schooling was established as soon as the infrastructure in the camps was organized. The available teachers were refugees themselves and they worked on a voluntary basis. Some people talk about a 'lost generation' as teaching in the villages was irregular, depending on fluctuations in the war, and the needs of the pupils very insufficiently met. Despite the strong ambition to open schools as soon as possible only about one third of the teenagers had attended more than four years at school and very few more than eight years.

The education level was higher in the hospital group compared to the two other groups. In the hospital group 64% had been to school and one in five had attended school for more than eight years. The reason for this difference can only be speculation. Do those with more education make better decisions, so that, for instance, they are more ready to seek medical help if they feel they have a health problem? Medical care is not free in Liberia and economic hardship can also prevent people from seeking help. Maybe educated people can afford to pay the fees demanded for hospital care. It seems essential to do more research concerning use of health care in order to give the government a better basis for decision making.

### ***Psychological support***

Some kind of psychological support had been given to 55% of the women. Family and friends had been a support for 51% and 16% had received professional support (missing answers 8%). There was an overwhelming wish among the victims, 96%, to get further psychological support.

### ***Comment***

The Church of Sweden initiated the cross sectional survey done in June-July 2004. They have concentrated their post-war support within the field of psychological trauma-healing work channelled through their partner, the Lutheran Church in Liberia.

The work with this initial study made a great impact on all of us who were involved, and it gave us inspiration to do additional research within the field. The further steps in the survey were taken with the results of this first quantitative study as a background.

## **Victims of Gender-Based Violence share their horrifying testimonies**

### **– An interview study conducted from November 2004 – January 2005**

The second part of the survey has a semi-quantitative design. It was accomplished between November 2004 and January 2005. After reflecting on the results from the first survey conducted half a year earlier which revealed the horrifying fact that 42% of the women in the area had been raped during the war, it seemed most important to highlight the issue of GBV. In this part only women affected by GBV were considered.

### ***The layout of the survey***

The questionnaire<sup>54</sup> covered socio-economic background, present social situation, reproductive health and different kinds of war trauma with emphasis on GBV. The issue of support given was included together with experienced need for further support.

Altogether 254 women were recruited. After the first six questions concerning the social situation and background, one woman was excluded due to technical problems in the form of the interview. Two women had been raped by a civilian during the war, not by soldiers or rebels. The rest had experienced sexual violence related to the war and some victims were violated from both of the two groups of perpetrators.

Test interviews were performed by the sixteen interviewers and necessary corrections were made to the questionnaire and the interview technique. Overall the different questions were answered by 93 - 100% of the women interviewed.

### ***Study setting***

Also in this part of the survey women from three different settings were approached, visitors at Phebe Hospital, women from two neighbouring villages (Singie and Gbatala) and women from the camps Maimu 2 and Salala. It was to a field position at the village of Salala that the hospital had been evacuated during the last part of the war.

The interviewers spread over the whole area and every third house was approached in the villages and every sixth house in the IDP camps. The first woman the interviewer met in the household was asked to participate. If she did not fulfil the criterion of having been raped or if she refused to be interviewed, the next woman in the household was approached. If she, too, was unsuitable the neighbouring house was chosen. Only one woman in each household was considered for an interview. In the hospital the target group was patients or carers. Consideration was given to the condition that brought the woman to the hospital.

54 questionnaire 2: see appendix

In Maimu refugee camp a support programme, including individual consultation, group discussions and training to get practical professional skills, had started for women affected by GBV. Several women interviewed at that camp took part in this programme.



Picture 20. Interviewers arriving at Maimu 2 IDP camp.

Picture 21. Information in the camp about the survey. Photo: Deddeh Began

## ***Ethics***

The experience of rape during the war was an inclusion criterion. As we already had an idea about the frequency of GBV among the population in Bong County from the first part of the survey, we estimated that about 40% of the women would have a story of GBV to tell. The interviewers found that they often had to ask a number of women before there was someone who admitted being a victim of GBV and agreed to take part in an interview. As only women with GBV were included, others around would soon deduce that, if somebody gave an interview, she had suffered GBV. If a woman had not already told her story, she may have chosen to refuse to be interviewed for fear of revealing her secret. The woman's choice was always respected without any further comment. In most cases the interview situation was the first time that the informant and interviewer had met. The main impression the interviewers got was that the informants appreciated the interest shown in their trauma and their person. The interviewers and the informants spent about one hour together.

Personal privacy was respected as far as possible in a setting where people live close together. In 10% of cases the interview was held in the presence of someone else. Out of the 23 interviews that were not held in private, 16 interviews were in one of the IDP camps. Usually the other people present were women from the same family. It was never the husband or anyone else from his family.

## ***Study Participants***

Also in this part of the survey women aged from 15 – 80 were approached, but only three women over 50 were included. The dominant age group was 20-29 years (46%) and 11% were teenagers. As many women had only a vague idea of their age, the interviewers made an estimate by comparing different steps in the women's lives with historical events in the country. Of the women interviewed, 38% lived in the IDP camps and 31% came from the hospital or the two villages nearby.

Bong County, where the interviews were held, was the original home of 48% of the women. The severely affected Lofa County was where 85% of the women living in the IDP camps had come from. Fourteen women in the camps came from four other counties. The informants represented nine out of the sixteen different tribes in the country with 60% being Kpelleh. The major area for the Kpelleh tribe is Bong County.

The majority of the women were Christian, three were Muslim, no-one professed traditional beliefs and 17 would not answer questions about religion.

In the following sections the different findings are presented.

## ***The flight***

Living in a country involved in a civil war for a long time, means that home is not a place to feel safe. All but seven women answered the question about flight and they reported that they had been forced to leave home once or several times. Sometimes it was very difficult for the woman to be exact about the frequency of flight as it had happened repeatedly during longer or shorter periods. Sometimes only a few days were spent in the bush before feeling safe to return. Others reported periods of years living in places far from home. The average number of times to have been forced to leave home was 3.9. Seven women spoke of ten or more times.

Most women had to flee several times to escape the chaos at home. Their reasons for flight might vary. When soldiers and rebels approached a village, they seldom just passed by; usually they invaded it with violence. And there are numerous horrifying stories. Often the civil population had developed a warning system to help them to recognize when the situation was threatening. Reasons for leaving home might be fear of soldiers' violence (84%) or fear of soldiers invading their homes (50%). Fear of sexual violence was mentioned by 45%.

At other times, when the invasion was more unexpected, the civilians were more or less trapped in their villages or homes. They just ran to save their own and/or family members' lives (71%) and 28% of the women specified that they ran to save the lives of dependants. Sometimes it was too late to run away and 43% of the victims were trapped and left home because they were forced to by the perpetrators. For a few women civil issues could be a reason to leave home



even during wartime and 16% had at some time left their home more or less voluntarily. Indirectly the reason might still be war-related as there was a chronic shortage of food throughout the war.

### ***Houses were destroyed and whole villages disappeared***

A majority of the women (84%) had their homes destroyed during the war. Also women living in the IDP camps, often far away from home, knew of the sad conditions in their home villages. Some women (11%) had to watch their home being looted and burnt down. For others, relatives or neighbours had been back to the home village and reported the terrible damage done. Only six women still had no idea about the condition of their houses. Robbery and total destruction of all property that could be of any value had been an organized and well established method for rebels and soldiers to earn their living. Invading a village successfully meant that valuables left behind could be taken. This was a reward for the soldiers from their commanders after, from their point of view, a successful raid. When everything of value, furniture, doors, windows and roofs had been taken, the rest of a house was often set on fire.

The trauma of a damaged and destroyed house seems to be of both practical and symbolic significance. Having no house means having nowhere to be rooted and resettled.

Although some women seemed to have adapted, a majority still felt traumatized. The situation when they were forced from their home and the house was looted was often the start of a family split-up. Some family members were killed in the raids and others were dispersed.

*It was very shocking to me because my husband was killed during the distortion of my house. It was difficult for me to overcome it. And up to now I am worried because I don't have place to be when I go back home. (Hospital)*

Being forced to leave home could also mean living out in the bush for longer or shorter periods without shelter or access to enough food and with the constant fear of being found during a new raid by the same or another soldier group. Many expressed the trauma of being unable to save anything from their homes to comfort them in their life of running, running and running to escape the feared aggressor, often without any idea of what they were running towards.

In the postwar situation, when the most acute 'running' was over, women who had lost their homes were dependent on others and they felt frustration at the unstable, impermanent way of life.

*I felt very sad, because the effort applied to build was wasted for nothing and also the finance. I'm still feeling bad because I have no place to be and I renting from people now. (Hospital)*

A great number of the women gave the impression of being very lonely in the responsibilities of trying to restore a home. Could this be a sign of split families with no male family member as head of the group or could it be the woman's worries for her dependants?

*When I heard that my house was destroyed I felt sad and dis-hearted. Now I am still feeling discouraged because we will soon be returning home and I do not have area to lodge me and my family. (IDP)*

Women living in a more stable family situation usually expressed more hope and trust in the future.

*I felt sad and discouraged in life because I alone to start my life over, it was not an easy task. But now through other family members help, I was able to start my life over by building one bedroom house. (Hospital)*

That others were similarly affected was a consolation for some. Trust in God gave many informants strength through the hope of someone greater holding the future in his hand.

*I was confused, disturbed and downhearted. I never knew my way. How could I rebuild my house after years of struggle? My feelings have changed. I have overcome my frustration through the help of my God. What others lost in war are more than mine. From this point I live my life. (Hospital)*

*When I heard this news about my house been destroyed I felt sad, but now I thank God that I am alive and will try to rebuild. It all happened because of war, so I do not blame anyone. (IDP)*

Hearing her express such confidence in the future, you might expect that this woman had not been much affected by trauma, yet her story shows a completely different picture. She lived in an IDP camp and was in her twenties. She had had to stop schooling after four years due to the death of her aunt on whom she was dependent. For the last nine months she had been attending a training course learning to bake. She lived with her husband but he had beaten her several times. When he became violent she would usually run to neighbours for protection. Her mother and four out of five siblings were killed during the war. She had had one child herself but several children were depending on her for care. For a period during the war she had had to be the wartime-woman of another man *because I never had food for my children*. As soon as the conditions around her had improved she took her children and just escaped.

Occasionally informants stressed that the looters should be brought to justice.

*I felt very discouraged and sad. Thinking on when will we have money to build another home. I am still feeling confuse and don't know what to do. I feel that people who did destroy my home should be brought to justice. (Hospital)*

Generally speaking women from the villages were more positive about their hope of getting somewhere to live. Even if without any practical means of rebuilding their house, they were more confident that the situation would be solved.

*I was downhearted and started to cry but at that time there was no one to stop them because of the arms. I'm now hoping and praying to get someone to rebuild my house. (Village)*

Assistance in rebuilding the houses was in top position among wishes for future support and was mentioned by more than half of the women. Those living in the IDP camps were more affected by demolished houses than women in the villages, 95% against 67%. As expected the need to rebuild the house was more urgent in the IDP group where 73% stressed help with housing as one of their major needs.

A woman in her twenties lived with her husband together with her own and her extended family in one of the IDP camps. She seemed to take the major responsibility for the family as she was the only one contributing money to supplement the food distribution by WFP (World Food Programme). She was working as a 'contractor' outside the camp. Contractor is a Liberian expression for someone depending on irregular work without any promise of employment. She had only had three years' schooling, as she was needed for work at home after her father, who had been paying her school fees, had been killed. The death of an uncle had also had an impact on the family as she specially mentioned him: *he was sometime helping my mother*. When expressing the needs for the future she seemed to take special responsibility as she spoke about 'my' house.

*I would like the government, any church or NGOs to help me with emotional, financial and materials to help me build my house in Lofa. Because I don't know how to go back home my house was destroyed. (IDP)*



Picture 22. Production of bricks for building a house in a small village



Picture 23. Normal life with a market has returned to a village

When making content analysis concerning the answers about loss of homes the result appeared differently in the different groups of women. The two categories **the loss** and different aspects of **traumatic feelings** were much more prominent among the IDP women compared to the women from the villages. When comparing the two categories **signs of re-orientation** and **inability of re-orientation** this also showed a big difference between the two groups with much more prominent lack of confidence in the future in the IDP group. When living dispersed and without having taken the step of returning to their homes, the informants seemed more afraid that they would lack the means to rebuild a house and recover satisfactory living conditions.

### ***Many family members were killed and others died as medical care was a challenge***

There is a vast panorama of trauma for civilians in a civil war, and no outsiders can possibly understand the depths of frustration emerging from all the various, often combined traumas. Although the families were often unable to keep together when forced repeatedly to leave home, important social links were maintained for most informants. About eighteen months after the end of hostilities the majority of the women lived in close connection or together with family members. However, the war had affected the family structure severely.

The killing violence affected civilians to a great extent and lack of medical care due to the war situation could mean the difference between life and death.

For 56 women (22%) their husbands had been killed in the war and seven more had lost their husbands due to other reasons. Since then a number of them have found new men but at the time of the interview 17% remained widows. About half of the women were living permanently with a man, married or not. Nine per cent of the women were married but lived for the time being separated from their husbands. Four per cent were divorced and 18% were not yet married.

During their lifetime the informants had given birth to up to 14 children, on average 3.8. Among the 28 teenagers eleven had become mothers. Five of them had had only one child and two reported four children.

The trauma of having lost between 1 and 3 children due to the hostilities had affected 48 women, more than every fifth mother. Almost 40% of the mothers had lost 1 - 8 children from so-called natural causes. It is likely that the figures for non-violent deaths are higher in a situation of war as many women testified that family members had died of diseases out in the bush where there had been no access to medical care. Considering all the sorrows the mothers in Bong County were facing, 52% had lost one or more children from different causes of death.

Most women came from big families, some up to 18 siblings, with an average of 5.3. Only two women had no siblings. The majority of the families had been severely affected during the war

resulting in a considerable reduction in family size. The war took the lives of up to eight siblings for 48% of the informants. Death due to other reasons caused 31% of the women during their lifetime to lose up to seven siblings.

In the group of interviewed women 10% had lost their mothers and 29% had lost their fathers as a result of the hostilities, showing that the killing violence affected men more often than women, a pattern that is shown also in other conflict areas.<sup>55 56</sup> Losing a parent affects people differently depending on their age. Among the 28 teenagers, seven had lost their fathers through war actions and four more had lost either their mother or their father in natural deaths.

Living in an extended family, the deaths of other more distant relatives could also affect people deeply, and 39% of the women mentioned loss of important supporter persons or other dear ones, leaving them with worries about how to recover.

*Today we are all afraid to go home because the strong men are all dead in the family. Anyone can now say anything to us and go free. We are all feeling sad because of their death. (IDP)*

This was the testimony of a woman who had six children and lived together with her husband, but her parents, her only two siblings and two uncles had been killed. She had fled altogether six times. Living in an IDP camp with her home burnt down, she and her husband did not know how to find the means to restore their lives.

As the interview was held more than a year after the end of 14 years of conflict, one might assume that in many cases the loved ones killed had lost their lives several years previously. The answers show that the hostilities were still in the minds of the women, making it very difficult for them to look or move forward.

Such painful memories often had to be suppressed for self-protection, as with this woman whose father had been murdered and whose uncle and nephew had been cruelly killed by being burnt alive.

*I don't like to hear about their death. They died a painful death. Their memories are always fresh and marked by crying. Sadness, sorrow and grieving are our days. (IDP)*

The flashbacks would return day and night specially for those women who had witnessed the atrocities affecting their dearest:

*My husband and my brother were killed in my presence. I fainted when they were*  
*killed and I was not to myself for two weeks. Since their death I have not been able*

55 Depoortere, 2004.

56 Brown, 2002.

*to do anything good for myself because I have just lost hope in life. (Hospital)*

Or as her ill-fated sister said:

*My husband and two of my children were killed in my presence. When they were shot, my eyes grew black, and I went to the commander to have me killed too, because I was unable to withstand the tension. Since their death, I have decided not to born again and to get married again. Now I am too lonely, confused and always being talked to forget about what has happened to me. How can I forget what happened to me? My husband made me very lazy. My two children were out of high school trying to go to the university. They were helping me with money and clothes. (Hospital)*

An important part of her family had just vanished and life had become very difficult, not only at the time of the interview but also as she envisaged the future. She was a woman in her thirties living in her extended family together with her two remaining children, grieving for the loss of her two well-educated children who had been seen as the investment for the future.

It was very obvious that family bonds were strong and that members of the family had been and were dependent on each other to run their lives. When asked about the effect of the death of a family member, what the women mentioned most often was that the loss of a support person had made it difficult to manage the practical matters of daily life. Many women had faced the loss of not only one strong person in the family but several, one after the other or all in the same attack.

*The death of my three brothers affects me greatly because they were very useful in the family, because they were the people to make farm for the family and cut palm also to help support the family in all conditions. (IDP)*

The support persons mourned often came from the extended family, showing the wide network of responsibility in a functional family system.

*My uncle and brothers were killed. Besides these three killed no one else. These people were very important to me. They assisted me whenever I was in need. Practically I miss them because they were very much helpful to me. They always came to my cry. Whenever I was jam (helpless, trapped in a difficult situation), financially they help me. Emotionally I am depressed, disturbed and down hearted. I always pray to God to bless their souls. (Village)*

The lost support persons were usually men. Fathers and brothers were in the majority and these were mentioned about twice as often as husbands; uncles were mentioned about as often as husbands.

One very important matter was the frustration of having had to leave school and not being able to get the education they had hoped for. For many informants the loss of a supporter had caused loss of hope for a prosperous future, as the deceased person was seen as the guarantor of studies for the woman herself, her siblings or her children.

*The death of my father has stopped me from going to school, because he was the only person to put effort in my schooling activity. For my two brothers they were always willing to learn to the highest and they were always encouraging me about my school. (IDP)*

*The deaths of my two brothers and my son have depressed me up to now, because they were very helpful to me financially and they were always willing to send my children to school but for now, nobody to send them to school. For my son's death, I feel hopeless in life sometimes, because he was always ready to go to school and to help me and at all times he visited during school break. (Hospital)*

When it comes to female support and emotional support, it was mothers and female relatives who were most missed.

*I was very shocked when my mother was killed. I lost hope in life totally. Because I know that I will never get somebody to replace my mother. And those things that my grandmother used to do for me, I don't have anyone to do them for me. (IDP)*

War causes a disruption in the means of maintenance, as one cannot plan from one time to the next. Possibilities for farming were minimal for many years. Also many services were cut making it very difficult to find money for daily life. The situation was often aggravated when main supporters were lost, making daily life very hard.

*I am so frustrated and when I think too much, my head starts to turn. They were all helping me but since they died, I am catching hard time to get food, help or advice. (IDP)*

The woman who gave this testimony was in her thirties and was living in an IDP camp together with three small children. She had been forced to leave home twice and had escaped to save her life. She was worried about returning, as she could see no way to rebuild her destroyed house. She was a widow; her husband had been killed, her parents had been killed and she had to console her sister whose three children had all been killed. She herself had had five children but lost two of them to disease. She had had no school education and was trying to support her remaining children by cutting brushwood to supplement the food distributed by WFP.

Some women really could not see whom to depend on or how to support the daily life of themselves and their dependants.

*My parents' and my husband's deaths had affected me greatly I nearly committed suicide when it first happened. And now I'm very depressed and lonely because I don't have anyone to help me with my problems, no one to care for me and my children. (IDP)*

*The death of my husband caused me to be frustrated and hopeless in life. I got malnourished for long time because I could not afford food for me and the children. (IDP)*

Her children later died in a measles epidemic.

The social boundaries might all be broken, as was the case with this woman in her twenties, whose husband had left her and who was living with her extended family. She had been forced to leave home eleven times and her father, her only child and one of her three siblings had been killed. She felt deserted.

*My baby's death and my father's death got me to feel very sad and discouraged. I am still grieving over it. My heart is very ugly in me and I can't understand myself. My life is full of sorrow. Since my father's death no one has been there to give me protection or talk for me. (IDP)*

Some women faced up to their tough situation and found the means to struggle on despite the great loss of quality of life.

*I have to get wood myself. I have to work for other people before getting money. I cry sometimes while working for other people for little or nothing. (IDP)*

Despite the loss of many family members in the war, the relationship with family members was stable or re-established for the majority of the interviewed women. The nuclear family was the social link for 66%, and 24% of the women lived together with the extended family. About 10% of the women lived without any family connection at all.

It is obvious that war affects civilians not only directly but also indirectly. To the question whether war prevented the woman from getting medical care, 78% answered 'yes' and their testimonies show a lot of suffering. Conditions generally seen in the tropics like malaria and diarrhoea diseases, often with periods of bloody diarrhoea, are most frequently mentioned, followed by different variations of the common cold with complications like pneumonia.

Some women lost their children and other family members in conditions that they presumed would have been possible to treat if they had had access to medical care. Very often the lack of care was connected with long periods of living out in the bush.

*When we ran into the bush one of my children got sick with diarrhea and died be-*



*cause there was no medicine. Even though we tried country medicine but it did not work. (Hospital)*

This woman was in her thirties and had escaped from her home four times. She had lost her husband and two children in war actions. She was now living with her two remaining children in her extended family but stated that *since their death my life has just been full of sadness*. Concerning her own health she said she was well off.

Another woman had lost several family members when living under extraordinary conditions. She lived, separated from her husband, in an IDP camp with her remaining children together with extended family members.

*Myself got sick in malaria several times and took country herbs and got well but my two children died because no hospital, my father and mother also died. (IDP)*

She explained that she had been forced to leave home seven times and her house had been destroyed. Her reasons for leaving home were: forced by soldiers, running to save her children's life and fear of sexual violence. She was in her forties and had given birth to seven children but had lost four of them, one of them in war actions. About her situation she said:

*I think no one can help me and I will remain here until I die. (IDP)*

Without access to official medical care, often inventiveness and mutual assistance solved the situation. It is obvious that people still have access to knowledge concerning traditional treatment, mainly with different herbs. Female family members were most often mentioned as carers, especially the mother.

*I had chronic bloody stool for two weeks and there was no health centre for me to get care. My mother was the one that got some country herbs for me that cured me. From that time up to now I can still feel some abdominal pain. (Village)*

Many women also saw signs of God's grace improving their health and saving their lives.

*We line deep into the forest for fear of the soldiers. We had no access to health care. Whenever we were sick, we took in herbs. God was really with us. I encouraged schistosomiasis for which I could not get treatment. It really gave me hard time. It was just recently that I got treatment for it. (Hospital)*

This woman was in her thirties and had been forced to leave home four times. She lived together with her husband. She was one of the few lucky ones who had gone through the war without the sorrow of losing any family members. Her house had been destroyed but also where this was concerned she felt trust in God.

*As time goes by, he will make a way for me. This attitude has driven away my wor-*

*ries. God will rebuild my house. (Hospital)*

A young teenager was also helped psychologically by her trust in God. She was single and had not yet had any children. She lived with extended family members in the village Gbatala.

*I suffered from malaria and could not go to the hospital because of the fighting, I used country herbs but it was only by the mercy of God that I got well. There are no longstanding health problems since. (Village)*

Her house was well kept in the war so she belonged to the rare ones. Her father was the only family member killed in the war. She regretted his death a lot as he was the breadwinner of the family and the guarantor for her schooling, which she had had to stop after eight years.

More acute problems had to be solved using whatever initiatives or capabilities were available in the circumstances.

*I cut myself on my left leg on a hook where there was no health worker to arrest the bleeding for about two hours. But later, I was helped by my mother and other women by tying my leg and later applied some herbs to the wound, but to now I can still feel the pain in my leg. (Hospital)*

Naturally, different gynaecological and obstetrical issues had to be handled by the women with various degrees of success through their own initiative or with the support of people around. A couple of women spoke of sisters who had died in childbirth. Some others gave birth out in the bush and lost their babies. Haemorrhage in childbirth is worldwide the leading cause of

maternal death<sup>57</sup>. Only one woman in this group mentioned severe bleeding when she gave birth and made the comment

*....by God's Grace I was helped by taking herbs. (Village)*

Also, when spontaneous abortions occurred, herbs seemed to be the natural choice of treatment.

*I had abortion but there was no health center to help me. Therefore my friends and family helped me with country herbs until I got well, but from that time up to now, my stomach can hurt me very much during my period. (Hospital)*

About one fourth of the women described chronic problems with their health which they themselves ascribed to lack of care during the war period.

*My family and I never had access to health care. Whenever we were sick, we would not go to a health centre for care. We always took herbs as a means of solving our*

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57 WHO fact-sheets.

*health problems. My health has been poor since due to the prolonged absent of health care. (Hospital)*

*I had severe stomach pain and I nearly die and I started to take country herb, but up to now at time I still experience this severe stomach pain. (Hospital)*

After the war had ceased 14% emphasized the wish for assistance with medical problems. All of them who stressed medical need had this wish for support in combination with other needs. Only occasionally the very specific medical problem they were suffering from was mentioned:

*I want for the person to give me treatment for vaginal discharge and dysmenorrhea and to help me to complete my education. I will like this help from an NGO. (IDP)*

Many informants seemed to understand about the risk of unsafe sex and about 9% expressed the fear of having been infected with sexually transmitted infections (STI), 17% complained of long lasting vaginal discharge regarded by the women as a sign of infection acquired through rape. A number of the women named a specific STI; whether diagnosed or not, it was their opinion.

*I got gonorrhoea from this soldier but I was treated with herbs by my mother and I got well. (Village)*

*Deep down in my heart, I felt miserable about the incident. This really disturbs my mind whenever I think about it. My fear now is if it could be that I have AIDS now from that man. He may have done that to many other persons before coming over to me. My life is in God's hands. He knows my problems. (Hospital)*

*I have been worried and depressed about my own health because I don't know the health status of those soldiers. And now I am still worried and depressed because of the abdominal pain and black menses I continue to have. (IDP)*

Two of the categories that came out of the content analysis concerning lack of medical care during the war were **creative means of getting help** and **remaining health problems**. With regard to ways of getting help it is impressive how inventive the victims, their family members and other people around were when facing acute situations out in the bush. In view of the traumatic experiences and life-threatening situations you would expect some of the persisting symptoms to have a psychosomatic background, which would explain some persisting health problems.

Losing a close family member through violence is a big trauma whether it is a grown-up or a child, a woman or a man, but to some extent it differs. The consequences of the loss differ depending on the position of the killed or lost person within the family. When doing content

analysis regarding the informants' reactions to loss of dear family members and other important persons in their lives, the following categories were found: The **emotional trauma** was prominently stressed and the **disorientation through loss of social connection** was also very obvious. **Practical consequences in the daily life** and a **feeling of helplessness how to manage daily life** and **anxiety about how to manage the future** also stood out. Almost half of the women mentioned loss of the support person as one of the most important consequences.

### ***Violence in war severely affects the civil society***

All 254 women in the survey had the experience of GBV as it was the inclusion criteria. When separately asking about physical violence, it was found that all kinds of physical violence had been affecting female civilians.

#### **Domestic physical violence**

Violence in the civil society occurs among people living together in all societies. In this survey the reported incidence of 'civil' or domestic violence was fairly low with 21% giving their testimonies of violation by related people. The prevalence of domestic violence in this population before the influence of war is not known. The informants had all been victimized by very severe war-connected violence. Could violence by civilians be considered as too trivial in comparison and therefore disregarded by the women in an interview that was advertised as dealing with war-related matters? A woman who was beaten by her uncle due to disagreements about their property was advised by her younger brother

*to forget about what has happened since we were still in the war at that time. (IDP)*

The reported violence committed within the civil society was caused by individuals with a variety of social links to the informants. The women were beaten by both men and women coming from their own families, by men from their husband's family and by friends and neighbours. Fifteen women, 6%, reported being beaten by their husbands.

Some of the women did not accept the ill-treatment from their husbands and took actions like bringing the man to court or reporting him to other family members.

A woman in her twenties who lived with her husband and three children was beaten by her husband over a period of two months. She took her complaint to the group of elders in the village and her husband stopped beating her after his brother and sister were appointed by the elders to go and talk to him.

Another woman in her thirties was hit in the face once. She was bleeding from her nose and she reported her husband to other family members who took him to court.

Fighting back against the husband was also a solution. After listening to gossip, a husband became jealous, suspecting his wife of what he considered to be unacceptable behaviour. He beat her over a period of two years. She usually fought back. Her mother tried to take her side but seemed to have been less successful.

As in other social settings alcohol played a part in the domestic violence, and a woman who had been widowed and now had a 'boyfriend' in the IDP camp where she was living, stated:

*He most often beat me without any reason, sometimes when he is drunk, that's the time he can carry on his behaviour. (IDP)*

His friends had tried to talk to him but to no effect and the informant, who was learning tailoring in the camp, accepted the situation for the time being but was planning to *go to my people* as soon as she got her qualification.

Abuse was also the background with the husband of a young woman who reported that she had been beaten about four times a year *with his belt, sticks and anything he finds around him*. The husband was a shop-assistant in a town about fifteen kilometres away from the village where they lived. She herself was contributing to the support of the family by farming. She had had four children and one of them had been killed in the war. She tried to fight back when her husband beat her but usually gave up as *he gets more worst on me*. The people around knew about the ill-treatment and she used to run to them as soon she could escape. Her mother-in-law had tried to talk to her son several times but to no avail.

Other relatives besides the husband were involved in violence for 11% (24) of the informants, most of them coming from the woman's own family. The reasons seem to be general family conflicts concerning work or disagreement concerning possessions. Often other relatives would step in to stop the row. A teenager complained about her aunt:

*She used to beat me and sometimes mean me with food, because I did not sell all her market or report correct money to her. (IDP)*

She found the situation unbearable, so she left her aunt and at the time of the interview was living in an IDP camp without any family members at all. She had lost her uncle and grandfather through war actions and they were the people she had been depending on although both her parents were alive.

When neighbours and 'friends' fought (7% - 18 women) it was usually over possessions. It might be about small things as in the case of a woman in her twenties who lived in one of the villages who had been fighting with neighbours over a piece of cloth. It might also be concerning more major things like ownership of property. In conflicts with people outside the families the informants usually fought back.

A woman who lived in an IDP camp had got access to a plot for farming to support her family. She was a widow with four children and both her parents had been killed. Obviously she had not managed to get a house of her own in the camp, as she and her children were staying with 'friends'. A quarrel occurred in the house and the informant said:

*They forced me and took away my land that I was depending on. They drove my children from their house and they slept under the rain. I felt bad, worried and cry whole night and planned to revenge if I had power to do so. (IDP)*

She felt very lonely as nobody came to her defence in her emergency. How the situation was eventually solved is not known.

The reasons behind domestic physical violence seem to be about the same as in many other settings, the woman having no real power to oppose. Disputes with family members other than the husband are dominated by disagreements within the woman's own family rather than among members of her husband's family. Conflicts with neighbours or friends are usually based on practical issues like work or possessions. A quarrel could lead to violence where the informant quite often seemed to be an active part not accepting to be the victim. The group affected by 'civil violence' is small and possibly there may have been other, more severely affected victims, who in this interview situation chose to keep their stories secret. In the homes in villages and IDP camps, with people living very close together, there is little privacy.

### **War-related physical violence**

Physical war-related violence was mentioned by 85%. About one third of the women in the whole group were attacked on one occasion and for 43% it happened between 2 and 4 times; for 10% it was 5-10 occasions and one woman spoke of 40 times.

The most common reason for physical violence in war (41%) was the need for working power. The women were forced to perform tasks like carrying looted goods from a raid or supporting the soldiers with different services like washing clothes, cooking, and pounding rice carried by the women to the shelter of the rebels.

*They forcibly used me to work for them. Cook, wash cloths, break wood and even look for food for them. They tied me whenever I refused to do so. (IDP)*

*They demanded me to get water for them to take bath and cook their food, to beat rice. When I let down their demands I was beaten severely by them. (Village)*

Sometimes the women were caught together with their children or other dependants. A woman in her forties had been captured together with her child about a year before the interview. At the time of the interview she was divorced and lived with her own and extended family. She

had had seven children; one had been killed and three others had died from other causes. Seven times she had been forced to leave her home due to hostilities and the main reasons for doing so had been in order to save the lives of her children and to avoid sexual violence.

*They force me and my child to break wood for them, cook for them and when we refused, they tied us and beat us. (IDP)*

Another woman had a similar horrifying story:

*Initially we, my children and I, tried to put up resistant. We were warned strongly to stop. If we refused, we will all be killed. That's how we eat with them. (Hospital)*

Women were considered by the enemy to be more easily handled than men and were often coveted as prisoners for rebels and soldiers as a part of the action when a village was attacked. Men might be a threat and, if they did not escape, were often killed in the raids. According to the evidence of the women in this study, three times as many fathers were killed as mothers. By killing the men, the invaders had more control over the group of prisoners.

The soldiers depended for their wellbeing and their daily living on what they could obtain through robbery during and after a raid. Looted goods needed to be carried long distances and the women were weighed down with excessive loads.

*I carried twelve sheets of zinc for a whole day walk and the second time was to beat the rebels' commander's rice for two days. (Village)*

From the women's stories, it seems that the worst thing to be forced to carry was ammunition because that made them feel as though they were contributing to the destruction of other villages where friends or relatives might be living.

*I was forced by them to be their cook, to look for food for them and more over to carry their gun shot. (Hospital)*

War-related physical brutality may often have involved sexual violence but only nine women specifically mentioned that sexual violence happened on the same occasion. One woman who was caught in a raid in 1994 when she was only a teenager was forced at gunpoint by a group of ten soldiers to carry ammunition and that was just one part of the violence. She explained:

*They beat me, forced me to carry their gun shot while I was put under gun point. On their way they undressed me and five of them raped me. (Village)*

Her testimony continued:

*I wept, screamed and begged them but they could not release me. When I was trying to defend myself, they tied me and forced a gun in my vagina and hit me with the*

*gun on my back. (Village)*

Obviously the cruelty was too much for some of the fellow soldiers, who, though hardened by previous actions, did not take part in the violent rape. The informant continued her story:

*Their friend soldiers, they appeal to them to leave and to only allow me carry their load. (Village)*

After the incident she was urinating blood for a long time. She became pregnant as a result of the rape and performed an induced abortion by swallowing some kind of pills. It took three months before she recovered after the abortion. She was suffering from abnormal vaginal discharge and abdominal pain. At the time of the interview she was living in one of the villages together with her husband, who was a carpenter, and their five children.

Quite often the attacks did not take place in the civilian settlement but when people were on their way, trying to escape from one place to another where they hoped to find security. Also, small, insignificant items would be stolen. Did the raiders think them valuable or was it just a power game? For the victims these small things might be all they had.

*They took away from us forcibly our clothes, food and money we had. We were scraped naked and checked thoroughly. We were hit and against our way. (Hospital)*

*I was beaten with gun on my neck and they took the clothes and foods that people had given me on the way to Gbaranga. (IDP)*

On many occasions it seems as if the atrocity itself was the aim – or the game?

*I cried and tried to fight back, but he was stronger than I, therefore he beat me until he was satisfied. (IDP)*

It is known that soldiers in the Liberian civil war made their own lives bearable by using drugs<sup>58</sup> which inured them to cruelty towards whoever got in their way.

Among the informants 65% gave the testimony of being beaten or injured by a variety of methods or by different weapons. Seventeen women were tied up, often in combination with other assaults.

*The first time I was falsely accused for being one of the rebels supporters. They tied both hands and legs and put me in the ants for three hours. The ants stuck me all over my body until I was like a dead person. My skin got swollen and painful. (Hospital)*

Fourteen women were imprisoned for a day or several days under terrible conditions such as

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58 Utas, 2003.



being tied up or with nothing to eat or drink.

*They jailed me for five days without eating and drinking. I was also beaten for one whole day. (IDP)*

*They beat me and pushed me into a deep hole where I spent three days, after that they force me to carry some planks for their commander to build his shop. (Village)*

Six women were burnt or scalded

*The first time, I was falsely accused. So I was tied and boil water wasted on my skin, as you can see the mark. I was only grieving within me, and praying for my life. I was crying but lied under the sun and rain. I was later released by one of the soldiers and ran away. (Village)*

*They forced me to give money to them and they took fire, put on my head and burned the centre of my head and beat my husband to death. (Village)*

*Beat me with a gun, put me up in a house and put fire under me. (IDP)*

The war lasted from 1989 to 2003 with fluctuating intensity and there seem to have been some peaks of violence against civilians. We asked about the first occasion of violence and 84% of the women could report the year. The information from the women shows fluctuation in the violence during the period but also escalation towards the end of the war. Whether this was really so or just the way it was remembered is only speculation.

In 1990 7% suffered their first attack and then it was relatively calm with only occasional incidents until 1994, when 18% were attacked for the first time. After this again there was a relatively calm period until 2000 when it started to escalate; 5% were attacked and the peak came in 2002 when 47% reported having been attacked for the first time. In 2003, the last year of the war, with peace officially agreed in August, 19% experienced their first attack of physical violence. When asked which year the last attack occurred, the women seemed unsure; only about a quarter answered this question. A few indicated 2004 as the last year of physical violence from soldiers. The disarming and repatriation of soldiers took place during 2004. It is likely that during most of that year a number of former soldiers and rebels still had access to weapons allowing them to fall back into familiar wartime behaviour.

The women were also asked to say how many soldiers were involved when they experienced the greatest number of violent attacks. For only 12% it was just one single soldier. About half estimated the number of soldiers involved to be from two to five, and 20% estimated 6-10 soldiers. Thirteen women estimated a number of more than twenty, up to several hundred. In an attack some soldiers took part, others were busy bothering other civilians and some soldiers might have been just passive observers of the hostilities.

In the chaos of brutality, unexpectedly for the victims, a saviour might appear. For twenty victims one or several soldiers did come to defend or protect the women being attacked. In six cases this rescuer was a commander, who might choose to use his power for protection, just as he used it in war action:

*One of their commander, he told these boys to let me go if they don't they will see his action and I was released. (Village)*

*The soldiers' boss, he appealed to his subordinates to stop forcing women to work for them. (Village)*

*One of the soldiers he told his friends to leave or else he could kill some of them and they left me. (Hospital)*

In other situations the women were freed because a soldier might suddenly decide to show mercy.

*One of the rebels, he told me "the only way you will be saved, is to run away in the night" and I did. (Hospital)*

Soldiers were continuously recruited or forced into fighting groups. They would come from different areas and might find themselves invading a village where their own relatives lived. One informant was saved by her brother ten years prior to the interview when she was in her teens. She was in a group of many girls attacked by a great number of soldiers. The girls were paralysed with fear but one of the soldiers was her brother and he managed to get his sister freed.

*He was a soldier too. He told his friends that I was his sister. I was released. (Hospital)*

Children as well as other relatives of the soldiers might be in the invading group taking more or less active part in the raid. Sometimes there could be a meeting between children as when a soldier's son appealed on behalf of one of the captured girls who was only a child herself. At the time of the interview she was a teenager and the event she relates happened four years before.

*One of the soldiers' boy, he tried to stop them by telling them that I was someone's child, let them free me, but they never listen to him. (IDP)*

Some brave women, 12% of the attacked women, tried to defend themselves against overwhelming odds. Due to their weak position the only possible way to resist was to escape. If they did not manage to escape they finally found they had to give up and accept the conditions.

*I felt very sad and vex because of the disadvantage taken over me as a woman. I fought to escape from these men on each of these occasions but to no avail. (Hospital)*

*I cried out for help and fought back but they over powered me. I felt so mad and depressed and did not know what to do. (Village)*

A couple of women resisted bravely in order to save others

*They forced me, beat me and even tied me because I refused to show where others were hidden and later they brought one bag of rice and told me to pound it. That day three of them raped me. (Village)*

*They beat me because I refused to direct them the right road to the next village. One of them slapped my right ear which caused it to run water for a year. (Hospital)*

For most women self-defence was not possible for fear of being killed.

*During the first time, I cried, yelled for help, but there were not people around. So I was crying while I was beaten. One of the soldiers took me and ran away. The second time I was tied, I only lied quietly, because there was no one around to help me. I ran away when they released me. (Hospital)*

*I was only praying for him not to kill me, because there was no way I can escape. The following day, they released me and let me go. (Village)*

*They forced me to carry their load, when I refused they beat on me and they pointed gun at me and I was forced to carry it, because I was afraid to be killed. (IDP)*

For about one third of the attacked women people around might sometimes try to intervene in an attempt to help or rescue them. Usually, though, the invading group had weapons so that all the civilians were in their power. The most common form of defence was just to try and plead of behalf of the woman. Usually this was in vain and in some cases the result for the defender was disastrous. In seven cases the defenders were killed while trying to intervene; others were caught for an unknown destiny.

*My husband, he came running to fight the rebel but was caught by other soldiers and tied. (Village)*

*My brother, he came to beg for me but he was killed on the spot. (IDP)*

*My grandfather, he beg the soldiers to free us but he was also grabbed and beaten badly. (IDP)*

Among those who did try to protect the victims, family members in different relationships were mentioned by 16%. Husbands were the defender in only two situations but nobody else from the husband's family. Three other husbands were killed while their wives were being raped.

*They beat me with gun butt on my back, kicked me, and tied my husband and took him*

*behind the house, there they killed him and said that we were enemy. I was pregnant for three months and after all the ill treatment I had spontaneous abortion. (Hospital)*

When women, particularly mothers, intervened it was by appealing or begging. It might also be just to care for and dress the wounded victims after the attacks using whatever means that were available out in the forests. A victim, who was in her twenties at the time of the interview, had been beaten by three soldiers until she collapsed. Later she managed to escape and run into the bush where she was reunited with her mother who cared for her until she recovered.

*My mother, by boiling country herbs to warm my back and later it subsided. (Village)*

In some other situations it was just somebody close by who intervened. It might be neighbours, friends or just any civilians who happened to be around. Usually the defender could do nothing but try to appeal for mercy.

*My family members, they gave money and begged the soldiers to leave me or set me free and they left me. (IDP)*

*My sister in law, she tried to talk to them but they told her to get of it or she could be the next person. (IDP)*

*My friends and my mother, while the soldier turned towards me, they beg him not to kick me or harm me but to no avail. (Village)*

Sometimes the help would be very unexpected and a spark of humanity would be shown. An unknown man passed a place where a group of women were imprisoned, forced as labourers to cook for the soldiers. They were threatened at gunpoint and in fear for their lives. The woman who gave her testimony was burnt by the soldiers when they were not pleased with her efforts. The unknown man happened to pass and:

*He advised the soldiers to stop treating us bad because we were women and we were free. (IDP)*

Also just to share the inhuman workload could be a gesture of humanity. Who was the unknown woman mentioned by an informant captured from one of the villages? Could she be a captured woman from a previous raid, become more or less accustomed to a life as a ‘wartime-woman’, yet still able to feel pity for a sister who would be sharing the same destiny?

*An unknown woman, she said, she was sorry for me. So she decided to join me to complete the cooking. (Village)*

In other situations ‘annexed’ women were actively involved in the violent actions against civilians.

*I was shame, sad and discouraged about their behaviors. I fought and tried to escape but was held strongly by these men and a woman or female rebel. (Hospital)*

Almost everybody had had physical injuries, at least for some time. When they were interviewed many women were still suffering from symptoms of their trauma. Most of them were beaten just, it seems, to demonstrate power. Pain sustained all over their body is mentioned by a quarter of the women.

*Since this ugly treatment, my life has been full of pain, body pain, stomach pain, joint pain. I am not even able to do my usual farm work that I suppose to do. (Hospital)*

Her husband, two of her five children and one of her brothers and his children were killed in the war. She was in her thirties and lived within her extended family, earning their daily living through farming. She herself had had a comparatively good education and had attended a sewing class after seven years in primary school. She had to stop further education due to economic reasons within the family. She described a raid that took place in 2002 when more than ten soldiers invaded her home.

*They came into our town in the night and attacked our house, and took me from among my family and forced me as their slave, to cook, wash, break wood and carry load for them. When I refused, they dragged and beat me. (Hospital)*

Eighteen per cent had been wounded by weapons or cut with knives causing bleeding wounds that were treated by whatever means could be managed.

*I suffered from lacerations and bled. I have scars on my hand because of the incidence. (Village)*

Long-lasting headache is mentioned by 15% of the informants. Many of them had been forced to carry heavy loads on their heads for long distances. Fifteen per cent were still suffering from lesions caused sometimes several years prior to the interviews.

*I usually have constant body pain and pain in my right foot especially where they wounded me with the pen-knife. (IDP)*

*They hit me with the gun to my stomach and since then I continue to have stomach pain. (IDP)*

One woman was in her twenties when she was forced by ten soldiers to carry loads from one village to another. When she staggered under the burden she was kicked badly in her thigh by one of the soldiers in order to force her to continue. Her uncle tried to intervene and offered to take over the load himself but this was not accepted by the soldiers in control. After the assault

she was unable to walk for a long time.

*I had pain in my legs for one year which caused me not to walk. For one year, I was sitting to one place like a little child who is just learning to sit. (Hospital)*

Despite advanced traumas, treatment had to be attempted wherever it could be found.

*My left leg got broken and was treated by herbalist. I can still feel pain in my leg when I walk distances. (IDP)*

Four women had an abortion or preterm delivery soon after being beaten.

*I was pregnant and taking the load and walking long distances when I came back my pregnancy was destroy because I got sick. I was pregnant for six months. (Hospital)*

In the acute situation the psychological reaction was emphasised by 40% of the victims but, in this section of the interview, only six of them referred specifically to on-going psychological problems. Different degrees of psychosomatic reactions could be an effect of the brutality experienced.

*My health was greatly affected. I would hardly sleep whenever I go to bed nor even eat. My body drained down and I developed hypertension. I presently suffer from this health problem. (Hospital)*

Content analysis concerning war-related physical violence committed against women showed that women were forced into slavery as they were **needed as working power** to maintain the daily living of enemies. The victims were exposed to **extreme physical violence**.

In view of the huge trauma the victims were facing it is amazing that the majority were able to summon the power and strength to escape from the perpetrators and that many were able to take up activities to support themselves and their dependants so quickly.

It is also clear that the victims and people in their neighbourhood were able to demonstrate **resistance and attempts at defence** although the efforts were seldom successful because of their weak position due to the possession of weapons by the invading soldiers. The women have **remaining detriment of the violence** through physical disability and due to relatives being killed in the same raid.

### ***Sexual violence during the war***

The issue of sexual violence during the war is the main focus of this survey and in this part it was an inclusion criterion. Forced sex might have a variety of aspects. It might be in com-

ination with the horrific killing of relatives during an attack by soldiers. It might be through violence by civilian men. More than 250 women giving their testimonies in this survey describe horrible savagery committed by men who, during the war, had created their own definition of their rights. Women were also forced into situations as a so-called wartime-woman.

### **Sexual abuse committed by a civilian**

Sexual abuse from a civilian during the period of war was only reported by 5% or twelve women. Two of them had been raped only by a civilian and never by a soldier or a rebel. The other ten women had the trauma from both groups of perpetrators. Two women had been raped more than once by either the same or different persons. Altogether 17 incidents were reported to have happened between 1997 and 2004.

On six occasions somebody was witness to the action, males and females, three people from the woman's family, two people from the perpetrator's family and in one case some friends. On only two occasions did those who witnessed the situation try to intervene.

Two women had conceived as a consequence of the rape and in both cases the pregnancies ended in a spontaneous abortion.

For most of the victims the psychological reactions seem to differ from when the perpetrator was an armed soldier. The situation did not seem so life threatening. The victim more often seemed to have strength for resistance.

*I ran and went to his wife and reported him. (IDP)*

*I cried, tore his clothes and promised to report them to my sister, his wife. I felt bad about him, never trusted him anymore, I left their house and went back to my parents. (IDP)*

*I felt unhappy and cry loudly and fight him until others came around. (Village)*

Of course, a 'civil' rape might also be life threatening.

*I cry for help but the man put cloth in my mouth and told me if I cry he would kill me. (IDP)*

This woman was in her thirties. During that and the previous year she had also been raped four times by soldiers/rebels. The rape by the 'civilian', whom she only referred to as 'the man', resulted in a pregnancy with spontaneous abortion. For the same woman one of the war rapes also resulted in a pregnancy and she had the baby.

Shame and a feeling of lost dignity were expressed by one of the two informants who had not been raped by a soldier/rebel during the war. The excesses against her happened seven years

before the interview. She only referred to the man as ‘him’. Her mother was present and she called people around to come and try to overpower the perpetrator. The informant now lived in one of the villages together with her husband and their two children. A third child had been killed during the war. The interviewer noted about the informant: “She is displeased and unhappy because her virginity will not be restored. She is depressed now”.

From reading the testimonies of the women, two of the cases reported as rape by a civilian seem more like war-related rape.

*I tried to escape but my family was attacked and forced to bring me for sexual use and after this I have never wanted to see this man in my life. I can really grieve on it. I never wanted this man but because he was a big man he forced my people to bring me and again this has added more insult and injury to my life. I do not think I can bear it. (IDP)*

*When I got to know that he was a soldier, my feeling, was to kill him or pay somebody to kill him because it was a disgrace to me as a woman. (Hospital)*

There might have been differences in how open minded the interviewers were to this kind of offence in a survey dealing with war trauma, as between the interviewers there was a wide range of reports received concerning rape by civilians. The twelve cases of ‘civil rape’ were reported from only four interviewers and one of them had talked to five women with experience of civil rape among his sixteen interviews. The interviewers who had recorded the issue of sexual abuse by civilians were two men and two women. The other twelve interviewers reported no sexual offence from a civilian among their 6-25 interviews.

### **Threats of sexual violence – solutions and interventions**

Some of the informants had been in situations of threatened sexual violence that had been successfully averted through actions taken by others in order to defend the victim or by resistance from the woman herself. Or it may simply have been that the potential perpetrator’s attention was diverted. In the whole group 28% described situations where there had been a threat of rape but something happened or somebody intervened and they were saved.

Most often, the victim herself managed to flee from the situation. In the chaos of the attack on a village, the invading soldiers did not always have full control, giving some civilians the chance to escape which they were not slow to do.

*They locked us up in one house to rape us during the night but we escape through the window. (Village)*

If a victim managed to escape it was always when she was in the hands of only one single per-



petrator. Intervention was done by family members or friends who most often just screamed or made a noise so that the perpetrator got nervous. In some cases the perpetrator did not give up until defeated through vigorous intervention by somebody.

*My brother and friends prevented this incidence by yelling or shouting for help and also fighting the individual. (Hospital)*

In other situations there was a negotiation between relatives and the perpetrator who would accept some small compensation, as when a chicken was offered by the father of a woman who at the time of the interview was in her twenties and lived an IDP camp.

*My father begged for me and gave them one chicken. (IDP)*

A very special negotiation was done by a sister of one of the interviewed women:

*My sister had to give herself for me. (IDP)*

The woman was met in one of the IDP camps and was in her forties. She had had six children but only two of them remained. Two children, her mother, one sibling and several nephews had been killed in the war. Two other children died in the bush due to lack of medical care and one sister died during child-birth when they were living out in the bush. The situation for the sister who made the above mentioned self-sacrifice is not known. The interviewed woman's comments facing her situation after having lost so many family-members was:

*I have really gone out of my mind, can't sleep good can't understand my life. I worry and cry why must this happen to me. I have no one to help me now. No one to come to my cry. (IDP)*

One woman was lucky to be approached at the right time in her menstrual cycle.

*The man forced me but when he saw that I was menstruating, he left me. (Hospital)*

For about one fifth of the women giving their testimonies concerning rape threat that was prevented, other soldiers or their commanders intervened. It might also have been just an unexpected turn in the war giving the perpetrators other preferences, which saved the woman.

For the women who had experienced a threat of violence that was never fulfilled the following categories were identified in the analysis: **intervention by other people, solutions given by chance and changes in war-activities giving civil opportunities.**

### **Sexual violence - a tactic of war?**

As for the physical violence a fluctuation in the amount of sexual violence throughout the period of war was reported, with increased violence in 1990, 1994 and from 2000 with the main

peak in 2003, when 21% had their first experience of sexual violence, the year when peace agreements were signed in August. When comparing answers from the locations you can see variations when violence hit the areas. In the village Gbatala 38% of the 30 interviewed women were affected for the first time in 1994 while only 4% of the women in the IDPs were affected during the earlier part of the war. More than 90% of the women in the IDPs came from other counties besides Bong County. The two IDP camps we visited were established during the last few years of the war. Of the women interviewed there 73% reported violence for the first time during the last three years of the war.

The frequency of violence also differed depending on location, with Gbatala less affected, where 75% of the victims were raped only one time. In the IDPs 47% of the interviewed women were raped only once. In the whole group 57% had been raped once, 33% 2-3 times, 10% 4-6 times and two women were raped eight and ten times respectively.

Mass rape was experienced by more than half (56%) of the affected women. Also here the experience differed depending on location with mass rape experienced by 64% of the women living in the IDPs. The village Sinyea was best off, but still a high number (44%) experienced mass rape. The women were asked how many soldiers took part on the occasion when they were most severely affected. In the whole group, 47% had been raped by 2-4 men and 10% were raped by between 5-10 soldiers taking turns on the same occasion. There was a clear association between the number of soldiers committing their cruelty and the physical injuries suffered. In the group of 24 women who were raped by 5-10 soldiers all but one (96%) had different degrees of physical injury and in the group who were raped by only one soldier 67% were physically injured.

### The acts of cruelty

There seems to be no limit to how savage the violence could be. The women might be tied up and held forcefully by some men while others took their turns.

*I tried to run away but they caught me, beat me and tied me and put me under gunpoint and did what they wanted. After that, I was completely helpless and not to myself. When I came to myself, I never wanted to live again. I felt worthless and useless. (IDP)*

*Eight soldiers attacked me the first time, but two soldiers raped me. The second time three soldiers did rape me, and the last soldier put stick inside my vagina. (Village)*

Weapons would be pointed at them making the threat of death just a second away from being realized.

*Nothing I could do, because some of them pointed the gun in my ear and I lie quiet and they carried on their acts. Later we, a group of people, ran away in the night.*

(Village)

*I did not do anything because he placed the gun in my mouth and threatened to kill me if I cried or yelled. I left from there after the rape. (Hospital)*

The horror seems overwhelming. Though clearly powerless, yet about a fifth of the women tried to resist.

*I allowed the first one to have his will done without fighting him because he was big but the second one and I fought for almost an hour before he overcame me. The act was carried on against my will. (Village)*

*I fought and shouted for assistance but to no avail. My I screamed and cried out for help but no one came to assist me, because everybody was afraid of the rebels. I felt sad, confused and depressed. My hands were tied on the bed along with my body. (Hospital)*

Another 37% resisted by screaming in fear and shouting for help in the hope that someone would come to their rescue.

*I screamed and cried out for help but no one came to assist me, because everybody was afraid of the rebels. I felt sad, confused and depressed. (Hospital)*

Most women knew they were powerless against armed men and chose passivity as their strategy to save their lives.

*I was surrounded by armed men. I only lied paralyzed and quietly until they met their desire. I ran away when I was taken to Totota to buy food. (Village)*

*I only lied quietly like a dead person, because I was afraid to be killed. After he met his desire he told me to go. (Village)*

*I cried for help and there was nobody to help me so I lied and pretend like I was not breathing so they left me and when away then I woke up and ran in the bush. (Hospital)*

*I saw my husband and two children dead and I was threatened to be killed. So I lied quietly because I was afraid to be killed. After they raped me, they beat me and broke my left hand. My friends took me to a near-by herbalist when they left me. (Hospital)*

Despite the danger, a few brave relatives tried to intervene; maybe this was a spontaneous action when a loved one was being attacked. For many of those who took such action the outcome for themselves was dire.

*I felt very confused, down hearted and deprived of my womanhood. I wanted to kill myself on that day. I was raped in the present of my late brother and my children. My brother fought them bitterly. In this fight, they decided to kill him. He was hit with knife. (Hospital)*

*My husband resisted, so they shot him in the presence of us. So my mother and father and everyone kept quiet. (Village)*

For a couple of brave women the opposite was the case. The informants defended their family members. In a violent situation four years prior to the interview the woman cited below offered herself in order to save her husband.

*I was afraid for my husband to be killed, because they tie him, put him aside and they told me if I don't do it they will kill him. And I accepted it, they release us. (IDP)*

Now she lived with her husband and their three children in an IDP camp. Her husband complemented their small supply of food from WFP by working as a contractor. When she was asked who had given her counsel, she mentioned a friend, but she had had no words of support or comfort from her husband.

A few women tried appealing for mercy but to no avail.

*I cried for help, begged them to leave me but one of them kicked me in the side and told me to close my mouth. I agreed and they did whatever they wanted to do. I was very sad. (Village)*

The most common physical trauma as a result of brutality during the rape was injuries causing bleeding. Vaginal bleeding affected 34% and 8% were bleeding from wounds and cuts on other parts in the body. Ten per cent of the women sustained injuries in the extremities mainly when the hips were forcefully broken and they had difficulties in walking after the trauma. For the nine women who at the time of the interview still had problems with walking, all but one had experienced mass rape by between two and eight men. A woman who was in her twenties and had been raped once by two men two years prior to the interview said simply

*Yes, I have a dislocated hip, and have foot drop. (Hospital)*

Another woman in her thirties stated

*I cannot walk. (IDP)*

The student who interviewed her added: "Hemi-paralysis. She cannot walk and does not talk clearly". Eight men had raped her three years earlier; moreover she had experienced physical violence on four occasions and once she was beaten by four soldiers at the same time. She lived in an IDP camp with her extended family. She was married but her husband was somewhere

else. Of her four children two had been killed during the war, as had her father. She had left her home in the severely affected county of Lofa four times. The reasons for this had been shortage of food and the need to escape to save the lives of herself and her dependants. Once she managed to escape before the soldiers invaded the village but another time she was caught and taken by soldiers and forced to become a bush wife. In the camp where she lived the food supply from WFP was topped up through income from another family member.

### Reproductive consequences

Ten women had a miscarriage or delivered a stillborn baby soon after the violent trauma. One woman in her twenties lost her baby when four men raped her a couple of years prior to the interview. At the time of the interview she was living permanently with a man but had had no other children after the one she had lost. Her father, who later was killed, witnessed the rape but was not able to protect her.

*I was pregnant six months before the rape, but after the rape I started bleeding right away and there is abdominal pain and bloody urination now. (IDP)*

Three years prior to the interview another woman, who was in full term pregnancy, lost her baby when she was raped by three men. She explained that she lived with her husband and remaining children. Besides the child she lost as a result of the rape, three of her other five children were killed in the war.

*I was pregnant and at term. They forced me hit me with gun buttock on back, two days later I experienced severe abdominal pain and delivered a dead baby. This caused me to have stillbirth (Village)*

Pregnancy as a result of rape was reported by 16% (41) of the informants. The whole group of women had together experienced 462 occasions of rape making almost 9% of the rapes resulting in a pregnancy. Of course it is possible that some of the pregnancies, regarded by the women as a result of the rape, might have been from her partner but not yet discovered before the rape took place.

Among the impregnated women, fourteen had to face the situation of being mothers to a child who had been conceived through violence. Sixteen women reported that they had solved their situation through induced abortion. Ten said they had had a spontaneous abortion. The figures are small which makes the statistics uncertain but the incidence of 25% for spontaneous abortions seems higher than what would normally be expected. Law forbids induced abortion in the country and possibly some women might choose to explain their experience in other terms.

The individual reason behind the decision for induced abortion is not focused on in this survey but the shame over the rape in front of the families is a reason spontaneously mentioned by a

couple of the women. The son of one of the women had witnessed the rape and she feared that he might report what had happened to his father. At the time of the interview she was living with a new man. She caused the abortion by swallowing cooked herbs and was bleeding afterwards for a week. She had a friend who supported her in the action.

*When that happened to me I told my son not to tell his father before we separate and he did not tell him up to today. I did all of this things because I was very much afraid about my man knowing something about it. For now I'm not too afraid because I know that my son cannot tell his father. (Village)*

The women might have been so badly violated that the possibility of pregnancy never occurred to them. One woman, who had been raped twice towards the end of the war, having recovered from the first incident, was surprised to discover that she was pregnant. She went to a nearby clinic for help and a nurse performed dilatation and curettage (D&C). Afterwards she had severe abdominal pain and was bleeding for some time.

*I felt that I was no more going to survive or even get pregnant. But found myself pregnant after two months. I felt depressed and never wanted the pregnancy because there was no father for the child to be born. So I aborted. I can still cry whenever I think about this sexual abuse. I have not forgotten about it. I have forgotten about it very little. But whenever I am reminded, I feel disgrace and begin to cry so I don't want to be reminded, because I have not forgotten it completely. (IDP)*

Whether pregnant through rape or not, in a situation of unwanted pregnancy women all over the world find means to perform abortions. Altogether 15% (38 women) had performed induced abortion. Most informants who had gone through an abortion were not impregnated through rape (22/38). Abortion was recognized as a life threatening action as 72% knew somebody or had heard about someone who had died as a result of provoked abortion. Of those who had gone through abortion themselves 89% (33/38) knew the risks of induced abortion.

The most common method used (28/38) was different herbs, sometimes in combination with other methods. It was not asked how the herbs were taken, whether orally or vaginally. In only two situations it is specifically mentioned that the herbs were taken via the vagina. One woman combined herbs with washing-powder and another woman inserted sticks in the uterus in combination with herbs. A friend helped her without involving anybody in her family. She started to bleed profusely after the procedure and was rushed to a nearby hospital. She was in her thirties, married and had two children. She mentioned specifically that she did not want another child as long as the war was going on.

Most women (22/38) performed the abortion without anybody else to support or help them. Seven were helped by a friend, and three by their mothers. Six women had been assisted by medical people, whom they called 'nurses' or 'doctors'. They all had the abortion performed

through D&C.

Psychological or practical support given by the families was usually not the case (31/38). It is not known if support was requested and denied or if the abortion was performed secretly without asking for support.

The abortion was successfully performed without any complications in about a third of cases. Eleven women mentioned bleeding and eleven also suffered from abdominal pain, sometimes in combination with bleeding. Seven women reported complications causing severe illness. One woman who had become pregnant after being raped said:

*I got seriously sick and almost died. I was only saved by God's mercy. (IDP)*

She had performed the abortion herself by taking herbs and 'medicine' without any support from family members. She had been raped five times and each time several soldiers took turns.

Among the six women who had D&C performed only one reported any complications. Her comment was:

*Small vaginal bleeding and severe abdominal pain. (IDP)*

which might be a normal symptom if the procedure were performed without adequate anaesthesia.

A group of 15% had the experience of abortion. As herbs was the method of choice and usually effective, although often with complications, there seems to be adequate knowledge in the population about herbs causing uterine contractions. Some women chose operative abortion. As the group was small statistics are difficult, but as it seems the assisting medical staff had adequate knowledge of the procedures and could offer safe abortions.

A couple of outstanding categories were evident from the content analysis concerning abortion: **traditional knowledge about methods for abortion** and **lonely in a life threatening action**. Most women took the action themselves and did not depend on others to terminate their unwanted pregnancy.

Among the fifteen women who had given birth to a baby after being impregnated through rape one had a stillborn baby and four other children had died later due to different sicknesses. Two children had some sporadic health problems and seven children were in a good health.

The feelings for the children, at the time of the delivery and later, differed. Nine of the mothers expressed negative feelings at the time of the delivery. When asked about their present feelings for the children, three women still had negative feelings while four were ambivalent but had started to accept their children.

A woman, whose husband had been killed, was living permanently with a new man. She had been impregnated by rape about two years earlier and had considered a possible abortion. Reflecting on her decision she said:

*I was encouraged by my friends to keep the pregnancy. So I had bad feelings about myself and the child at delivery. (Hospital)*

The child was now in good health but she still had difficulty in accepting it although her other two children had been killed in the war.

*Whenever I see this around me I can always think about how I was raped. So I want to send the child far away from me, but I have no one. (Hospital)*

Another informant in her thirties said:

*I really never wanted the child to live after delivery. I felt bad when the midwives told me that the child was alive. (Village)*

Her son was now in a good health, and about her present feelings for him she said

*I have accepted him because I shaved blood for him and he too has the right to live like me. (Village)*

Five women felt positively towards the baby already at the time of delivery.

*I felt happy because God help me to deliver safely without complications. (IDP)*

Her baby later died at the age of one due to an outbreak of measles.

A woman in her thirties lived with a man in her extended family in the village she had been forced to leave five times during the war. She had been impregnated through rape by three men about eighteen months before the interview. The baby she had had was her only remaining child as her other two children had been killed in the war. Her son was in good health and she said about him:

*I loved the child because I bore pains for him and I still love my child although I was raped. (Village)*

She had had psychological support from her uncle and she was satisfied. When asked what further support she would wish, schooling for herself and her son was her top priority. She had never gone to school as she was needed for work at home and had never been encouraged by her family.

Five women specifically blamed the rape for their present infertility. One of them had never had any children and the other four had lost between one and three of their children through war



violence, leaving two of them without any remaining children at all. One woman who was in her thirties had had seven children and lost three of them in hostilities during the war and two other children from so-called natural causes. She was married and lived in one of the IDP camps together with her husband. She said that after the rape she had been suffering from

*Severe premenstrual pain and has never getting pregnant since that time. (IDP)*

Another woman who was in her twenties and had lost her only two children through war actions, said:

*I cannot get pregnant after the many violent sexual acts done to me. (Village)*

She had been raped three times. The first time, when she was only a teenager, she was raped by two soldiers. The last time, a year before the interview, five men raped her on the same occasion.

*I had the feeling that I was useless in life for every time I was raped. I did not do anything on the first and third occasion but really fought back to prevent the second from taking place but no avail. (Village)*

When she thought about her two killed children she said

*Their death affected me emotionally in that they cannot be replaced by any means and I cry till my face got swollen for some days. Practically things that they did for me stop automatically upon their death. (Village)*

A woman in her twenties who lived permanently with a man had no children. She was worried about the possible influence on her fertility of the rape two years prior to the interview when four men took turns in front of her father who was unable to intervene.

*From the time I was sexually abused I have never come back to my normal body because of depression and hopelessness. I cannot get pregnant and have a child for the man I am living with. (IDP)*

The fear is obvious. A woman is expected by society, herself, and the man, to have children. Without a child her situation will be socially very vulnerable.

### The feeling of shame is long lasting

The feeling of shame and futility is very obvious both in the acute situation and in later reactions.

The established order for the young to honour the elderly was broken and could give an additional feeling of disgrace. A woman in her thirties who was raped two years prior to the interview by three soldiers commented:

*I felt worthless, and wanted to commit suicide because the children that raped me were much younger than I could born. But my daughter had talked to me not to do so, presently, I have decided not to commit suicide and not to marry but be alone with my children. (Hospital)*

In the same year when she was escaping from one place to another she was attacked and robbed.

*They have me beaten badly because I refused them my bags, chain, and watch. One of the soldiers hit me with a stick and broke my left hand. While I was bleeding they left me. (Hospital)*

She was a widow after her husband had been killed. Two of her four children were also killed during the war. She now lived in her extended family and earned her living by doing some business and by getting help from her remaining children. The only education she had had was in a 'bush school'.

She had received psychological support in her trauma from her mother, a sister and her daughter and was satisfied with their support. She had not been given any professional support and as she gained more confidence in the interviewer she added: *I don't want to tell anybody, besides you.*

When asked how she envisaged the future, she admitted the need for further both psychological and practical support.

*I still need counselling, additional help for my children to continue their education, and materials for my children to build our destroyed house. (Hospital)*

As possible supporters she mentioned trust in the government of Liberia as her first priority followed by church organisations or any NGOs.

One can understand how deep is the frustration of lost honour when listening to the teenager who said:

*I said, Lord, take my life away, I am useless now, I am insulted I am spoiled, take my life. Why will you allow my life to be this way? I pray but could not overcome this situation. (Hospital)*

This young woman, who had lost both her husband and her only child in war-related violence, felt ashamed of her actions when, in fact, she had been outstandingly brave, having offered herself to save others. In the attack she had succeeded in escaping from the invading soldiers but returned to save some family members' lives.

*I ran away but my family was tied, beaten only because of me and when I saw how my family was suffering, I come out and they arrested me. (Hospital)*

Her fate was to be raped by three men. When asked about her physical trauma she said:

*Yes, stomach pain, body pain, and bleeding. My legs almost went paralyzed and I had pain in my hip. (Hospital)*

In a raid during the same year at the end of the war, she was forced to be the slave to a group of twelve soldiers.

*I was forced by them to be their cook, to look for food for them and more over to carry their gunshot. I pretended to be sick so that they could leave me but I was just forced whether I liked it or not. I really grieve into myself and started getting sick. My aunt begged for me but she was not listened to. Now I am always sick with my head and back. (Hospital)*

This woman described extensive physical and psychological war trauma from many different aspects. Yet she had never received any counselling, not even from family members. Did they not know what a sacrifice she had made in order to save some of them? When asked about her desire for support she said:

*Yes, from family, friends, government, church and NGOs. I really need someone to help me. Help me get back to school, help me with training, help with support and help with my health. (Hospital)*

A number of women specifically mentioned that they felt degraded as a woman.

*I felt sick within myself. I felt that my rights and pride as a woman were taken away. He had arm, nothing I could do to resist him. (Hospital)*

Sometimes the shame was so great that the victims no longer wished to live. The women describe different degrees of frustration. For 13% the trauma caused a deep depression and in their mind suicide was the only solution as they had lost so much and felt such total humiliation.

*I felt of killing myself after they raped me. I never felt that I was living again. I just wanted to die. I felt useless in life and even now I still feel that life is useless for me because I still worry about what happened to me and I am still sick from what they did to me. (IDP)*

*They killed my friend and also wanted to kill me and they put me under the gunpoint and force me to do it. After that my head started turning and I could not move for more than an hour. I just wanted to die on the spot. (IDP)*

The feeling might be so intense that the women in the acute situation would even have preferred to be killed by the perpetrator. A woman in her twenties who had been raped five times during a period of two years and the last time just one year prior to the interview gave the following

testimony:

*I had never expected this to happen to me in my life and I just wanted to be killed. I told them to kill me instead of raping me but they all raped me, and spit at me. I felt death was better. (Hospital)*

She became pregnant as a result of the rape and had a son about whom she said:

*I never liked the child when he was born. (Hospital)*

The child died later at the age of one year. The same woman was later forced into an involuntary relationship as a wartime-woman. The reason she gave was: *for food and to get some protection.*

At the time of the interview she was still in the same relationship and she stated, *I have not find anyone to help me yet.* She had also become pregnant in her forced relationship but she performed an abortion, without support from anybody else, by taking herbs and ‘medicine’. After the abortion she had a period of two weeks with abdominal pain, but later she recovered.

Her parents were both dead; her father had been killed and so had one of her two children. She had also lost two of her sisters, one of them through violence, and she felt very lonely.

*Since the death of my sisters, I feel I am left alone and I fell it's a big destruction of our family. Who will come to my cry, our sister that was killed and I feel I may die the same way. I don't have family support now. Since my children died from me, I am just confused in my life and I have lost my way out. (Hospital)*

She had received psychological support from an uncle and a nephew but felt it was far from enough. No professional support had been given to her and when asked about her preferences she wanted *help on how to forget everything.* She was living together with her children in the extended family and to support them she was doing ‘businesses’. She was comparatively well educated being one of the three women who had secondary school as a background. When asked about needs, she said she wished to have practical support to rebuild her own house and *help to train me to do something for myself and help with my children to school.*

It is obvious from the testimonies that the experience of rape influences a woman throughout her whole life. Some women in the group had their last experience of rape in 1992, twelve years prior to the interviews, but their traumas were still overwhelming for them. Most women, though, had experienced their trauma only a year or a couple of years prior to the interviews. Whether the incident was recent or far in the past, the feeling of shame and futility was the most common reaction among the victims.

*It was a great insult to my womanhood. A great disgrace that I cannot forget. It was much better for me to die than to be raped by those dogs and never will I forget it.*

(Hospital)

This woman was in her twenties and had been raped six times between one and three years prior to the interview. She got pregnant as a result of rape. The child, who later died, seemed to have been born with some kind of deformity as she said about him:

*I felt bad when they brought the baby to me, he was not normal and so I did not like him. (Hospital)*

In order to get some kind of protection against further brutality she later accepted a situation of an involuntary sexual relationship. She explained why she came into this situation:

*I was forced into this relation for security and support because I was just tired and afraid of the constant rape and harassment. This man is still forcing himself behind me because he says he is the one who saved me in the war. (Hospital)*

A couple of other women expressed their frustration at lost dignity in the following ways:

*I felt so much sad in myself. I felt life was never good to live again. I got sick poor in the body, worthless to myself and I went out of my mind. Whenever I think about it, I just want to die. (IDP)*

*I feel depressed and unhappy. At that moment, when I was raped, I actually regretted why I was made a woman. Presently I feel unhappy when I'm reminded. (IDP)*

The stigmatization of being used and the fear of negative influence on the chance of getting a husband were mentioned by some women. Some feared that men might be afraid of potential sexually transmitted infections. For others it was loss of dignity itself, which they feared might interfere with their chance of attracting a man again. A teenager who had been raped once by one perpetrator five years prior to the interview had her worries:

*I felt so depressed and hopeless because I was very small and at that age I would even become sick. I believe I may not get someone to marry me willingly because of that sexual violence. (IDP)*

Her mother and grandmother were present in the acute situation and had done whatever they could but all in vain.

*They try to defend me by crying and appealing to the man to please stop. But he did not stop. (IDP)*

She had had psychological support from her whole family involving her father and her brothers but still she worried:

*I am not satisfied with their support because presently I believe no man will willing-*

*ly marry me when I was rape. (IDP)*

A woman in her twenties wept a lot when she explained:

*I felt worthless and decided leaving this town. I cried a lot after the sexual abuse. I have not forgotten about what has happened to me. I don't want to be reminded because I can cry. I'm a Muslim and thought that no man was going to marry me after the sexual violence. (Village)*

### How to get back trust – a challenge

As time had passed after the violations, many women had started to adapt and were able to look into the future with some confidence. A woman in her twenties living in one of the villages stated:

*I don't like to talk it because I felt shame and disgrace and insulted. It is disgraceful for any lady to be raped. I couldn't get over the situation. I cried for days. Today, I am feeling much better because it happened to many women too. Now that things are improving, I feel much better and living a normal life. No more shame. (Village)*

Her husband was a teacher and, although they were not living together, he contributed to the support of the family which included two children. The woman herself produced and sold soap. She was satisfied with the counselling given by a male family member and a deacon. Her comments were:

*Yes he has really told me to forget those bad things that happened to me. He later gave me dry goods to sell. I am satisfied because I am making small business and studying the words of God with others. This is a fine with me. (Village)*

Very few women, only seven informants, mentioned ideas about retaliation in the acute situation by their own means or through hope of assistance.

*I felt bad and discourage of what happen to me and my plan was just to kill them and myself but there was no way that I could do it. (Hospital)*

*I shouted out for help but no one came to help me and I fought back to resist the act against me but they overpowered me. I felt so mad and depressed that I wanted for those persons to be killed. (Hospital)*

*I felt bad about life, I was disturbed. I wanted to fight back, but, he fired the gun under my feet. If I see him I will revenge on him. (Village)*

At the time of the interviews when reflecting on experienced hostilities 8% (20) of the victims mentioned ideas of aggression and revenge.

In a discussion outside this survey a woman who had been exposed to different hostilities during the war made the comment that reprisals and brutalities have been tried in this country for fourteen years and it has only caused an escalation of the war. “Now we have to forgive and forget in order to get a future”.

Although some of the victims had their perpetrators in their close environment, reminding them continuously of their trauma, they did not have the strength to consider the possibility of taking their case to court.

A woman in her thirties who had been raped twice, three and four years prior to the interview, had to face one of her perpetrators in her daily life. When talking about the events she was crying throughout.

*Right after the first time, I thought and wanted to be killed. I felt that kill me would have been better than alive. Presently, I can still see the boy who raped me the first time. Whenever I see him, my eyes can get dimmed and my heart beat fast. I can always cry when I see him. I am trying to forget about it, but not completely. (Hospital)*

The perpetrator had put sticks into her vagina after the rape causing her to bleed severely for several hours. Although three men raped her a year later, the first event was more horrifying and stood out more clearly for her.

One of her three children and both her parents had been killed in the war. She had also experienced a period of being forced to be a wartime-woman. She describes this:

*I went into this relationship with this man because that was the only means my children and I were going to survive when my husband was across the rebel controlled-areas. We broke this relationship when rebels attack the town we were in, and this man fled with his own family while I went another direction with my children. (Hospital)*

Now she lived permanently together with another man supporting themselves by farming and additionally she had some contract work. She never mentioned anything about actual plans or hope for justice towards the perpetrator living in her close environment.

When reading the narratives, one gets the impression of total chaos in the acute situation. Though all normality was lost, some of the victims were still hoping for some kind of righteousness within the army, as twelve women reported the incident to the authorities within the soldiers' group; but for most of them it was in vain

*I cried and even fought them, but they conquered me. Later when I was left alone I took the case to their commander, but nothing was done about it. (Hospital)*

For four women the complaints were listened to and action was taken against their perpetrators within the soldiers' own organization:

*I yelled for help. We were taken one at a time to be searched. While the soldier was searching my bag in the empty school building he told me not to talk; he will kill me. Other friends and soldiers came. After the soldier left me, my mother went and told their commander. He arrested the soldier and put him in prison. (Hospital)*

Total anarchy seemed to be the prevailing situation during the period of war although some women put their hope in the remnants of civil authorities, but for all of them in vain.

*I was discouraged and depressed. I reported the case to the town authority, but they could do nothing for fear of the rebels. (Village)*

The anger and thoughts of justice rather took more direct and unofficial manifestations. A woman in her twenties who was raped by one soldier three years earlier stated frankly:

*I felt that life was useless and that I should kill that man who raped me. (IDP)*

She had not had any support or counselling either professionally or from any family member.

The interviews were held less than a year before the democratically elected government came into power in 2005. Once president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf very soon was anxious for rape crimes to be dealt with within the system of justice. One year after the end of the war only seven women expressed thoughts of possible official punishment for the perpetrators.

*I felt discouraged and hopeless about life. I felt that life was only in favor of men in time of war. My feelings now are that those that did the act to be brought to justice. (Village)*

*I felt so mad and depressed that I wanted for those persons to be killed. I felt mad for such dirty persons to have sex with me against my will. Up to now I still feel depressed when I think about that. I still want them to face justice. (Hospital)*

Another woman felt relief because of her trust that justice would finally come by depending on almighty God:

*I don't want to see those people in my life either today or tomorrow, I will never forget what they did to me. Although I thank God that I am alive, but God will pay them in reward. (Village)*

The cross section survey performed half a year earlier showed that 42%, almost every second woman, had experienced rape during the period of war. Reports in this later survey give the impression that the collective trauma, the feeling of not being alone, helped the women to accept



their own trauma.

*I felt bad but I have accepted that condition and the child. I am fine, I am no more ashamed of the act. It happened to many people. (Village)*

*I kept myself indoor for days because I felt disgrace and made shame. The shame and pain are no more because what happened to me happened to other women too. (Hospital)*

*I felt destroyed, disturbed and confused. I also felt like dying and just finish with this world. But now, I feel somehow fine because a lot people have shared the same experience with me. Now I know that I am not the only affected woman. (Hospital)*

*I felt disturbed, confused and worried each time I thought about this. But now I am able to explain to people and feel that I am not the only one who was affected. (Hospital)*

The reaction by the four women cited above might have been influenced by having an almost undamaged social background. They were all in their thirties and all of them were comparatively lucky concerning other war traumas. They all lived with their husbands and had found means to support themselves. Neither their parents nor their siblings had been killed. Two of them had lost one child through war actions but both had several remaining children.

All of them were satisfied with the counselling given to them and felt no need for further psychological support. One woman, who had been counselled by her uncle and a pastor, said she was satisfied with the support as she was told to *forget those bad days* and she felt no need for any more support

*Because we are all living as successful women and coming on fine in life. (Village)*

Another woman did not get any official support at all but said about support given by her family:

*I am satisfied with the support, because they are my own family members, and they are the ones who really counsel me. (Hospital)*

For victims less fortunate with other war related traumas, the recovery seemed more difficult to achieve. When looking at late reaction, it is obvious that sometimes it was not easy for the informants to separate their frustration and trauma specifically over the rape from all the other terrible events experienced during the war. One woman in her thirties said:

*After the sexual abuse, I felt worried and never wanted anyone to hear about this. So I was hiding myself indoors for one month. I have not told anybody because whenever I tell someone about this, I can think of my husband and children's death,*

*and begin to cry. (Village)*

A soldier had raped her in front of her parents and her husband five years earlier. None of them was able to come to her defence. Later in the war her mother, husband, and two of her five children were killed. She now lived with a new man in a small village making their daily living by farming. She had been counselled by her sister but not by any professional person and she felt a need for further psychological support

*The war has ended but I will still need counselling by anyone, because sometime when I think about the past, I can cry. (Village)*

Although a woman's own situation might be horrific, there were usually others who had been affected still more severely and this comparison might help in the phase of new orientation. A woman in her twenties who had been raped once and who had been forced into an involuntary relationship commented:

*Psychologically I felt sad inward. I felt that my rights were violated. I feel fine now because I never came from there with a child or any health problem. (Hospital)*

Generally speaking the women seemed to trust that the peace agreement now would last. During the fourteen year long war the population was disappointed many times through broken agreements between different warlords. What could be the difference? It may be the unconventional actions by the female action group WIPNET, that played a very important role during the last years before the end of the hostilities. At the time of the interviews their demonstrations could still be seen all over Liberia and put pressure on the peace-building activities.

*I used to get angry each time I thought about it, but now since all is over and the soldiers are disarmed, I feel normal. (Village)*

*I have been feeling sad and depressed about the abuse. And now that the war is over I have forgotten. I was shame and felt disgrace. I kept myself indoor for days. Now, I have no more shame face. I am among my friend girls. (Hospital)*

*I was very angry and felt depressed and disturbed. But now since everything is over I have no problems. I have accepted the situation now. I'm not the only one affected. (Village)*



Picture 24. WIPNET-women outside Phebe Hospital.

The healing process psychologically and socially seemed to progress as time passed. Although still experiencing the chaos created by the war such as living in a camp or still separated from family members whose fate you might not know, people had started to look forwards. Almost half of the women (44%) made comments showing that they had at least started a new orientation in life.

‘To forget about it’ is a comment repeated in many different sections of the interviews. It might be as advice given by both relatives and professional advisers. It could also be the conclusion reached by the informants themselves as a way to handle the situation pragmatically.

*After the sexual violence, I felt ashamed, never wanted my friends to see me, and thought that my parents were going to put me away. But they did not do. But after the episode, my mother told me to forget about it. It was due to the war. And now I have forgotten about it. (Hospital)*

Some comments give the impression that the acceptance had never really been integrated in the victims’ mind but more told from outside.

*I have been shame to tell anybody about this. I always went indoor and cry whenever it comes to my mind. I don't want to think about this. I have forgotten about it. (IDP)*

*I was shame and degraded before my husband and was worried that my husband was going to divorce me but he still accepted me. And now I have forgotten about it. I only think about it whenever I am reminded. (IDP)*

Unfortunately she might be reminded often because she added:

*The person who raped me is still living in this camp. Whenever I see him I begin to cry. (IDP)*

The comments by the informants show everything from discontent to deep satisfaction with the advice to ‘forget about it’.

A woman in her thirties had lost her husband, her father and two siblings through war hostilities. She had been raped twice and on both occasions by two perpetrators. Her aunt had tried to counsel her and the niece seems to have accepted her limitations.

*I was not satisfied with the support but nothing else I could do about it. She only told me to forget about it. (IDP)*

The sentence ‘it was due to the war’ also comes in many variations and from several victims from all three locations. The comment ‘due to the war’ was also often expressed by official counsellors. It seems to be the general view when talking about the reason why the atrocities were committed. No one is personally blamed; the blame is abstract and collective.

*I felt useless and worthless to myself and cries a lot and do not want to see them in my life. I accept it through counselling and it happens to me because of war. (Hospital)*

*When my relatives heard about the episode (the rape) they came to see me, and accepted me. They knew that it was due to the war. (Village)*

*My husband was killed during the war and I did not marry again. My mother and sisters don't have problem with me, they said it was due to the war. (Village)*

Another woman in her thirties had been raped once by three soldiers. She got pregnant and without any assistance she performed an induced abortion by using herbs. One of her seven siblings had been killed. Some family members had given her welcome support, making her conclude that the war itself was the cause of all evil,

*I am satisfied because they talk nicely and tell me to forget it because it was due to war that caused this to happen to me. (Hospital)*

A woman in her twenties, whose husband had been killed, lived in an IDP camp with her three children. She had not had any school education before coming to the camp but there she had attended a school to learn tailoring. In the school she had been counselled by her teachers.

*For five months now they have been counseling us to forget about what has happened in the past and let us think positively about tomorrow. (IDP)*

When asked if she was satisfied with the support, she was pragmatic and answered:

*Yes, because nothing I can do about it and their counseling is helping me. (IDP)*

The advice 'to forget about it' was given to twelve women by pastors, social workers, health workers and teachers. Nine of the twelve were satisfied with the advice. Most of them, but not all, had been counselled several times. A woman in her twenties living in one of the IDP camps was satisfied with the counselling given by a pastor in her church.

*For two years now and by counseling me to forget about the past. I am satisfied because it is God that keeping me alive. (IDP)*

She was living on her own in the camp. She had been forced to leave her home village in the neighbouring Lofa region four times and had been raped six times. The first time she was raped she was only a teenager and once she was exposed to a mass rape committed by four soldiers. After one of the rapes she became pregnant and had an induced abortion. Her mother assisted her in performing the abortion by using cooked herbs. She had severe abdominal pains for four days and was bleeding for eleven days, but later recovered.

Although she did not live together with any family members in the camp, for a period after the trauma she had felt that they and a friend were her anchor. About her family she said:

*Yes because my family love and they always talking to me peacefully. (IDP)*

When asked about needs for the future she is very modest in her wishes or expectations of others and she trusts in God to find a way for her:

*I would like an additional support from anybody that God will send and I will be pleased with any support that will come. (IDP)*

There are some further strategies for handling the traumatic events. Although experiences might be so full of horror, beyond what any human being could stand, yet, in the middle of abhorrence, the feeling of God's protection might still be there.

*I asked God why should such thing happen to me, and cry bitterly, later he released me and I tried to find my people. (Village)*

*I felt bad and I was just praying that God should direct me so that I can run away. (Hospital)*

*I felt worthless and thought of committing suicide before other people hear about it. Because I was raped in front of my husband and my children. While lying in the pool of depression, they killed my husband and two of my children right in front of me. I was only God that saves me. (Village)*

The woman quoted above later remarried a man who was a teacher with whom she had two

more children. She was satisfied with the psychological support given by her parents and present husband. When listening to her comments you can guess that it was a struggle for them to reach acceptance of her trauma and peace within the family.

*...because they lasted accepted me home and comforted me. And my present husband loves me also. (Village)*

Many victims mentioned leaving everything in God's hands. For them it seems to be a working way to be healed in mind.

*Psychologically I wanted to die that day. I just wanted the ground to open and cover me. I have taken my problems over to God in prayers. I feel that he will make way for me. God has taken that bad feeling away from my mind. (Village)*

*I felt very sad, frustrated, depressed and heartless. By the grace of God I am relaxed in mind. I can only feel sad when I see the person who did the act. (IDP)*

*I really wanted to kill myself that very day. Being abused publicly brought me the greatest shame and disgrace in my life. If I had any means to weapon, I was going to kill the man and kill myself. I have just overcome those bad days and try to move my life forward with the help of God. (Hospital)*

In the process of coping, forgiveness has become a strategy for some women. In the official programme for trauma-healing presented by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and by different church-connected NGOs forgiveness and reconciliation is a strategy for finding a way to live together.

Forgiveness could be on different levels. It could be through forgiveness by God

*At the time I was very much depressed and frustrated, but for now, I am praying to God to forgive them for their evil doing. (IDP)*

or from the victim towards her perpetrator

*I was shame and refused to come out in the day. I am feeling fine, I have forgiven him. (Village)*

Many women express the need for acceptance by their families and friends but for some victims this is not enough.

*I could not bear it to see dirty boys having sex with me. I shared tears and kept in-door for days. I called my husband and told him and later ask for his forgiveness. (Village)*

The women carry the burden of shame so deep that they themselves feel the need for forgiveness from the environment for what has happened to them.

In the part concerning sexual violence the informants described the acute situation and also their present reactions. The content analysis has to be divided into an acute and a later phase.

In the acute situation **prevailing horror and exposure** and **villainous combined war crimes** express fairly well situations that words cannot do justice to.

The later reactions diverge more and show a difference between the group already settled in their villages and the women still dispersed in the IDP camps. The most prominent categories are: 1) **remaining sadness, frustration and feeling of worthlessness**, 2) **social, physical and reproductive consequences of the outrages**, and 3) **starting re-orientation** 4) **different coping-strategies**.

### **Wartime-wife – a practical solution or forceful imprisonment?**

There are many reasons in a war forcing women into an involuntary relationship. It might be following an attack on a village when a group of women might first be raped then taken by force by the perpetrators to serve as wartime-women. In other cases the difficult living situation might drive a woman to put herself into a relationship with a man for protection or maintenance. In the whole group 30% had been or still were having to live with a man due to conditions in the war. The quantitative study conducted about half a year earlier in a similar environment reported 45% experience of involuntary relationship during the war. There is no explanation for the difference in incidence in the two studies.

The tendency in study one of it being more likely for women to be involved in an involuntary relationship if they had been raped repeatedly was the same in this part of the survey and 50% of women in this study who had been raped three or more times reported engagement in an involuntary relationship.

During the war the soldiers were more likely to have access to food and other necessities than the civil population. Most women involved in an involuntary relationship put forward the difficulty in supporting themselves and their dependants as the reason that was forcing them into this position. As an answer to the question: ‘Why did you come into this relationship?’ 70% described difficult life circumstances.

*Poverty. I needed someone to help me and my daughter after the death of my husband, so I am forced to accept his negative behaviour. (IDP)*

*There was no food the fellow said he would only give me food if I fall in love with him which I did. (Village)*

*I went into this relationship with this man because that was the only means my children and I were going to survive when my husband was across the rebel con-*

*trolled-areas.* (Hospital)

Sometimes the women took responsibility for a large group of family members and behind the comments you could see resolute and active women in their efforts to find means to improve the situation for themselves and their dependants.

*It did because food business was hard and everything was just rough. So I needed help for food and other things to help my parents, brothers and sisters and myself.* (Hospital)

*I got into this relationship for two reasons. The first one being poverty and the second my mother was sicked and this man was a nurse and I wanted him to treat my mother* (Village)

For about one third of the group the strategy was to get into a relationship with one soldier, often a more powerful one, in order to escape interference from other soldiers moving around.

*I was just forced to do this just to get some protection and food since indeed my husband was killed and everything on mine damaged.* (Hospital)

*I was forced into this relation for security and support because I was just tired and afraid of the constant rape and harassment.* (Hospital)

The resolute woman in her twenties cited above had been attacked physically seven times by soldiers and raped six times, once she was raped by six soldiers taking their turns. She expressed her feeling about the rape:

*It was a great insult to my womanhood and never I thought about it. A great disgrace that I cannot forget. I t was much better for me to die than to be raped by those dogs and never will I forget it.* (Hospital)

Concerning the issue of protection sometimes the women had their own agenda and used the relationship to a man to achieve a goal that, it seems, was hidden from the man concerned. The relationship in many cases lasted only as long as the woman could get some benefit from it. The circumstances might have changed due to war action or the whole social situation might have become more normalised.

*Survival and security. I fell in love with one soldier who I thought could protect me from the rest of the soldiers and was able to transport me to my husband after the death of my mother.* (Village)

*I stopped the relationship. I left to go back to my parents. I explained to him why I am leaving him. And I said thank you to him.* (IDP)



*Because I needed to be secured from other soldiers, and support, but he and I have parted since. (Hospital)*

Throughout the war with so many occasions of breaking up from permanent or temporary homes families were often split up and separated. With the constant movements in the population family members could all of a sudden find each other again. Women who had looked for support and protection from a man, found no reason to continue the relationship, when family members able to give reasonable support and security turned up. The thing most likely to change the situation was the appearance of the husband.

*There was no food and the fellow said he would only give me food if I fall in love with him, which I did. I succeeded to stop the relationship. When my husband joined us, I put an end to our love and turned to my husband. The fellow agreed. (Village)*

*I succeeded to stop the relationship when the war was over. People were finding their relatives and I re-joined my parents and my present husband. (Hospital)*

One out of eight wartime-women had been forced into this situation through violence and threats. Usually the comments by the women affected by this kind of violence are quite short, more like a statement

*I was told that if I did not agree I would be killed. (IDP)*

*Because he raped me and forced me to stay with him. (Village)*

*I felt discouraged in life because this was not the proper way for me to live. I was threatened by this man and all the time I could not escape. (Village)*

A teenager living in one of the villages with her extended family reported:

*One soldier on this many occasion (of rape) - which I can't remember. I was now serving as wife for him because anytime he feels like sexing he will come for me. (Village)*

Her forced relationship never resulted in any pregnancy but she had a child. She had lost family members through the war; her father and one of her eleven siblings had been killed. Her education had been interrupted after only one year due to the closing of the school because of the war and she had never had the possibility for any additional training in practical skills. She supported herself with help from other family members and by doing some business. Due to fear of soldiers invading her home and fear of sexual harassment she had been forced to leave her home once. When coming back to her village she had found her house destroyed. Her war trauma seems to have been concentrated during the last year of the war when she reported being physically injured by soldiers four times and raped ten times. Once she was saved from an

unexpected side:

*Yes, their rebels' commander. He talked to them in order to leave me. They released me very fast. (Village)*

There had also been a situation when, with help from some friends, she was able to prevent a threatened rape

*The incidence was prevented by my friends when I was shouting for help. The individual ran away when he saw my friends. (Village)*

After the war she had received good emotional support from her mother and one of her sisters but felt the need for additional counselling and also the need for substantial practical support in order to achieve normality again.

More than one year after the ceasefire 28% of the group in an involuntary relationship still lived in the same relationship. Almost all of them came from the group still living in the IDP camps and not yet returned to a more normal life. The hardship of sustaining their lives remained and the man was 'needed'.

*I have not tried (to stop the relationship) because I don't still have somebody to help me. (IDP)*

*No, because I don't have anybody to help me besides him. So, I am forced to accept him or even marry him to help me. (IDP)*

*I want to terminate the relationship but cannot do so due to poverty. (Village)*

At the time of the interviews, less than eighteen months after the ceasefire, when soldiers, not yet de-militarised, were moving around, there might still have been wartime-women held by perpetrators. This group, of course, could not be reached for an interview. Those who escaped from their oppressor often succeeded in running away by taking a chance when it turned up.

*I finally escaped and went back home. I was searched for but could not be found by the one who forced me. (Village)*

*I told the man that I wanted to go to do business and I escaped after I was allowed to go. (IDP)*

*I succeeded to stop it because I want to go to an additional school. I talked to him to let me go to see my other family members and I didn't go back to find him again. (Hospital)*

For some women their family expressed disapproval of the involuntary relationship. In all these cases the woman had been involved in the relationship in order to find a way to support herself

and sometimes her dependents. None of the women who had been violently forced into the relationship met with disapproval from their families.

A teenage woman had been physically attacked twice by soldiers. She explained that on one occasion the soldiers forcing her were fifteen in number. Her relatives were not happy that she had been involved in a wartime relationship in order to support herself

*They got angry with me for getting into a relationship until it was cut off. I got into this relationship because I wanted support or finding means to take care of myself. I succeeded in putting stop to the relationship because the war is over and the young man does not have any more power and money. I told him we should end the relationship. (Village)*

When she was interviewed she lived together with her extended family in the village she had fled from three times during the war. One reason to leave, she said, was shortage of food and poverty. Another time she left hurriedly due to fear of invasion by the soldiers and the third time she was forced to leave together with the soldiers. When living out in the bush she suffered from health problems like most others and used country herbs to treat herself. Her parents were alive but two of her brothers had been killed. Her brothers had previously encouraged her to go to school but she had had to stop her education after four years due to lack of support after their deaths.

Another woman in her twenties living in the same village was involved in a relationship in order to support her mother who needed medical help. Evidently, this was not appreciated:

*My mother and other family member got angry with me and said it was not necessary to establish such a relationship. I got into this relationship because I wanted help when my mother was sick. I had no other means. (Village)*

Both these women had had psychological support from good friends but not from any family members.

For the wartime-women, the content analysis produces the categories **hardship forces solutions, determined women** and **war creates its own social links**. Those who were still held prisoner could not, of course, be reached, so an important group of wartime-women was unable to make their voices heard.

### **Relationship to family members after sexual violence**

The majority of the women 79% (201) had had psychological support to different extents from at least one family member or close friend. Women were more likely to give support (44%) than men (25%). The mother (74/253) was the person most often giving support. Among men

the father was most likely to give support (37/253) and only 22 women were supported by their husband. Nine women got support from their children, sons or daughters. Thirty women mentioned 'family members' as a group, which might mean husbands, parents, children or other more distant family members. Within the whole group 17% (40) had received support only from friends or neighbours and not from any family member. Some women expressed great appreciation of support given by friends.

A minority experienced active support and loving care but for the majority the answers could be described more as a passive acceptance by family members.

A woman in her thirties living in one of the villages with her own and extended family had a special relationship with her family. Once by offering herself she had saved the lives of family members when they all had to pass through a violent area.

Her comment about the episode was:

*My people were blessed and saved through me. So they love me for what I did for them. We needed to cross into Bong County and only soldiers were helping others. I loved to him to allow my family members cross and come to Bong County. I spent one week with him cooking for him. Later I told him I was leaving with my family to join my husband. He agreed and allowed me go. That's how our love ended.*  
(Village)

She belonged to the luckier group in the survey as none of her family members had been killed. She had three children and nine siblings. However, she had other war-related traumas as she had fled from her home four times and her house had been demolished.

The same woman was involved in two other situations of violence from soldiers and then she was less open to her family about what happened to her:

*I couldn't lift my head up to see them I cried but did not tell my husband. I left very shame to see a boy younger than my son having sex with me against my will. I cried and burned all the clothes I had on.* (Village)

The husbands/boyfriends seem to be a special group having difficulty in accepting the trauma affecting their women.

*My husband divorced me because of the sexual abuse. My other family members said that it was due to the war, not my fault.* (IDP)

*Because of the sexual abuse, the man I am living with always telling me about that abuse whenever there is misunderstanding among he and I to make me more depressed in life.* (IDP)

Sometimes it was still a big impediment to talking within the family even if the trauma had occurred years before. A woman in her twenties who lived in one of the IDPs had never told her family about her trauma more than ten years previously:

*No, because no one saw us or heard about it. So I am still ashamed to tell any of my family members up to present. (IDP)*

The interviewer specially made the comment: “This woman doesn’t want anybody to hear about this, especially not her present husband, because he will leave her.” With the question concerning her wish of further support she had problems due to lack of openness to her family:

*Yes, I would need support only from professionals who will keep this sexual abuse as a secret, before my husband hears about it. I will need emotional support and materials to build my house. Because I am worrying how to go back home. I will need support from the Government, church or and NGOs. (IDP)*

There are also men actively supporting their women in a loving way or just by passively accepting them. In most testimonies, the husband is specially mentioned among the family members, as if the women are more aware of the possibility of his rejection than of feelings of aversion from any other family members.

*There is no problem with my family members and myself. My husband always encourages me to take courage and forget it. (IDP)*

*It never affected my relationship with my family members neither my husband, but they were in sympathy with me. (Village)*

*No, my husband accepted me because it was not my intention. Other family members counselled me. (IDP)*

A woman in her thirties who was raped by three soldiers at the beginning of the war states that:

*It has not affected my relationship with my husband in any way. My husband feels for me and even regrets the death of my brother in the process. (Hospital)*

About the day when she was raped she remembers:

*They enter our place in the bush, collected me and raped me. The three of them went out with me. My brother, he fought them bitterly. In this fight, they decided to kill him. He was hit with knife. I felt very confused, down hearted and deprived of my womanhood. I wanted to kill myself on that day. I was raped in the presence of my late brother and my children. Whenever I think on that day, I just want to kill myself. My missed my brother also. Now I pray daily to God to take complete control of my life to help me overcome my situation. (Hospital)*

A woman in her thirties from one of the villages was raped two years before the interview. She felt relieved as her husband accepted her although she was impregnated and had a child after the rape. Her son was now in good health and she had had altogether nine children and one of them had been killed due to war-actions. She was supported mainly by her uncle, but felt accepted by her whole family.

*My family members including my husband have all accepted the condition, the child and my very self. We are all fine. No trouble at all. My uncle has told me to forget those bad days. He usually gives me food, money and other house hold things*  
(Village)

Thirty women had experienced disapproval or blame from their family due to what had happened to them and another twelve women feared this reaction and had avoided explaining about the trauma to any family members. This made altogether 17% of the women who had not been accepted or feared they would not be accepted within their families due to sexual abuse committed against them. Many other victims had chosen to relate their trauma only to a few selected people within the family and kept their secret from the rest. In the interviews the women were asked the question: ‘How have sexual activities that you have been forced into affected your relationship with your family members?’ The rejection by families could be expressed like:

*I can say yes because the way my family used to accept me is not like that now. They don't care for me.* (Hospital)

*My family hates me because of this, except my mother.* (Hospital)

*One of my brothers went against me, say I was the cause for the actions against me, because I was not fast enough to follow them where they were escaping so they could protect me.* (IDP)

As mentioned above twelve women preferred to hide their trauma, not telling anybody, as they feared misunderstanding, reprisals or being abandoned.

*It did not affect my family relationship negatively, because I was taken to the prison centre where I was raped. And none of my family members were there. After their desires were met, I kept it as a secret.* (Hospital)

*I do not have bad relationship with my family because I did not tell them and they do not know about it.* (Village)

A teenager had a very special relationship to her mother. Due to poverty they had been living separated for some time during her childhood and the war had caused situations she had to handle without her parents' advice. At the time of the interview the girl felt guilty towards her mother.

She lived in one of the villages together with her own and extended family. She had three siblings. Nobody in her family had been killed during the war. Her family was also fortunate as their house was saved; only 14% of the women were so lucky. Her comment about this was:

*Where I lived belong to my parents and thank God it was not destroyed. I was going to feel very bad if it was because my parents are poor and old to get another one now. (Village)*

She only went to school for two years as she was needed for work at home. During her time at school she did not live with her parents.

*I was given to my mother's friend and she didn't care to send me to school. (Village)*

During some period of the war her parents had cared for her lovingly when she got sick and there was no access to medical care.

*I had jaundice but my parents gave me herbs and I got well. (Village)*

She was forced to leave her home village twice shortly before the war ended. The reasons she gave were that the soldiers forced her and another time that she ran to save her life, fearing sexual violence.

About the situation when she was forced to follow the soldiers she estimated that about ten soldiers had invaded their home and two of them attacked and raped her:

*They started to push me and asked me to go with them into the next town. They also dragged me and kicked me from the back and my side. I begged them and cried for help but there was no one to help me. I cried for help and refused to go with them but they threatened me with their guns and I kept quiet and so I agreed. I then followed them. (Village)*

Concerning one of the soldiers in the group she said:

*He tried to stop them but they told them until the operation is over they could not listen to him. (Village)*

She was forced to stay with the group as a wartime-wife and she got pregnant. When she realised she was pregnant she continued to stay with the perpetrator on a more or less voluntary basis and her mother disapproved of her choice.

*I agreed to stay with the man who sexually abused me because I was carrying his kid. I succeeded to stop the relationship, after I delivered my mother told me to come back home and I came back home. (Village)*

About her delivery and her daughter she said:

*I was happy and felt good because I delivered safely and the baby is my first child. The baby was born all right and now she is doing fine and well. I feel good about my baby because it was God's will for me to have the child at this age and time. (Village)*

When asked about her psychological reaction after the rape she seemed to have come to terms with the hostilities committed against her and reached acceptance:

*I first felt very depressed and frustrated but now, thank God I feel fine and have accepted the condition. I am presently living with the situation. (Village)*

Her mother had been trying to intervene concerning the relationship her daughter continued to have with the man who initially had raped her. For some time the mother evidently pleaded in vain. The daughter said:

*My mother tried to help me, only that I refused to listen to her. When I came back from the bush she told me to leave the boy and I refused. As soon as the war was over she tried to talk to me but I felt misled. (Village)*

Finally, however, she obviously came to recognize that her mother's care and advice were wise and she moved back to her parents together with her child. She seemed to have a very bad conscience towards her mother. She stressed as number one her relationship to her mother, when asked about what kind of additional support she needed to normalise her life after the war:

*I will try to beg my mother to forgive me for what I did to her. But if any other wish to help me with money to make market and to go to school I will be happy. (Village)*

Eleven out of twelve women, who had decided to hide their trauma from their family, lived together with their husband or a permanent man. In the whole group 50% were living together with a man, married or not married. The victims' fear was that the husband would not accept her after being raped. It was more common for a woman to hide her trauma if she was living together with a man. Was it more necessary for a woman to hide her secret if she was dependent on a man?

A woman in her twenties who had returned to her village after the war had only told her story to her mother for fear of not being accepted by the rest of the family. She was not married but lived permanently with a man who supported the family by selling gasoline. The family had also started farming again. Her father and two of her three children had been killed in the war. Four of her five siblings were alive. Four soldiers had raped her two years prior to the interview. During the rape the soldiers were all standing around her, waiting for their turn with her and nobody else was around.



*I only told my mother and no one else besides you. So all the family members have not heard about this, so they accept me. (Village)*

Seven women had been unable either to inform or to get support from any family members as they had been separated from their families and often had no idea about their condition or whereabouts. Some family members had been killed or had died due to other reasons. These lonely women all lived in one of the IDP camps.

One of the most unfortunate women was met in the hospital. She was in her twenties and was totally alone. Her parents, her two siblings, her husband and her only two children had been killed. About the loss of her family members she said:

*It has disturbed my whole life, no peace, no comfort, no sleep for me. My life is full of pain. I have lost all supports, no one to turn to no one to play with. No one to share with. (Hospital)*

She earned her daily food by going around working for other people although she was comparatively well educated with primary school and two years in secondary school. She had been raped six times by soldiers/rebels during the last two years of the war and once by six perpetrators and nobody else but soldiers were around when she was attacked. The story she told of one of those incidents was:

*After they dragged me into the bush to rape me, I yelled or shouted for help but the soldier put cloths in my mouth so I was unable to speak. I just felt death was OK for me at that point. (Hospital)*

Besides assaults by soldiers a civilian also raped her twice. She had been forced to leave her home six times and fled due to fear of sexual violence and in order to save family members. About her remote family members she commented:

*Even though my family can visit me sometime, they have never been able to help me out these problems. In fact all my family died. (Hospital)*

She had been given some psychological support by friends and a teacher who talked to her once.

*He only told me I am sorry for what happened to you, try to forget it all. No other support beside this. (Hospital)*

When asked about any wishes for support for the future she put her hope in the church or some NGOs.

*To counsel me, help me with treatment for my illness, help me rebuilt my house. I will appreciate any good. (Hospital)*

When analysing the family relationship and support the categories to be stressed are **life goes on despite limited support** and **silence and acceptance**.

### ***Resources for daily life***

Farming is by tradition an important way for people to support themselves in developing countries, but war changes the conditions and, just over a year after the end of the war, only about one third of the informants had access to farming. For long periods during the war fields were deserted as the constant and repeated 'running' prevented the rhythm of planting and harvesting. The way to sustain life differed depending on where you lived. Here I will only compare the women from the villages and the IDP camps as the hospital women originated from a variety of groups. Farming was, at the time of the interviews, a source of food for about half of the village women. Living in an IDP camp, 13% of the women had succeeded in getting a small plot of land to grow vegetables to supplement the food supply from the WFP.

In the IDP camps almost everyone was supplied with food by WFP, but the distributions were too limited to keep hunger away. A majority of the women (80%) in the camps tried, together with their families, to supplement their daily portion with other efforts. Three women living in an IDP camp had to struggle without any official support at all. As mentioned previously, it was a rule that you had to be registered in a house to get supplies from WFP. If you had not succeeded in building a house of your own and lived unofficially with others, you could not get your share of the WFP distributions.

As many of the women had been left without male support as a result of the war, sustaining life depended to a great extent on the females. In all three groups in this survey it was a big burden for the informants to earn their daily living for themselves and their families. In 56% of the cases the family depended on her work. The most common work (32%) was some kind of small-scale business. In the village group the dominant task was business, usually selling different kinds of agricultural products in the market. Struggling to get contractor work was a way of earning daily living and in the IDP group 73% of the working women had tasks as contractors or other employees, while only 13% of the working villagers had similar tasks.

For 32% the husband contributed through his own employment and for 18% other family members. In the IDP camps, 27% of the women had husbands who contributed with work and in the villages it was 38%. The contribution from other family members was 9% in the IDP camps and 21% in the villages. Also for the men, contractor work was a common way to earn a living and 42% of the men had this insecure employment. Rubber used to be a big export product and Liberia was formerly the leading producer of rubber in the whole world. The production of rubber has suffered for many different reasons but the decline has partly been influenced by the war. Only six men in this group were working tapping rubber trees. Fourteen men had a higher

education enabling them to get a more advanced job.

During 2004 large groups of people had returned to their homes but still many Liberians were scattered within and outside the country. The interviews were held in November-January and many returnees came too late to plant for that year. Close to the villages vast areas had not yet been returned to farming. It is not known how many villagers were farmers before the war and over a period of 15 years it is likely that things would have changed whether or not there had been war.

### ***Education in focus***

The educational background differed a lot depending on age and partly also on location. Education could be primary school, secondary school, schools for practical skills and traditional bush school.

Overall 63% had had at least some education in primary school but the average time spent in school was only 2.85 years. It was promising that years in school were higher in the lower ages showing that, despite the years of war, the educational level had been improving. Among the teenagers 86% had had at least one year in primary school, for women aged 20-29 it was 70%, for women aged 30-39 years it was 57%, for women aged 40-49 years only 18%. None of the three women aged 50 or more had ever been to school.



It is interesting that 33% of the illiterate women had achieved some practical education. Most common was training in sewing, baking, tie-dyeing or soap making. This training was offered specially to women affected by GBV in Maimu IDP camp through the Norwegian Refugee Council<sup>59</sup>. Among the women from the IDPs, 53% had had this kind of practical training. Many expressed confidence that the skills acquired would bring hope and possible maintenance for the future when they went back home and tried to restore their lives.

Picture 25. Women coming from a training school in one IDP camp.

The traditional bush school used to be common within different tribal groups preparing youngsters for their adult life. In the context of Bong County Sande-school is the name of the traditional school for girls. Among the interviewed women 18 (7%) said they had attended Sande-school, a number that might have been higher as this kind of school was not specifically asked for. Of those who had been to Sande-school, half were illiterate, though two had also had eight years of primary school. There was a wide age range among former Sande-school pupils, including two teenagers, showing that this kind of school still plays a role in the society.

Three women had attended secondary school. None of them came from the villages. Twelve women were still at school.

The informants were given the possibility to reflect on why their education had not gone further. In a situation of war you would expect the various war-related events to be the main reason, but this was not obvious from the answers of the majority. Many women mentioned several reasons, showing a complex situation when education was not given priority. For many women education had been irregular during the years of war with various reasons preventing schooling at different periods. Directly war-related reasons like moving from the school due to the war or that the school was closed depending on war-actions were mentioned by 16%. In many developing countries problems within the family cause girls, more often than boys, to have to take a step back. In this group different kinds of family reasons like economy, no encouragement or needed for work, were mentioned by 80%. Only 3% (7 women) stated that it was she herself who did not give education priority. Childcare is a well-known reason for limiting women's education and 24% mentioned pregnancy as the reason for dropping or interrupting school.

Many women had a wish for further education. When asked to express a possible vision for the future, 27% put education on the priority list for their children and 17% harboured a hope for a better future through increased schooling for themselves.

*Yes, I really want to go back to school. I would need financially support and periodic counselling to enable me forget about the past. From any NGOs, church or the Government of Liberia. (Village)*

*I will be willing to receive support from anybody including NGOs, church or the Government. That is to send me to vocational school to help me be somebody useful in the society and also help me build my house. (Hospital)*

*I want support from NGOs, churches and government. That is to support me complete my high school and become a medical doctor for my country. (Village)*

The young woman in her teens with the high ambition to become a doctor had been to school for eight years. She lived in one of the villages together with her parents and her extended fam-

ily. They earned their living by farming. She had three siblings who had all survived the war. The only person she mentioned as lost through violence during the war was her grandmother.

### ***A test of well-being***

In the early 1980s the division for mental health in WHO<sup>60</sup> developed a Self Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ). SRQ-20 is an instrument to screen for mental health especially designed for developing countries. It is also suitable for illiterate people. It consists of 20 questions; the answers to different statements concerning well-being are a simple yes or no. Scores could range from 0 to 20. The sensitivity has been evaluated at 0.63-0.9 and the specificity between 0.44-0.95. In an evaluation in Brazil concerning neurotic disorders only 6% of the control population scored >6. The test-group had a score of 11.98.<sup>6</sup> When used in Rwanda<sup>61</sup> the SRQ-20 was found to be a potential screener for common mental disorder, which it was assumed would be prevalent in this traumatized society. The score of 10 was found to be the optimal local cut-off point for women (sensitivity 0.81; specificity 0.80). The SRQ-20 has been found to perform better in women than in men.

In this survey the mean value was 8.97 indicating a fairly high score for neurotic and psychosomatic reactions. Mean value for female interviewers was 9.2 and for male 8.7. When analysing the figure in more detail we saw great variation between the findings for different interviewers. The interviewers had been doing 6-25 interviews during the survey covering two months in time. The values for the interviewed women differed between 0-19. The mean value for the interviewers differed between 4.0 and 16.3. The findings are unlikely to differ that much just by chance. The reason could be diverging understanding of the method used or maybe the interpretation was influenced by the trauma the interviewers themselves had gone through. It was difficult to see any difference in experienced violence between the three interviewers with the highest scores and the three with the lowest score. The group of interviewers was small and all of them had themselves suffered to a greater or lesser extent through war actions. A conclusion of possible influence on the outcome of the test is not possible to make.

### ***Support from officials and the wish for further support***

The need for psychological support for victims of the war was well recognized in the postwar situation in Liberia, and many NGOs had a programme of support specifically designed for women affected by GBV. In this survey support from an official person was shown to be given to 25% (63) of the women, leaving three out of four women without any support whatsoever from an official person or organisation throughout the war and up to one year after the hostilities

60 WHO/MNH/PSF/94.

61 Scholte, 2011.

ended.

Pastors or other people from a church were the biggest supportive group. They had given support to 23 women (10%), followed by health-workers, usually a nurse, in 17 cases (7%). Thirteen women had talked to their teacher. The support differed a lot between the different groups, and an official person, usually their teacher, gave 32% of the women in the IDP camps support. This is probably due to supportive programmes offered by different NGOs to women in the camps. In one of the villages where 31 women were interviewed, only three women had had any official support given by a nurse or pastor. In the other village 11 out of 41 women had had support from officials. Eight of them were supported by their pastor, two by a nurse, and one by a counsellor.

The support might have been given just on one occasion, as for fifteen women, but one third of the women (22 women) had been involved in a support programme for between six months and two years.

Of those who got support 43/63 women said they were satisfied or partly satisfied with the support given. One woman even remarked

*I am very much satisfied with that support. (Village)*

She had been counselled by her pastor for one year and he had also to some extent given her practical support.

Generally speaking the given help expressed was mainly psychological. Twenty-three women (36% of those given support) referred to some practical help that they had received, though this was not a question that was specifically asked of them. Another twelve women mentioned practical help through medical advice or treatment.

Support and medical service from a nurse at Phebe Hospital was given to a woman in her twenties who lived with her parents in one of the villages. She had been raped once when she was a teenager and a second time shortly before the war ended.

*It was once after the incidence occurred when we came from the bush. He (the nurse) tried to talk to me that I should forget what happened to me. Yes, I am satisfied because he talked to me and treated me when I said I was sick. (Village).*

The practical support was not usually very substantial but as a rule it was very much appreciated, as it seems to have been given either in a very critical situation or in combination with emotional support.

A woman in her twenties lived without family members in an IDP camp. She was married but had been separated from her husband. She did not say if her only child was living with her. She had been raped four times about two years prior to the interview and on one of the occasions

three soldiers took part. A pastor and his wife had supported her during a period of two months but obviously this made a great difference to her. About the pastor she said:

*This support lasted for two months. Through prayer, counselling and asking me to join his family for dinner. I am satisfied and now accept my condition. (IDP)*

Comparatively few informants, only ten, had had support from specially trained counsellors who were already active during the war and from several NGOs after the war had ended.

A woman living in one of the IDP camps together with her two children but not with her husband had also been given practical help by a counsellors from the organisation Concerned Christian Community (CCC) for six months.

*They counselled me and helped me with rice, cloth and even trained me in soap making. Yes, I am satisfied with the support. (IDP)*

Hostilities committed against her had taken place during the first part of the war and more than ten years had passed since she was sexually abused.

Five women, who had been supported by different people involved in a church, had at the same time helped with church work and had been paid a little for their efforts. All of them expressed satisfaction with the support. Maybe the income they got through their own work was part of the satisfaction?

A woman in her thirties, who lived permanently with a man and their three children in one of the villages, had been counselled by the pastor of her church. Her partner earned money by work in a rubber farm. She had been raped four times 1-2 years prior to the interview.

*I was counselled for six months in his yard. I was told to teach Sunday school children and given small amount money. Bible stories have been helpful to me. Yes, I am satisfied God comes for all of us. I am comforted by God's words that I read daily and managing well my income. (Village)*

She had also talked with friends, and about their support she said:

*I am satisfied because they talked to me to forgive the evil doers and they comforted me too. (Village)*

Another woman in the same age group who came from the same village had had support from the evangelist in her church. She lived with her husband who was employed as a cleaner. She had had eight children and two of them had been killed in the war. She had been raped four times 1-3 years prior to the interview. About the support she said:

*He helped me for six months. He and other church members gave me clothes and asked me to go with other women from village to village preaching. It was fine. I am*

*satisfied. When I told people my problems some said mine was better. Going with other women and getting small money from the church also has been a blessing to me. (Village)*

About support within the family she mentions family members generally and from them she had also received both practical and psychological support.

*They gave me lappas (piece of clothes) and some other things that I needed at that time and words of encouragement. (Village)*

During the period of the interviews, the UN was playing a big part in maintaining stability in the country and UN vehicles completely dominated the picture in Monrovia and on the big tracks in the country. The frequent checkpoints along the main roads were all controlled by the UN. During the war different soldier groups had made their own 'checkpoints' causing fear for travellers. Several NGOs were present offering their assistance in rebuilding the country. The impression was that both UN and different NGOs were much welcomed by the population.

The informants were asked about their assessment of their own need for support to recover normality in life. When asked from whom the women wanted support to rebuild their lives, NGOs were in the top position and were mentioned by 65% (164). The church was mentioned by 42% (107) and the Liberian government by 37% (93). Trust in families was mentioned by 10% (26) and about the same number hoped for help from neighbours and friends.

Most women did not focus on their need for psychological or spiritual support, as only a couple of women specified this as their only need. A woman in her twenties who lived with her husband and their three children in one of the IDPs simply said:

*I need additional support such as counselling from any church/neighbour. (IDP)*

She had been raped twice and on one of those occasions her husband was violated at the same time. She said about this:

*I was afraid for my husband to be killed, because they tie him, put him aside and they told me if I don't do it they will kill him. And I accepted it, they release us. I felt very bad and depress and very shame for such thing to happen to me in front of my husband (IDP)*

She had already had psychological support from friends but no support from family members or any official person. About the support from her friends she said:

*I am satisfied with their support because there is nothing I can do about it. (IDP)*

The second woman asking only for psychological support was a widow and her husband had been killed together with two of her children in the same incident when five men raped her. It



had happened about two years before the interview. It was the second time she had been raped. Her comment about this traumatic event was:

*I felt worthless and thought of committing suicide before other people hear about it. Because I was raped in front of my husband and my children while lying in the pool of depression, they killed my husband and two of my children right in front of me. It was only God that saves me. (Village)*

After this episode she felt forced to take on a relationship with another man because of the hardship of maintaining her living conditions. She explained her reason:

*Poverty and isolation I wanted someone to help me and comfort me. I broke the relationship when the war ended because I could not cope with his demands. I lastly saw the present man that is still with me. (Village)*

After the first trauma, when she told her parents she was rejected by them but, after the second rape and the murdering of three members in her family, she felt comforted by them:

*When my mother and father heard that I was raped and sustained fracture during the first episode, they never wanted to see me. They lastly accepted me home and comforted me. And my present husband loves me also. (Village)*

Her only wish for the future was for more counselling for her huge trauma that evidently still had to be hidden from some members in her neighbourhood. She lived together with her second husband and her extended family. They were living off farming and the man contributed to the income of the family by selling drinks and she herself worked for others as a contractor.

*I would need continuous counselling from someone who will keep this as a secret and talk to me whenever I am thinking about the past. I always cry whenever I am reminded. I would need support from a professional social worker, Government of Liberia, church or NGO. (Village)*

About one third of the women mentioned psychological support as one wish in combination with other listed needs. Maybe it is understandable that practical support to achieve normality is more relevant. The surrounding conditions have to be normalised before one is able to recognise psychological needs.

Thirteen women mentioned the wish for help 'to forget'. As already seen, 'to forget about it', seemed to be a way of adapting. The advice 'to forget about it' was often given by both families and official counsellors. Maybe this is a practical way to deal with a huge collective trauma. When everybody in a society is affected to a greater or lesser extent and the capacity for professional psychological counselling for a universal trauma is very limited, maybe 'to forget about it' is the only achievable approach.

*Yes, I need more support from NGOs especially to open night schools for us to go and something. The government can also come to help us so that we can forget what so ever that happened. (Hospital)*

*I would like the church members to help pray for me to forget or stop worrying about the abuse. NGOs help to educate me well to the best of my ability in order to be able to take good care of my family members. (IDP)*

*I will want medical, emotional, physiological analyst to help me continue my training that I started with NGO that will enable me to forget the situation that we underwent for fourteen years. (Village)*

The aim to be self-reliant can be traced in some of the answers.

*I still want more support from a church, NGOs or my government. The church support could be to have strong prayers for me and my children to prosper in life. For the government or NGOs, I want them to help improve our lives by providing loan to help needed ones. (Hospital)*

*From Church and NGOs more talking to forget what had happened and self-help projects. (Village)*

*Yes, from church, NGOs and the Government I want them to help sent my children school and help me with money to make business to help myself and my mother. (Hospital)*

As mentioned before many of the interviewed women in the IDP camps had been trained in different practical skills. The training schools in the IDPs often combined teaching with counselling for war trauma. Eleven women reported that teachers from practical training had given useful psychological support. When leaving the schools, the hope was to be self-reliant.

*I would appreciate a financial support to help me, since I did here with dye, so that I can continue to do it and sell in order to help myself. The support can come from NGOs, family and the Government. (IDP)*

*Yes, I will be happy if someone helped me with my working materials after my graduation for me to be able to get my child support and my living. (IDP)*

About one third of the group mentioned a need for more general support, saying that all aspects of life were influenced. Obviously it was difficult for some informants to identify anything in particular.

*I will want financial and medical emotional, spiritual supports from any humanitarian worker to enable me to have a healthy life. (Village)*

*Yes, I need additional from any group who will come to help people like us. I will also need help from NGOs, from the government to send my children to school and to rebuild our house. (Village)*

The interviewed women, generally speaking, showed great trust in NGOs, the Liberian government and churches to be able to give support in order to normalise their life situation as fast as possible.

Concerning official support the categories to be stressed are **limited support but greatly appreciated** and **official programs have difficulty in reaching their target groups**.

### ***The victims' views concerning the interviews***

Generally speaking the victims had had little or no psychological support from a counsellor as only 25% had ever spoken to an official person about their trauma and for many the support had been for a very short time or only occasionally. The interviewers came as a group and were dressed in their student nurse uniform. This is likely to have made them look trustworthy.



Picture 26. An interview situation in one of the IDP camps.

All but two of the victims considered the interview to be a step forward in the process of counselling for them. How valuable that answer was could, of course, be questioned, as the interviewers asked the question themselves at the end of the interview.

Every interviewed woman was asked at the end of the interview if she was willing to take part in a more detailed interview that would be recorded, and 84% agreed to this.

# Consequences for rape victims after the civil war in Liberia – findings of in-depth interviews

## *Subjects, method and study setting*

Fifteen women were recruited for in-depth interviews. Out of 254 women in the semi-quantitative survey 212 volunteered to participate in a more detailed interview and six of them were asked to do so. Nine other women were found through the so-called ‘snowball technique’. As the interviews were performed without the assistance of an interpreter only women with enough knowledge of English were considered. An interview guide<sup>62</sup> was used with thematically open-ended questions comprising the women’s life situation before the war, their experiences during the war with emphasis on the reproductive, psychological and social consequences of rape and their present situation. The interviews were recorded and lasted an average of 53 (29-92) minutes.

Eight interviews were conducted in the two refugee camps visited for the semi-quantitative survey, five in two villages and two at Phebe Hospital. In one of the refugee camps a support programme, including individual consultation, group-discussions and training to get practical professional skills, had started for women affected by GBV. All seven women interviewed in that camp attended this support programme.

The study participants will be called the ‘informants’ or the ‘victims’. When quoted, the informants are numbered 1-15. The informants were between 20 and 60 years old with an average age of 32 years. In fact several of them had only a vague idea of their age so sometimes it had to be estimated.

The interviews were intended to be held in private and this could be satisfactorily arranged for most of the women. All of the informants had experienced rape as this was an inclusion criterion. My impression was that the women willingly shared their stories and appreciated the interest shown in their trauma and their person.

## *Analysis*

Professor Ulf Högberg of Umeå University collaborated in the content analysis by spot-checking in order to increase the validity of the coding. There was a convincing conformity in the coding. Four categories were selected from the whole material in order to elucidate the study question, i.e. the consequences of rape for women who were assaulted during the civil war in Liberia. This affected the women at the time of the **trauma** and it affected their **reproductive health**, their **present life situation**, and their concept of **anticipated possibilities**.

62 Interview-guide 1: see appendix

## The trauma

The informants experienced an acute threat of death due to the overwhelming power of the armed perpetrators. One woman who was fleeing together with her family described how on the road she had been raped and almost the whole of her family killed.

*All of us were coming. We were walking. They take me, they pulled me aside by the road. They go with me. They laid on me, went on with me, five men. They raped me, my Ma was crying and my son because I was get belle (pregnancy). They caught my Ma and cut her here in the neck. My family they came there, they killed. They killed my Ma, they killed my brother they killed my son, in the spot.....They raped me with the cassava. They put it here (showing towards the vagina). They knocked me with a gun here on my back. I was in my four months belle it destroyed. I had abortion after they raped me. (6)*

Many of the informants initially tried to resist and in the fight the victims were often physically traumatised.

*.... he knocked me with a sword, made a cut, and I was too afraid then to fight him again and he did whatsoever he wanted to do with me. (2)*

Realising that no help was available brought a feeling of total abandonment. One informant felt completely deserted. On waking up after the outrage, lying in her own blood after having aborted a six months foetus, she found herself alone, the only survivor of the raid.

*They just killed there, only my own was left and I was not to myself. Only my own was lying there in the town. (7)*

Generally the informants were aware of the possibility of a still more brutal destiny ending sometimes in death.

*I saw it, we were sitting down they say if anybody cry (she makes a movement with her hand to the throat). That's her house, I was in this house. They killed her, that woman died, she died. They killed her, they cut her titti (breast), they chop, chopped her, they left her. When we go back she was rotten. (8)*

Some informants had very ambivalent feelings after the incident: they had got through alive but were traumatised both physically and psychologically.

*I feel bad and I feel fine... God allowed me to come back. (13)*

Different negotiations could take place in order to handle the chaos. In most situations the victims surrendered out of fear, but a couple of the informants, although victims, took the initiative. They gave themselves in order to protect others.

*They said since you say you are old then we will grab your daughter. I say you will come, I say you leave my Ma, they left her (about her mother). (8)*

Another informant gave herself as a pledge in a critical situation so as to save her family group: her mother, a brother and a sister and her children.

*When we were passing the main road between Bong and Lofa they were killing people there plenty so we passed in the bush. One man helped us and we crossed in the night. I explained plenty thing to him what happened to me and I said I beg you. My people there my mother cried when it happened they killed my two uncles, my aunty in Lofa. Then we were coming here on the road, my Pa died for some frustration and I was crying on them. So they helped us to cross in the night. The man that I was begging to cross me to bring me to Gbaranga, he told me the only way I will help you when you and myself lay down. Before I crossed the river, he did it to me. Plenty people passed and some paid money but me I did not get money. I can't feel fine, but I wanted my life. Because what happened to me there, they killed more of my people there. I am thinking when they be killing me again what would be my own benefit. He said if you want me to cross you there I got to know about you. I did not trust him, but God is the one who made way for me, because some people they can have sex then kill them. So it is just God. I prayed to God. And God take me from inside and I was safe. (3)*

Negotiations could also be between the perpetrator and the relatives. A woman could become a pawn in the game.

*From there my father got scared and said let him carry me or they will kill all of us. (10)*

The informant who was ordered by her father to go away with the soldier felt doubly victimised, by the perpetrator and by her family, although she somehow at the same time was aware that there might have been no alternative to save the lives of them all.

It was not uncommon for relatives to be killed while the woman was being raped and the result could be desperate.

*My aunty plus myself and my uncle, we were three. We were hiding in the bush when the rebels came. The people, they killed my aunty and my uncle, they killed the two persons, my aunty and my uncle and then I was not to myself. Only me one was there but I was not to myself because at that time I had abortion, I was not able to go again. (7)*

The interference of brave relatives could result in an escalation of violence from the perpetrator.

*I had the baby with me they took it, they chonged it away. Then the father went for*

*the baby and bring it. They grabbed the father, they went to kill him. (5)*

Some informants experienced the fear of losing their children held at gunpoint during the brutal act towards their mothers. The children present were paralysed by fear for their own safety and their mothers' lives.

*The next morning I was weak and my son was crying, he said: ehh mama is dying. (8)*

After an attack the remaining community sometimes tried to keep together, supporting each other to save whatever could be saved. Victims might be tended, dressed when they were naked or carried away to a safer place and cared for until physically healed.

*I was feeling bad, shamed. The clothes there were teared, teared. I could not take it, it was spoiled. They gave me some old clothes, I tied it and we started coming. Different people gave me, one of my friends, it was not new clothes. It was old clothes, I tied it. (4)*

*I was sick, my ma and pa came and take me, we ran into the bush. They peeled leaves and boiled it until the sores finished. (11)*

*Other persons were passing now, I was not to myself, they took me, they were carrying me hiding in the bush. They were with me and I was able to come to myself. (7)*

In the chaos family members could be separated with fearful results. Separation from supportive persons in the family caused frustration and a sense of helplessness about the future.

Separation from children could cause severe consequences. In the chaos of violence when family members fled in different directions two informants were separated from their nursing infants who both later died.

*They just came to us in the village. All the people from the village were running. They caught me. I was the only girl. They took my brothers, then they caught me. They took my baby. The rebels they raped me, I got sick, my baby got sick and the baby died. Me I ran away from the rebels. I ran to look for my people, when I saw my people they said my daughter died.....My mam and my pap were carrying my daughter. My baby was sucking and she could not see me for two weeks. (11)*

The rape could be the starting point of a destiny of slavery.

*He just grabbed me in my hair and carried me and pulled me down where he was cooking. (9)*

The forced relationship could last for days or months either in isolation or together with other women victims, caught in the same or in another raid, all fearing for their own safety and for the destiny of the remnants of their families. Most of the imprisoned women escaped when they



had the chance or they could be abandoned by the perpetrator when no longer of any use.

*They forced me, I spent one week with the other man... the time I get sick that is the time the man leave me. They just left me there. (1)*

The trauma of rape is a deep psychological and physical trauma for the women affected. The victims sometimes continue to live with a very ambivalent feeling after the incident – they have survived but they have been traumatised with long-lasting consequences. For others praying to God was one way to cope in the acute situation and having come through alive, they felt that God had protected them.

## **Reproduction**

Four of the informants, who were pregnant at the time of the rape, had a miscarriage or preterm delivery. One of them was in the sixth month of her first pregnancy when she was violated by four men.

*At that time I was pregnant, I was in my 6th month. They came there, they put me under gun-point. So they raped me. They told me I may lie down on the ground. I was lying on the ground one was holding my foot, the other one was holding my hands, so they were raping me, the other men, all were getting there. And when they were raping me now then I was having abortion. The same day! The baby came all by force. (7)*

All four informants who suffered a miscarriage regarded the rape as the cause. Another informant who had a miscarriage some months later also claimed the rape to be the cause of her loss.

During the flight there were no facilities except what could be arranged on the spot. One informant was full term pregnant and the baby had to be delivered during the flight with no time for the mother to rest. This gave her subsequent health problems with a prolapsed uterus.

*Then people came now, they were fighting. The child and the other belle (pregnancy) was in my stomach and we go in the bush.....That's God made way. God helped me, I born the baby in the bush. One woman in the bush helped me..... I was facing problems. Because when I delivered in the bush that same day in the morning we started running again we were going. The people came behind us. In the morning we start running again, when we were going my stomach were giving me hard time. My womb used to come outside.....I did not lay down. We were coming. People were firing. I had to hold my baby like this. We were running, going. We spent three months in the bush with the baby. (3)*

One of the informants, realising that she was pregnant from the rape, desperately tried to find a way to end the pregnancy. When born, her child caused great ambiguity in her feelings. She

faced slander from those around her and she experienced difficulties in being accepted by the community.

*..if you get a child and you see the child you would not feel it is OK to kill the child. You have just to consider him as a child. (10)*

Seven of the informants said they had fertility problems and all of them blamed this on the rape. For all of them the trauma of infertility seemed overwhelming, preventing them from looking forward. One informant with infertility problems in one of the IDP camps was 23 years old. Her only child, a small baby, had died when they were separated during the flight. Moreover she had experienced many other traumatic events. As a child she had seen her father killed. When she herself was being raped she had witnessed her husband being killed by having his head and his penis cut off. Despite this huge trauma she said that they could all be ‘forgotten’, if she could just see a future with a child.

*When I get it, at least when I look at that child I can forget about all those that happened to me. If I forget about it all I will feel fine sometime. (5)*

## **The present life situation**

### ***Well-being***

In the postwar situation the informants are struggling to cope with their memories but at the same time looking for a means of reorientation so as to be able to look to a future. Several informants expressed feelings of disgrace, shame and depression.

*After this date I don't please. I just get the body for nothing. The hard time I had I am the only one who has seen me. At night I worry, worry, worry, no way. Sometimes I can't sleep at night. (10)*

Some of them stressed the disgrace of being approached by a stranger more than the embarrassment of the trauma itself.

*You can feel bad, very bad because it is not your man, they will just come and rape you like that. You want to kill yourself but no way for you to kill yourself. Just let me die, not move because you can be disgraced, shamed. (4)*

Four of the informants expressed the wish to die or to commit suicide. Clearly they were suffering not only from memories of the rape but also from all the traumas and frustrations caused by the war.

The social structure is broken and they feel lonely and incapable of restoring their previous way of life.

*I say I'm not even to myself. I'm not all right in my body. Because when I'll be thinking about it when someone who is to be doing something for you, when they kill the person. While passing you see your friends, their brothers is doing something for them, I can just be feeling sick in my body. I will be feeling bad. My own self is living now, I say why am I living here for now? I'm looking like paper, I cannot feel fine, I can feel hurt every day, every hour. But I can just pray to my God that me and my children will have something tomorrow that we can depend on. (3)*

Obviously the rape gave the informants severe reproductive consequences through loss of pregnancies, impregnation resulting in risks with induced abortions or an unwanted child and post-partum problems with prolapse of the uterus. Facing fertility problems seems to be the most traumatic reproductive ordeal in their present situation.

The informants face many difficulties when handling their new situation struggling with their self-image as well as a breakdown in the normal social structure.

### **Anticipated possibilities**

Socially, in the postwar situation, the female family, consisting of mothers and sisters with or without children seems to be the reliable option when other alternatives are not there. Being infertile and childless yourself, it is not easy to live close to children belonging to other women.

*I can feel bad mam, because I see them with child and I don't have some. (7)*

This woman was raped by several men and on the same day suffered an abortion, her only pregnancy, and her deep frustration over her desperate situation is obvious.

*When I'm lying in the bed I can be crying, it can be hurting me. I cannot have child since that happened to me. I can be crying, it is not my body, mam. It is not my body. Since that happened to me, I can be thinking on it, my mind can be distended. I had abortion by force. It can be hurting my stomach. I can't be able to born. (7)*

Only two of the informants lived in a trusting relationship with a man. Some other women were waiting for a man to take the initiative and seemed willing to accept his choice. While waiting, many informants were in the process of adjusting to life without a man and were facing the possibility of staying alone long term. Getting a man is important for support and for achieving the social norm, but for many women there are doubts about relying on a man.

*Maybe the one I will get will be worse than the other one, so I will get a burden with him, but sometimes things use to be difficult on your own. (10)*

A couple of the informants felt mistrust for men as a group and preferred a life by themselves. Having some kind of education seems to make it is easier to feel trust in a future by themselves with their children.

*I was embarrassed with him so I left from there because I wanted to go to school.  
(15)*

*If I don't get man that I will trust that will decide to be permanent or to marry me  
I'm not willing to have any more child. (9)*

Being infertile, women often have to face men's sexual initiative towards other women without the power to protest.

*... he can tell me and say he is using the blood for nothing on me, I can't born. He  
is spending for nothing, I can't born. He is looking for a child. (7)*

Childless and abandoned by the man and being left to a destiny without future prospects, is much worse if the woman has been separated from her own family.

*I don't have nobody. I can just beg him to be in the house until the thing can cease.  
Myself I can be begging sometimes to consider me until the war can finish. When  
the war is over now I can go to my parents. (7)*

Although the normal social structure is disrupted the informants find ways to cope with their traumas. The sentence 'to forget about it' was mentioned in several interviews. The war had just ceased and this approach seemed to stabilise the situation psychologically, even if former perpetrators are in the vicinity.

Personal guilt seems to be avoided by blaming 'the war' and not making anybody personally responsible for all evil. Also relatives could use this coping mechanism to handle the trauma. One informant had been raped by a perpetrator in a group of about twenty soldiers, who had caught up a group of people that had tried to flee from the village out into the bush. She explained about her husband:

*He never said anything, the person that did the thing is in the town here. He only  
say it started because of the war. (14)*

Another informant explained how the issue of coping is brought up in the local church

*They talk to us they say we shall forget about the past even those that were fighting  
in the war they are disarmed and we may not pay judge to them we may forget about  
them. Because that was war and we may forget about the past....I can forgive them  
because that was war. If that was not the war they would not have come and kill my  
uncle. (15)*

## ***Comments***

Rape in war is often closely linked with other traumas, such as being forcefully chased from home, separated from supportive persons and dependants, and being witness to the brutal killing of family members or neighbours. The trauma of rape has to be considered in combination with all other traumas in order to understand the full width of the consequences for the women affected.

Rape can cause different very dramatic reproductive consequences. After sharing the stories with the fifteen women in this part of the survey, I have realised that for victims of GBV being childless and facing infertility often destroys the hope of a promising future.

Concern for the future is not easily handled in a broken society. To get support from a man is a desirable norm, but the female family seems to be the more reliable alternative for many informants and education improves choices for the woman.

Reorientation in life is often delayed by persisting feelings of disgrace, shame and depression that are only partly relieved through the help of relatives or professional supporters. Reconciliation and forgiveness is part of the official peace process taught by society and the victims are struggling to use this strategy.

## The stories of three traumatized women

Fifteen women had in-depth interviews and gave heart-breaking testimonies showing all kind of cruelties that occur in wartime. To give a more personal insight into the effect of gender-related war traumas, three of the women will give their stories. To hide their identities, their names and some other details have been changed.

### *Amina*

Amina was about forty years old. Having fled from Lofa County, she had been staying in Maimu refugee camp for about one year. She was living alone after her previous two men had left her. She had two teenaged sons who, supported by their uncle, were living and attending school in Monrovia. In the camp she lived with her two daughters aged nine and eleven. One of her sisters lived in another house in the camp and together they were taking care of their elderly parents. Here is the story Amina told about her life:

*We were a big family. My father had two wives and altogether we were fifteen children from my father. I was the first-born. My mother and my father's other wife had their own houses but we were all farming together. We were making rice-farm and sugarcane farm. They grounded the sugar and produce liquid and they sold it to get money to be able to send us to school. I went in Zorzor central school up to seventh grade. Then I stopped as I was having belle (pregnancy). After this I never have taken up schooling again. Me and the father of my son married, and later I born two more children to him but we are not together now. He had gone to high school and was working and bringing money to the house. He left me and married someone else. He said as I don't know book he can't make it with me. I myself was doing business to sustain our living.*

*When the war first came to our area it was in 1993. I don't know from which side the soldiers came. They came and they were just killing people and raping women. Some of them wanted money, they said: "show me the place you keep your money". They took the money from the person and then they kill the person. They killed people with guns or with a knife. They took it from this side, the neck side.*

*The time they came to us we were on the farm in our village. They first entered the town and plenty people were running to us telling the enemies are in the town. We packed our things and that day we started our journey to Guinea. That time now when we were going they came after us and grabbed three men and killed all of them. It was my brother, my sister's husband and my sister's husband's brother. They said if we cry they would kill us too, so we shut our mouths. Then they told us, the women, to go and sleep with them. They carried us in the bush and used us.*

*After that we escaped to another village but the soldier people were there. There they took my husband and said we will go and sleep with your woman, if you say anything we will kill you. So they carried me again and they used me. Two of my children were with me and they were small. One of them was four and the other one was six. The soldier men told them “you go and sit over there, if you go we will kill you”. So the children went and sat down waiting for us. They continued until day-break. When they got trough they told me I should go, but I could not get up, I was lying down. I later found the group on the road going to Guiney. I couldn't find my husband, he had run away and gone to a different place and I didn't see him until we returned after seven years.*

*In Guiney we stayed in a camp and there we build our house. I myself cut the sticks, I did everything. Usually people worked for contract and I went for the palm-kana (palm-oil) and I sold it to get money for food. I was living with my three sons, but one of them got sick and died. He was seven years old. During our time in Guinea I met my second man and we got two girls.*

*In 1998 we could go back to Lofa again and we returned to our own place. We build a house again and one of my sons joined the Co (Cooperation) and my sons were brushing our farm and we could plant rice. But in 2002 the war came to Lofa again. My husband who came from Sierra Leone, he left and went back where he came from. The soldiers came and plenty of people were running they came from Zorzor, Voinjama, from Fessebu and Yealla and were having their things on their head. They told us the dissidents are coming. So we ran again to our farm out in the village. Then the soldiers came and it was in the night and what happened to me on the way to Guinea they did it to me again. We were running and my sister was running with my two daughters in front, they were three and five years old. The soldier men came and they grabbed me, ohh they grabbed me again and I suffered! I suffered, they used me, I don't know the amount of men. They said they wanted to see me and we should go to another house. If you don't go we will kill you, they told me. They also wanted to grab my old Ma. The old Ma cried, she said I'm old, you leave me, I'm old. They then said since you say you are old we will grab your daughter. I said you will come and you leave my Ma. They left her. I don't know – they were more than five, because when one was coming and he finished he went back and another came. Five minutes he came and then five minutes and another one came. They were taking turns and came back again. I was having three months' belle (pregnancy) and they used me, used me until the belle spoiled. The other man came and I said “I have started bleeding, can't you see”. He said no and they continued – the whole night. I was week and I was hungry. I now always have pain here in my back, ohh, you know they did like this – they carried my legs up, I suffered, I cried. They*

*took off my clothes and I was naked. My son cried he said mama is dying. He was thirteen now and he was sitting outside when I was in the room. When they left me I never got my clothes back. When I came to the village I found a piece of clothes that I could tie on me and I found some panty. I went outside like that walking three days without clothes. When I came to Watersite I saw my friends and I explained to them the way they used me and that they took all my things, my clothes – only that panty was on me. They gave me one lappa (piece of clothes) and I tied it on me. We continued to walk for three weeks and slept every night in the bush until we came here in this camp. Some time we could go into a village and find rice to beat and cook for us to eat. You can say we stole it. We found pots there to beat the rice and we put it in our bags, tied it and carried it. When we came to Gbaranga I looked for my children and I asked plenty of people and some show me the place and I saw them. I was happy, I cried because I was not thinking I would see them again. I was happy, oh that day I danced! I wanted to dance but I was not able to dance because they raped me, all this place was hurting. I explained everything to my sister, I told her how I suffered on the road and she cried. We were now altogether nine people from my family, three of my children, my sisters, my pappy, my old ma and my old ma's sister.*

*After my belle (pregnancy) spoiled from that time I can't receive (menstruate). Since that day I can't see it, but it can hurt me. From 1993 I suffered and 2002 I suffered, they used me. They were more than fifteen men altogether.*

*I don't have a man now and men say they can't make love to me because they used me. They will say I have sickness because many men used me. They can be afraid. People know because I can be going to the clinic to get medicine and I explain my situation to them, I can't be shamed. Other people then can hear and they will go and tell other persons, that woman they used her, that woman had more than five men.*

*So it is hard for me now to marry. One man asked me for love last week. He came and said he wanted me. I told him let me think about it until tomorrow, then you can come. From that time I didn't see him, maybe they finished telling him, I don't know. You see I want somebody to help me. If I will be like this, I will be suffering, I'm not too old. I need someone to help me and if somebody is helping me I will make love to that person, because he is helping me. He will not help me free. I want a man because I'm jam (meaning having no choice in a desperate situation) now. I have nobody to help me. In this war, if you don't have man to help you, you will suffer. You can be doing hard work until your whole body is hurting. I have cut my own sticks to build my houses. If you were two, if I was married I would not suffer too much. The person would be in my house and buy my clothes for me, do everything,*



*but nothing like that for me. Sometimes I can think about it in the night and I will feel bad, because plenty men used me, I say God, what will I do. Maybe that nobody will like me. If somebody come and love to me and I explain to him he will say, that woman plenty men go with her. The person will feel that kind of way and he will not like me now. He can forget about me.*

*I will also feel cold like that in me when I think about it. Sometimes I cannot sleep, I will go up and sit down and be thinking about it. Because from that time now when I was having the belle and it spoiled, my stomach can be big like that and it hurts. I say, maybe I got sickness and I soon will die. But they are giving me medicine, every Friday I go to the clinic.*

*In the clinic also they talk to me and say I may forget about it. They say it was the war, forget about it and you may feel free. I say OK and I cannot think about it. Yes, they are always advising me. I feel fine when they talk to me. What they did to me they have finished doing it to me now. They did not kill me and I feel good and bad inside now. The way they raped me, the people advised me to forget about it. I can do nothing now. What would I do, nothing. To cry every day that is for nothing. Before I used to cry, but it is not only me that happened to – it happened to plenty people. Some people can be ashamed to talk about it.*

*Also my sons say I may forget about it. They say, Ma that is wartime – forget about it. My sons say they remember the men, if they will see one of them they say they will remember, they would say oh, that is the man who raped my Ma. But they will do nothing, they have finished forgetting about it. It is finished now, everything, the war end now. Yes, we want peace now, we just forget about everything now.*

*One of the men who used me was here in the camp for some weeks. I felt bad when I saw him but I went to him, I called him and said come. I said: you know me. He said no. I said you lie, you know me. I told him in the village you came and you grabbed me, you forced me and you were more than five men. You were the first, have you finished forgotten? I told him I know you. He then said “oh, Ma I’m sorry, oh Ma that was war time, I’m sorry. Anything I get some I will help you, oh ma, be going to the clinic, anytime I get money I will help you”. He told me I’m sorry but I told him that is your business. I told him it is finished now, what will I do, nothing I will do. I said go, I can’t do nothing to you, I told him it is the war. He left and they say he went to Lofa to get their money. They get money when they leave their soldier life. What can I do to him? Nothing. I forgive him because he finished doing it to me now, if I get vex (angry) that is just for nothing because he has finished using me now. I can’t do nothing to him, I will not go and fight him or tell someone to kill him. He has finished with me now. I felt good because I saw him, if I hadn’t told him I would feel some kind of way, but I called him and I feel good about that. What can I do, so*

*while I'm living I thank God, they have not killed me.*

*When we came here in the camp we started to build our houses. My older son who is eighteen now came from Monrovia and he helped me to cut sticks. I was lucky, for some time I have been working here at MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) kitchen and I get some money. We are getting some supply but it is not enough and I have been helping everybody in my family with the money I got from here, but this place is closing now and I'm thinking hard how we can do different work. Last night I was sitting down I could not sleep. I was thinking what way I will get money from, where I will get clothes from. I have one clothes on me and I have one to the house. There is nobody, my Pa is old and my Ma is old. And I'm thinking about my little daughter, she is supposed to go to school but she is not going to school. There is nobody to help and I was sitting down, I cried, I don't know what I will do.*

*My sons are going to school in Monrovia. They are in the seventh grade and in the tenth grade. They say they want to go to college and to do nursing. I'm trying hard to help them, when I got small money I carry it to them. I help them because I want them to help me, I'm getting old now. They are the one who will help me in the future. That's why I will try hard to help them to school and when they finish they will do some for me. I will not suffer again.*

*You asked where I got my strength from. I think I got it from my home. I'm used to hard work, I got strong in the bush. If you are strong you cannot suffer. That is why I am like this.*

*God is also very important to me. When you are a Christian you cannot think, you cannot do bad. I can be happy myself when I'm going to church. Yeah, when I think about God I can be happy. I pray to God so that God will help me. That what happened to me will not happen to me again. When all that things happened to me I said oh God everything is to you. In the place where I was I could not fight them. I said God help me so that they may not kill me. Let them use me, let them leave me so I can go. I prayed to God and they did not kill me. My son, they did not do anything to him, they just raped me, they left me. They said, "oh ma, you may go, go". OK, I'm still living.*

*They were killing some other women there. One bright woman, they killed her, they cut her titti (breast) small, small. She was sitting and she was crying and piece by piece they suffered her. We were sitting down close and they say if anybody cry, they would do the same to us. They chopped her and then they left her. When we went back and passed later she was sitting there rotten. They killed plenty people there, and they were beating people. One baby they knocked her with a stick in her eye. She is alive but she can't see with the eye.*

*They suffered many people there. All what happened to me – they raped me, fine and they left me. I said thank God they did not kill me!*

*When they close this place we will go back to Lofa and make farm in the bush. My sons will stay in Monrovia and go to school. I will make farm and cut palm nut and fix oil and carry to them in Monrovia. That is how it will be. I will have to build a house and I will cut stick myself and build my house. I'm strong now. If you would see me in the bush you would enjoy me. I can cut my sticks and tie it and put it on my head. Then I will look for people to help me to build the house. I will go to the men and say please help me to build my house and then I will cook for them.*

*Sometimes I think my second husband will come back, because he wrote a letter. When he come and he beg me then we will go. He and myself born. But when he come now he must not lie to me, he may fool me, maybe he is not coming. If he will come I will feel good, but if he not will come I will sit down. Other men if you don't born for them they cannot do love to you. If a different man come he will say I may born, I don't want to get a man now. If someone come and fool me and love to me, the person will use me for nothing. He will say I'm old now, I can't born and I also don't want to born now. There is no way, I can't see my periods, I can't born.*

*Let the peace come and we will be happy, because if there is peace in Liberia we will be happy. We will do everything in common, in the bush you make your farm, you sell rice and oil and you will make money to support your children to go to school. We will be happy when we get peace.*

## **Mammie**

Mammie was 23 years old and had come to the hospital to take care of her mother who was admitted due to abdominal discomfort. She was young and beautiful but rather shy. It took some time before she felt comfortable enough to explain her very tough and incredible story that contained all kinds of brutality that can occur during a civil war. Mammie, her mother, Mammie's sister and her two children, all that remained of the family, lived together in one of the IDP camps some distance from the hospital. Here is the story Mammie told me:

*We used to live in the country-side in Lofa when I was small. My father was a farmer and we were farming rice, that's all. We used to share the work with the farming all together; my Ma, my Pa, my grandma and other children and I. I was only a small child when the war started and I don't remember good, my Ma says I was six. We could hear people shooting and we got scared. One day the boys and I were in the same house. We were inside the house when they attacked, they came and one boy who was renting from us, they took him outside in front of us. They carried him*

*out and they killed him and he was lying just in front of the door. When we later came out we saw him. They had cut the neck with a knife. I felt bad and I cried. We got scared and didn't know who more would be killed. Soon after, the whole family and other people left the house and went to a different place far out in the bush. As I was small I can't remember how long time we spent there. We were sleeping out on the ground and were eating what we could find. I remember we ate wild bananas. When we came back again we found that they had burnt down the whole village, they broke it down. I think we spent a year in the village trying to do farming again but it was not a safe place. Soldier-people came the second time and we took off and were in the bush again the whole family and many neighbours.*

*When we left the third time we were a small family now crossing the border running to the neighbour country Guinea. The rebels came into our house. I was only eight years old. They were many and they forced my mother in front of all of us and four men raped her. My father was taken outside the house and there they cut his neck of him. We saw him lying outside the house. After my father died our life has been difficult for us and my mother has never had any means to send anybody of us to school.*

*It was me, my mother and sister who went to Guinea 1993 and we spend four years there before we could go back. The war then had ceased and we hoped the life would normalise. We could not go back to our village so went back to stay in a camp in Voinjama town run by the MSF.*

*As our village were burnt down we never have gone back there again. In Voinjama we only stayed one year as the war came back and the decedents attacked us. We had to run out in the bush again, we were about thirty people running together. We were mostly women and children but some men were together with us. As we didn't find Lofa to be a good place to live, we now tried small small to come over on this side. While living in the bush I met my husband and I got pregnant and got my daughter. When she was only three month old it happened again – they captured us in the middle of the day. The soldiers arrested every one of us and carried us to a town called Veliezaga in Lofa County. The soldiers took my baby from me and chonged her in the dirt. They were three soldier boys that raped me before my husband, my mother and two little brothers. Two of the soldiers were holding up my legs while the other soldier was raping me. They all raped me one after the other and they beat me. After raping me I was feeling severe pain and was crying for help. My husband went for the baby and brought her to me. As soon as he gave me the baby, the same soldiers who had raped me told him to go with them behind the house. He begged them not to carry him but these soldiers refused because he had brought the baby to me. The soldiers forced him and carried him behind the house and killed him. Later they told me that I should go and see my husband's body. I went and I saw my husband's dead*

*body lying in a pool of blood. His head and penis were cut off. I came back and told my mother that my husband was killed by the soldiers. She wept bitterly. While she was weeping the same soldiers got angry and asked why my mother should weep for a dead body? They told my mother to undress herself before us. She took off her clothes as she was put under gun-point. The soldiers told my mother to lie down on the ground. Two of the soldier boys raped my mother right before my two little brothers and myself. After raping her they put sticks into her vagina. She bled until she fainted. When my mother fainted the soldiers left us and went away. My two brothers and myself backed our mother and carried her on the main road going to Gbaranga in Bong county. One of the government soldiers' commander came with a car and met us and we explained the condition to him. He helped us and carried our mother to a hospital. After several different treatments my mother got healed but one of her legs got crippled.*

*When we were running from there we were trying to come on this side. I now had my baby with me but the titti-water (breast-milk) was not good and after three weeks my baby died. My titti-water was not good, because they went on with me and my daughter could not live. I was frustrated to the extend I thought God had forgotten about me.*

*After coming here I got a new boyfriend 2001 but he said I can't born so he left me after one year. After they raped me I could not receive for seven months. The eights month it came but was completely black, like soso-water (meaning blackish water). Still I can't receive good, it is still black, black. I went to the hospital but no way. That is the problem I'm facing now, I can't receive good and I can't born. Myself I decided I have to sit down until I can solve the problem before I can get man.*

*I'm now training in a school and that will help me tomorrow. I want to do business. Since we started the school, our boss, the lady she can talk to us. They are telling us to forget about it and to forgive. Sometimes I can be feeling bad when they talk with me. When I'm sitting along with my friends I can sometimes be feeling bad the way they (the other women) talk. There with my class I can think about it but I won't cry in the class, I just leave the class and walk off. When I think the way they suffered, in the way they died and now I can see them. When I lie down sometimes in the bed I can't sleep, I get everything and I'm crying throughout. There are three things I use to think about, the raping, my child and my husband. Actually the day I had there the way they suffered me and I don't have my child, I can sit down and think of it and cry, every day sometimes.*

*I can't talk to my mother about those things. She is old now, she is getting old and she says her own problems has finished, that is the reason I don't want to bring it up. Myself I'm now trying to forgive small, small, until I forget about it.*

*You asked what will happen if I would meet those men again who did this to me, I have nothing to do, I leave them there, I go different place to go to live. I and them can't live together. I get my own to God. When I have problem I pray before him. He can always help me.*

*When I am not suffering at all I will forget about these things, because the pain is there and I can't get a human being now, he has gone away from me. When it go away from me, my problem, my stomach, then when I am feeling fine I will forget about all. If I can't get a child again I can't feel fine, when I get it, at least when I look at that child I can forget about those that happened to me. I can forget about it. But if I don't get it sometimes, when I sit down and think I cry more. At least when I get it I feel fine.*

## **Orida**

Orida was about thirty years old when I first met her. She was a very ambitious woman and throughout the war had taken every opportunity to get some education. The school in her home village was closed several times but she caught up as soon as there was any possibility. When staying in a refugee camp in the neighbouring country Guinea for some years, she finally succeeded in finishing secondary school. Returning to Liberia, despite the continuing war, she started studying to become a teacher. When we met she was at the end of her training and looked forward to becoming a professional woman able to serve her country and be part of its prosperous development.

Her huge family had been split up when the rebels invaded their village the first time. Her father had two wives and she had fourteen siblings. She fled to the neighbouring town together with her old grandmother and a younger sister. They succeeded in avoiding rebel attacks by continually moving between the village, the bush and the town, but finally during one attack she was captured. This is her story:

*We stayed in the village for three months but we used to go into the bush sometimes. Come into the village and go into the bush and come in the village. We had to do so because sometimes we heard all the rebels coming in this part and if that village is close to us we had to leave. I did not feel fine having the old lady with me. I was responsible for her and by that time I did not have anything to manage her in the bush. About treatment, I did not have anything for her. For a long time the rebels never came into our village but later it became true, but at that time we did not know that they were coming. We did not know and we were still in the village when they entered. They came in a big number, they just covered the whole village. They came in the night when we were already in bed.*

*When they came they requested for food and we should cook for them. They wanted a bath, they wanted to eat. We should make hot water for them so that they could take bath and find food for them. We had chicken in the village and we cut some. They were so many, the whole village was covered. We wanted to run away me and another person but the safest way we thought was to remain in the village because if you run into the bush you don't know who you are going to meet there. If we remain in the village and their leader is in the village, they would not do harm to you. So that first time they remained calm, they did not humble us and after we cooked everything they ate and then they left. Nobody died and nobody was raped for the first time.*

*After they left we knew we were not safe over there so we left the village and we went in the bush and build a kitchen like in a displaced camp. In a quite area were no other person would know the place. We were about three different families who went and build that. We were there and we could only sleep in the day. There is no food in that particular place. We still had to leave in the nights to go and find food so at another time when we were in the village making palm-oil, in the process to obtain oil from palm they all just came again. They were more than thousand. They came from Voinjama and Kolahur. They were coming here going to Gbaranga to find arms and ammunition to go back to look for their enemies. In fact they had some arms and they wanted us to help them to take it to Gbaranga. When they came some people in the village managed to run, when they saw them far away, they just escaped. But some of us were not able to escape. For example if you are in the bathroom and you see them you just remain in the bathroom. When they came that day, they did not ask us to cook, they did their own cooking, everything. They said we should go with them to the next village. They took me, and some boys from different families. I was the only girl from that village, but they had other girls from different villages. They came with them to our village and we all go to the next village.*

*When we got to the next village – I actually had some relatives in that village, so I went to them and asked them to please help me to escape and they said they too wanted to escape. There were no means. The group of soldiers were large in number, more than 1000. If you wanted to escape you would go and see another soldier – so there was no way. So while there, the person who took me from our village, bringing me, was looking for me all around. When he came and saw me sitting over there he just grabbed me in my hair and carried me and pulled me down where he was cooking. He was one of the heads for them. He pulled me down there and he told me if you leave from here the next time if I find you in any other area it means you do not want to continue the journey. It means if I don't stay with him I will not continue with them. He would kill me, right in the village there. So I sat there until*

*he got through cooking. He said I should go and eat with him. I said I did not want to eat. So he got through eating. He put the water, warm water in a bucket. He said I should go and take bath with him. I said no, I didn't want to be together and go with him. He said I should get up and go with him. He forced me to go with him and have a bath with him and I went with him. After the bath he said we should go into the house. I stood for long, he said I'm telling you let's go in. He said he had his boys, they were all inside there. In this house he had his room and his boys are all in the living-room. They are many, more than hundred, sleeping all in the room. I was the only girl. He had this room for him alone. So while we passed through the whole way the other soldiers were there. They told him oh, chief we are here. They saw me walking with him inside, so they are telling him: they are waiting, meaning they are waiting to get me as well. That's why they told him. So I walked inside with him. When we came I told him I did not want him to touch me. And he told me if you don't want me to touch you, if you make any sound I'm just going to send you over to those boys and they will just have you with any means and I will just tell them to go ahead. This is what he told me and because I did not want many other soldiers after that I accepted him and he had sex with me.*

*After I told him I wanted to use the restroom. So he was calling one of the boys to come and walk me to the restroom and to make sure to bring me back, but none of them answered. I think they were sleeping all, I don't know. He continued to call but nobody came. So he gave me the flashlight and his slipper and said "OK go and use the restroom and make sure to come back. If you don't come back when we will come back to pass here on our way to go to Kolahur, anywhere I see you I will kill you". When I came from the room I passed all hundreds of soldiers and they did not ask me. Some were not sleeping, but they did not do anything. This is their chief and if the chief did not tell them to touch me, they would not go against, except he tells them go ahead and touch, so that is how they allowed me to leave their house. I went outside and when I saw some soldiers I would just bend down like this until I got on the road to town. I got on it and I managed to walk a bit faster and I did not put the light on. I continued to go but I did not know where.*

*From the village where I was raped there were some persons who took one boy from that village, they told him: "carry us to the nearby village". They were going to look for money and other things to steal. So this boy carried them to that village I am escaping towards. They were on their way back to come and meet their friends in the village. So while I escaped they almost saw me. They were seven boys. I never had light on but they had light and I saw their light and I just went into the bush. They are passing on the road and I just hid myself in the ditch. I just bent over like this (bending with her body to show). I thought they could pass so that I would get*



*back on the road to go. It was dark at that time, it was after eleven going to twelve. I alone was struggling on that road. When they came they did not pass. They stopped right there to divide whatsoever they got from the village. And while I was bending over I was tired and I was just praying. If they had seen me they would have actually kill me. Before they would not leave me alone, they would do whatever they wanted, so I just prayed.*

*It took time to divide the things they got from the village. When they left I was afraid to get back on the road to go, I said maybe some their friends are still behind. So I remained right there, I continued to go in the bush, I never had light on. I continued to go and all my skin spoiled. It was all sore. In the bush I went up on a hill, I went right up there. The hill has trees, big big trees on it. So I climbed up. I did not really know that I had sore on me, I did not feel. I went up the hill in the forest and there I slept. There were wild animals living there, snakes, were all there but I was not afraid, I was not. I lied down and I slept. Until the next morning I could remain. On that hill there I heard them from the village in the morning when they gathered. They were calling on another to get ready to leave to continue their journey, I was hearing them. Even when they were leaving there, their sound when they were marching, I could hear all those sounds. They were making noise and I could hear all these noise. After the noise ceased everything and before I came down it was hard, it was very difficult for me to leave that area to come down on the road. That was the time I was feeling the sores. I did not feel any pain until I was safe.*

*After they left that village and were going in opposite direction, I decided to come down to try to get to my village. When I came down, I got on the road to that other village where the seven boys went and I saw another lady sitting crying. She told me they raped her last night.*

*I did not tell her about myself. She said they took away her money, they took away her lapas (pieces of clothes). They asked her to give them all those things and she did so just that they could be satisfied with that and go. After they left, one of them, one of those seven boys, came back and raped her so she was sitting crying. I met her crying and I just passed. I just passed. I could not see her crying.*

*I passed and tried to get to my village. When I came to my village I saw my grandmother sitting crying. She said she did not sleep, the whole night she worried a lot. I told my grandmother I was back, I told her the only thing I had was sore all on my body. And she asked me what did they do to me, how I was able to escape and I explained to her how I escaped, but I did not tell her what happened to me, that they raped me. Because I feared she would go to worry so much and I would never have any means to manage her on the hand of treatment. I felt if I tell her she is going to get sick and I would get into trouble, so I decided not to tell her. Now after*

*eleven years still I have not told her. I have not told anybody else, you are the only one who knows. It was very difficult for me, but I decided to tell you because I felt this is something that was done due to the war, and also due to, I say, due to poverty. Because if at the time if my parents were well educated to war, they would not sit there and let the war reach us to that far.*

*When the rebels were approaching the town, advancing towards us we saw some other people taking their families out of the country where it only requires you to walk. It is no distance, two hours and thirty minutes. I do not actually blame my father, because he never had the thought, he never had the idea. Some can have the idea but they are not willing to do it. It was not like that. He could not imagine what was going to happen. I don't have a bad feeling for him, I just believe he was not educated more to understand these things.*

*After that incidence I told my grandmother that that place was not safe, that we should try to go to Guinea. Still she said no. She said she did not want to go to Guinea for the food- business was hard and she did not know anybody in Guinea. She said if I wanted to go I should leave her in the village and go alone. I did not want to leave her, she could easily die in the bush.*

*She didn't want to go, but she sent us to Guinea to buy salt to bring for food, this is the only place you can buy salt. So we left and went over the night to buy. We carried palm oil on our head, and we reached in the night so that the soldiers from Guinea would not take us for being rebels. So we reached in the night and slept and in the morning we go to the market sell the palm oil and get salt. Then we came and wait and in the night again we travelled. We could be about 5 – 6 who travelled, usually girls and women.*

*In Guinea I saw a better life. I saw my friends in school. And I saw some other people that were leaving us in the town, crossing to Guinea. They were all healthy, before they just had their children, all sick from malnutrition. So when I came back I told my grandmother that I saw good things in Guinea. That we should go to Guinea so at least we would be able to go to school. And she still did not support. She said I should leave her in the village and go and go to school. I did not want to leave her so I continued to stay there with her. Usually when I tell my grandmother that we should go to Guinea, she said she did not want to go to Guinea because the rebels are not bothering the older ones. So she preferred stay in the village. But she realised that the rebels could disturb me so she said I should go, my sister and I should go. Yes she encouraged me, but myself I was afraid to leave her because I knew something could happen to her if I left her in the village, she would be alone. There was no one to care for her again.*

*After some time those rebels that had carried us along, were leaving to go back to Kulahur again. At that time they did not enter our village but they entered a nearby village and they killed all the people that they saw there, they killed them. In every village they passed they would kill. They were killing any other person they saw, everyone they met!! So that trip when the rebels were coming they killed older people and they killed three persons who were best friends to my grandmother. I saw the three old ladies' bodies. I was shocked when I saw them. They were three old ladies, the age of my grandmother. When I got to her to tell her the news, she had already heard it, so she told me to night she was not going to sleep in the village she was ready to go to Guinea. So that is how we all left together and from the nearby villages where they killed people in, people also left from over there to join us. We were large in number and we went to Guinea that night. We passed the border that very night and slept in the first village in Guinea. The next morning the soldiers from Guinea came and access our loads to see it is gun-free and after they did not see any guns they said we should go ahead to go to the town. We were not afraid again and so we walked to the town. They had a camp there where refugees were settling. They go and give you a house spot and you go in the bush to find sticks and build your house and there you live.*

### ***Acknowledgement***

I am very grateful to the fantastic women Amina, Mammie and Orida who have been brave enough to share their terrible stories with me. I am now passing them on to be read by others. May the stories give inspiration to strengthen efforts to prevent such cruel hostilities against civilians caught up in war.

## **Confidence in the future – but the shadow of the war remains in the background.**

### **A follow-up with four victims**

Three and a half years after the end of the war and more than two years after the previous interviews four out of the fifteen women who took part in the in-depth interviews were found again for follow-up interviews.<sup>63</sup> They were all from the villages in the neighbourhood of Phebe Hospital. The IDP camps had all been dispersed and the occupants – more than 40,000 from the three parts of the Maimu camp close to Totota and 25,000 from the big camp in Salala - had been invited to go back to their previous homes, which most refugees had accepted. The previous IDP areas were now being used for farming by the people living in the neighbouring villages. Normality was beginning to be established. There was no way to follow up the women in the hospital group who had previously been interviewed, as for reasons of privacy their personal data had not been saved.

Nothing really had changed in the four women's practical and social life since we last talked but there was a great difference. They had a certain amount of confidence for the future.

*My life is fine in that now there is no running again. I'm sitting in one place. I don't worry you know how the war will be making me to move. I'm not worrying about that and I'm doing the job and I'm in school. My children are in school. I not actually worry. My people are not sick. So I thank God, I'm all right.*

*Now I can see the time is improving because now people are getting the money to fix their houses. It was not like that before. So we can say thank God for that. Because now when you get five dollars you can be and nobody can beat and take it from you.*

*The people are together here. Like when they bring any development they will look for the town chief and he will not hold fast to it he will call other quarter- chief that they will come and discuss. They will tell the town crowd to come around and they will hold some meeting. They are working together here. It is not like before during the war when the soldier- people will just join inside and take it. It is not like that now.*

When content analysis of the interviews was done, five different categories stood out: **the shadow of the war, women no longer so dependent on men, confidence in the future and in the development of democracy, desire for education and strength from trust in God.** They will be used as sub-headings in this chapter.

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63 Interview-guide 2: see appendix

## ***The shadow of the war***

Psychological stability might still be fragile, the shadow of the war remains and the fear returns in nightmares, although not as often as before. There are three main topics that recur in the nightmares: ‘the running’, ‘the loss of loved ones’ and ‘the act of rape’.

*When I think on it now, sometimes when I go to bed I will dream about it. Sometime a man will be going on with my body. When I think on it like that over the night now I can dream about how people was firing and I run away with my children there. I will be crying and then some of them can be lost from me.*

At the beginning of 2007 there were some disturbances in the neighbouring country, Guinea, and three of the women gave evidence of how this affected them and brought to the fore traumatic memories of their own violent time.

*The war, some time I can think. Especially when they were talking about Guinea-business, that war was there. I got sick, for almost four days I got sick. My whole body was just painful, my heart was giving me hard time, then my head was just hurting a lot and I started vomiting. I was afraid.*

The sudden appearance of somebody could also cause flashbacks and reactions that might seem incomprehensible to others around. One of the women mentioned her reaction when a man happened to approach her from behind.

*Yes, I can be thinking that maybe that is somebody will come and do the same act to me again. So I can really feel bad. I can get that bad feeling. When a man talk to me my heart can beat until I want to do something. I want, I can really tell them bad word so that they will move from behind me. When I think on that one it cannot please me because it was not good intercourse I went through.*

Despite a strong sense of relief, even happiness, there is continuing grief over the losses experienced during the war and the consequences of the trauma. One of the women felt strongly that she was being slandered and rejected as a result of having been raped.

*Some days I can feel bad when I see people telling me oh, that girl was affected by the war. I can feel bad some days.... People were talking about me. People were gossiping about me and when I heard it I felt bad.*

The negative social consequences of rape are evident from other war environments. In south Sudan it was found that women rarely spoke out about their trauma as such talk could damage their chances of a future stable life.<sup>64</sup>

*Another man approached me but when he came I said I will think on it. Then he went by, when he came for the second time now, he said they say you were affected*

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64 Tankink, 2013

*by the war, I said yes. He said that is what they told me, so he said: is that how it is looking I will come back and from that day up to this time he has not returned back. After this time I can only see him and when I see him, that shame can be on me. I say then, why?*

Two of the women had had a baby as a consequence of the rape, and for one of them the child is a constant reminder of her trauma that neither she nor those around her can handle.

*The different feeling that I can get for him because of the father, the way he may behave..... So when I think on the father doing, I can feel bad so when he comes I can start beating him. Sometimes I can blame him. Because of him I caught hard time, I'm staying in the hard time. .... People are talking to me to change my mind and I beat him like that and when the people come I can start crying.*

There is relief at now having some security but at the same time there is sorrow and frustration over all that has been lost due to the war, loved ones and a life with respect and comfort as yet impossible to regain.

*We had our shop. I had big dishes and clothes I used to sell it at the shop. Then he (the husband) was selling gas. All the time we were there the thing took place, the war took place and we ran in the bush. That is how we came on this side. ... So all those bad thing is making burden. I'm not making any business.*

### **Women no longer so dependent on men**

Whether or not there is war, a woman's life is expected to be together with a man. A man confers respectability. Women who have suffered rape often have to struggle on their own and face the challenge of a life outside the expected norm. All four women interviewed in this session were single with children. Of the initial group of fifteen women interviewed in 2004, only two lived in a trusting relationship with a man.

*In our setting they respect you, they honour you if you are with men but if you are single parents that respect is not really much. Like this house where I lived before, where you met me last time, I left from there to go to the other side because of that just I don't have man. I think so. Children smaller than me will tell me something you know psychologically insult, just anytime they feel, but in our setting if you are with man nobody do that to you. They can be afraid of the man. Because of that it is necessary I believe, to have a man. It is necessary to be accepted by the community.*

Without a man, a woman might have difficulty protecting herself against unwanted overtures. Compared to the time during the war, however, legal and official means now exist to deal with the situation, giving an enterprising woman opportunities that were not available before.

*What they usually do to me ....come to me and say they, he wants me. I mean they don't see me with anybody when I am going to work at night. They see me I alone go, all the time they see me alone. But I don't know what made him brave? I am still thinking on it. I have reported him, I told him that I was going to tell his head, their head for the department. And I told him and he said when they have their meeting I will be called there and then we will talk and he did. And we went there he said yes, I did it but I'm sorry. So I asked him, but why me? He never answered. He didn't bother me after this, he didn't tell me anything but he stopped.*

Moreover, education is starting to change a woman's dependence on a man, giving her some authority of her own.

*Someone may not like women to go to school but now women know their right so they will not sit down for men to just push them and buy what they eat from..... I see my future and my boyfriend ...providing if he don't put his hand in other thing for me to feel bad he and I can marry. But if I will be suffering and he is not getting nothing and when he is getting five dollar he going and join behind other women then I will sit down.*

### ***Confidence in the future and the development of democracy***

The women show an obvious confidence in a prosperous future for society, and a working democratic organization seems to have spread even to the level of the villages. The first national democratic election after the war was held about eighteen months before the interviews and local elections a few months later. The system seems to be structured with direct and indirect democracy well known and historically well accepted by the people, as it is built on old rural traditions. Local leaders, the heads of a few houses, deal with disagreements among neighbours. The war had lasted for fourteen years – half a generation - leaving a big part of the population without any memory of the previous social structures. However, older people did have memories and experience of a functioning society and this helped in the reestablishment of a democratic system.

*The chief for the whole place is elected by the people. Then he the chief now appointed different people to help him. They divided the area they said this is the leader for this place and they all have their leader. So if somebody accuse you, you tell this leader and he brings you together and you talk. The house I live in, the man is the head for that area. So usually different people come there to talk matters. He is doing well.*

The interviewed women were clearly relieved to be now in a democratic system and showed their satisfaction in different ways.

*During the war there was nothing like that.*

One of the women who had lost almost everybody and everything in the war had returned to her home village and was staying with her aunt together with the child she had had as the result of rape. Despite the fragile situation she had found some kind of order and a satisfactory routine in her life. She lived with her aunt close to the neighbouring university in a mutually supportive situation, striving to normalize their life together with whatever means were available.

*I feel safe. I stay with my aunty and she is doing me good because she can help me for the boy. When we came here the whole was breaked down. One of her friends helped her to create the money to fix it. Now she is looking for the money to pay it.*

*I wash clothes for them (the students at the university) in the water, sometime I clean their room and in the morning they pay me. I give the money to my aunti, so we can eat inside.*

During the war people were dispersed and society was completely disrupted for long periods so that all basic community services were lacking. Now the women express satisfaction that a lot of services have been restored and are available when needed.

*Since you left from here by the grace of God I feel fine, nothing wrong with me because the school we are taking all the money. For the hospital each time we get sick we can go there but after the war I'm not getting sick like before so by the grace of God things is fine although hard. I can say thank God for that.*

*People are fine because it is not like before there was no hospital, when you were sick you look for country medicine but now when your head is hurting you can run to the hospital or if you have no chance to go to hospital there are drug-stores around now. It was not like that before. When you were sick you die or you had country medicine and God blessed you.*

There were villages in Liberia and in Bong County where more or less all houses were destroyed due to the hostilities. Walls in the mud houses that had survived the violence deteriorated because the villages were deserted for so long. Now the women express confidence in the progress of reconstruction at both village and national level.

*Yes this community, there is differences going on. You can see the war affected some people's houses and they have rebuild, they have renovated them and they are still building other new houses all around. And the living condition for people, at that time it was all up and down, sometime we hear gun-sounds but this days nothing, so people have realise they can feel free to make their gardening all around, and to even buy things that they can sell, market things that they can sell in large quantities. The community is OK, is well this days.*



*They have like swamp-farms. The community get together and plant rice over there. They can use it to eat, sometimes they share some for single parents. And then road making, they also pave those streets. The new buildings they are putting over there they have streets leading to those buildings. So now they come together to clean those areas. During the war there were no rice farms there. It is the second year now doing that.*

The women also show confidence in progress at the national level and have some ideas about international relationships for Liberia. Historically Liberia has been closely linked to the USA and people expect most foreigners to be American.

*To me I believe that things should be fine, mmh, I pray God that things should be fine, that we should not run away again. And that my heading should be united with American president, to be one. That they should put idea together, then things will work out fine. I would like that. When things go on like that she should visit her friend president there. It would be all right and then peace will come here in our country, but when it is not so another war will pick up, I believe that. For example for the American president if he get his support for Liberia he will pass it through my heading and do it. To do it for the children or for us. For Liberia.*

### ***Desire for education***

Good education seems to be the symbol of progress and three of the four women regarded access to good education as a key issue for development at both a personal and a community level. Though state schools charge no fees, parents must still pay for school uniform and other necessities and this is a heavy burden for those struggling to feed their children.

*The children what they are eating or they are going to school or they can wear clothes, shoes no way. For A. again they putting him off for school. No way. For A. uniform, no way. So all those bad thing is making burden. So I can really feel bad.*

Private schools have a better reputation and both parents and children would prefer them. As money is always an issue, learning may often be disrupted for those whose parents cannot afford to pay.

*It is difficult for me because now we are in Phebe there, it is not like the government school were more instructors for high school not present so how can we learn on that side. It can be hard, they can put me out but still I will look for that money. Like today they put me off, I didn't pay all my money because I get pay some part of the first semester school fee. I can feel bad really like today because you are in group and they just can call one person among all their friends so it can be hard. I feel bad because I'm missing my lessons while my friends they carry on, on their own.*

*If I carry that money, the administrator will talk to the other instructors for me to do that test. My sister is facing the same problem because our mother did not have the hand. They did not put her off today, the register just told her to come with the money, that is how she came. But she took her test.*

The advantage of a good education is well understood also by children and some make a big effort to secure it. Some school children, for example, try to make money by joining the market traders in the afternoon and selling things like fruit, sugar or kerosene oil which they have bought in quantities of a few days' supply.

*There is a fee and it is true everybody cannot afford. But the children also, the bigger ones, can help their parents to raise funds. Some sell, I think you can see some children sell after school.*

*My mother used to make garden to send me to school but now she is not able to pay my school-fees as all the money is going on. So sometime I sell small, small bread or I make garden myself to go to school.*

Today primary education is compulsory in Liberia for children between the ages of 6 and 16, but it is an enormous challenge to achieve the national goal of school for everybody. Clearly the government has had some success. The women interviewed tell how society and the government are now putting big emphasis on education and making efforts to facilitate it, particularly for girls, who seem to be given priority when there is a chance of a scholarship. Various methods are also used to prevent children of school age from being sent out to work. Liberia is well known for production of natural rubber and was once the world leader. It used to be common for young sons to follow their fathers in the work of tapping the rubber trees.

*I'm saying now Liberia will go on fine for us because for one side for the education. Like last year in the school an organization came in. Now they sponsor some girl-children. And to the boy-side, although they are not giving scholarships to boys, but they are encouraging their parents send them to school. Because when they see you and your son tapping they will hold the bucket from him and carry him to the office. So it means they are forcing people to send their children to school, it was not like that before. They say there no tapper-son or -daughter should go in the bush and stop (meaning to stop school). When they see a son in the bush they can stuck you (meaning punish you).*

The awareness of the benefit of good education has spread to the countryside and made an impression on parents who previously gave no priority to education.

*I believe things will be OK because right now I see that people that never had interest in education now they have and they advise other people even to continue. Other people join there to send their children to school. Some parents are escorting*

*their children to school. It never used to be like that. Sometimes they tell you: let's go on the farm today. No more school today, let's go on the farm, the teacher will not come, but this time they don't do that. They encourage the child to go to school.*

The emphasis on education has also reached the children who may even demand their rights from their parents.

*When some people see their friend going to school they say you may give some money to me so that I can carry it. Like that when the children see their friends they can be serious and they can humble their parents to send them to school. When you see your friends all around playing you will like to go to school.*

*Now they have a special NGO they call it Human Rights. If the child wants to go to school and you are the cause the child not to go to school for even a day, the child carries these parents to these people. The parents will be, you know, called to answer questions. So all in the community these parents know all of this.*

According to statistics from UNESCO literacy rates have improved greatly in Liberia, especially among girls, and by 2010 women were surpassing men. In 1984 33.7% of women and 62.8% of men aged 15-24 could read and write. In 2010 the literacy rate had reached 82.1% for women and 71% for men.<sup>65</sup>

Among the women interviewed in this session the two women most concerned about education stressed how important it was for women to be educated and how they had to struggle against male dominance and the previous neglect of women.

*Now some they don't want to see women going to school because when we were coming from school other men were complaining. The time when men were president they were sponsoring him and women were girlfriends. In the church they don't want sponsor boys, only girls. It means they wanted for the women to be above there now when we were coming from school they were talking about it.*

The women interviewed were clearly confident that the new leadership was pushing forward female education.

*Yes it has made a difference a lot because some of those men were not ready to help because as usual other men when the other president come no scholarship were floating at this time meant for the girl-children. It was just under cover other minister know that the scholarship their brothers' children they put in there, but now it is open.*

The two more educated women were very aware of the benefit of education and were prepared for hardship in order to reach their goals.

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65 UNESCO 2010

*My future will be fine because it is better for you to suffer from the beginning and then at last you will enjoy. So I know that if you try everything if you go to school tomorrow you can be somebody. That is why I can try by all mean to send my little son to school, try for myself to go to school. Because now if I say I would sit down and say I can make more money but I can see in the end there is nothing so that is why I am trying by all mean to go to school.*

### **Strength from trust in God**

Faith and trust in God supported the victims during the wartime hostilities and, despite the struggle for daily needs, clearly gave them confidence in a prosperous postwar future. One of the women, starting from virtually nothing, was struggling to find money for school fees and daily living but showed no worries about how to continue to get a good education. God would help her.

*That will be fine because if I go to school now by the grace of God when I will be out of high school because I can always tell my friends by the grace of God after my high school graduation although I don't have money but God will pass through somebody and send me to colleague and that is my dream and I know it will come true. I want to do nursing. I have decided to choose nursing because if I do nursing because when I do my nursing I can be ready a work for Phebe and also I can open my little drug-store and I can be able to pay myself.*

The fellowship of the church gives strength but daily worries can still easily intrude.

*I can go to church. I am a choir member so sometimes when I worry so just the raping or certain time when something happen to me when my school carrier can be worried. Sometime when we come from school no food and we can stay like that. When I be thinking it can raise my mind I can be worrying too much.*

When summarising her situation she expresses trust in life through confidence in God.

*I thank God because although life is hard but since that time I have not getting any difficulties. Things are fine with me. Fine by the grace of God.*

Despite feelings of desolation and rejection, God remains in the background. One of the women more than the others often remembered the time during the war and continued to think about her present hardship. She found there was no way for her to judge or deal with her situation by herself. 'Leaving it to God' was her solution for coping with a situation she could not handle. This approach seemed to lighten her struggle.

*With the children with me in the bush no food for us to eat, mmh. I had a lot of hard time, no way was over me, only God, yeh. ....God can be with me. Really God can*

*find my battle. He can find my battle sometime. Some days I cry on him I say oh, God you are leaving me out to this time. My little sister and brother there they all finished building house, making business, getting their own men. When they sit down the gossip about me, they leave me to suffer, one child. I'm having no brother, no sister. They will leave me to suffer that way, what have I done to you. I can ask God that way, some day. ....I leave it with God. That is God will. But if I get things some of them will come but I will not get that mind that they were doing bad to me. I will not get that mind. I will still like to do good for them. That is how I look, mmh, that is how I look.*

### **Comments**

Meeting the four women a few years after the end of the war gave me trust in the strength of people's capacity to recover after a catastrophe like a civil war when the whole of society was torn to pieces by evil that spared nobody. I can scarcely comprehend how the women managed to survive psychologically and I feel profound admiration for their strength of character.

## **War traumas affecting the interviewers themselves**

### ***Background***

Sixteen interviewers met 1048 women in June-July 2004 and in a second part of the survey they interviewed 254 women from November 2004 – January 2005. The interviewers were all students at Phebe School of Nursing, nine men and seven women.

The war had severely affected the hospital several times and its status as a teaching hospital was given no priority when all efforts had to be concentrated on keeping up at least a minimal standard of medical care. During the last years of war only one new group of sixteen student nurses had been accepted due to lack of teaching facilities. Their training had been interrupted several times and their period of study had to be prolonged for more than a year. The last time that the hospital had to be moved the students along with staff and patients all became virtual refugees. The teaching was somehow conducted but administrated under very difficult circumstances.

At the time of the first part of this survey the hospital had moved back only about a month earlier. The dormitories had not yet been repaired so the students had to live in damaged houses with mattresses on the floor as their only comfort. In the evening they had to do their studies in poor light in the empty waiting room used by outpatients during the day.

The war affected everybody, including the interviewers. There was a discussion before the survey was conducted as to how their own trauma would influence their ability to perform the interviews. The students did not only come from Bong County; some also had experience of war violence from neighbouring parts of Liberia.

Fortunately we faced no language barriers during the interviews as the students were familiar with the local languages spoken in the area and could translate the questions if needed. English is the official language in Liberia and is spoken also by many illiterate people.

Before the interviews were conducted, lectures and discussion groups were held with the students concerning trauma, psychological reactions and interview technique. After the first part of the survey many of the students reported that the work with the survey had deepened their own knowledge about the war and how badly the civilians had been affected.

Of course the stories told by the women reminded the interviewers of their own war-related traumas and some of them came to me and gave their own testimonies of traumatic events. After several individual and group consultations with the students, I felt still more convinced that their interviewing work had helped them in their own process of trauma-healing and reconciliation. They were anxious to continue to be a part of the process of shedding light on how the war had affected the population, and they were convinced that the provision of support was an important part of the peace process.

The interviewers agreed to take part in a short survey concerning their own war-related traumas, and the findings show many similarities to the testimonies of the women interviewed. Fifteen students took part in the self-reported survey.<sup>66</sup> One of the students had to leave the area due to family reasons during the latter part of the survey.

### ***Findings of war-related traumas among the students***

The students had had to leave their homes between two and seven times (average 4.6 times). Nine of them had lost between one and five close family members as a result of the war, and six of them also mentioned other people dear to them who had been killed. Ten out of the fifteen had personal experience of physical violence from soldiers and/or rebels.

The question of sexual violence was perhaps too sensitive. None of the female students stated that they had been affected by sexual violence committed against them. However, I discovered through personal talks that this group was not entirely spared from this type of violence. Among the eight male students three declared that their wives, fiancées or girlfriends had been affected. It is not exactly known how many of the males lived singly or as a couple. Eight of the fifteen students said that close female relatives, mothers, sisters or sisters-in-law had suffered GBV.

### ***Experience and reflections of the students about the work with the survey***

The students were asked to make a subjective evaluation in a ten-grade scale (with 10 as most difficult) as to whether the work with the interviews was easier or more difficult if the women interviewed were affected by the same trauma as themselves.

The outcome was between 1 and 10 with two men and two women choosing 10 and two men choosing 1. The average was 5.5. It was not possible to see any correlation between declared personal trauma and the position given in the evaluation of difficulties in performing the interviews.

The students made their own comments about their work in the survey and these could be categorized in three parts.

#### **Benefit in coping with their own trauma**

*Although it was difficult to talk to somebody who was affected by the same trauma, these interviews served as a counselling session for me. Through this process I was able actually to express some inner feelings that have been bothering me for a long time. I really enjoyed this survey and its form. (female)*

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66 Questionnaire 3

*It was more difficult for me to go through this survey because when I think of what I passed through I always feel bad and more traumatized, but as I went through the interviews I was released from the trauma. For this reason I extend my appreciation for this survey. (female)*

### **Increased knowledge about the war and a feeling of confidence in handling traumatized people in need.**

*These interviews were a very good exercise for me. It has made me learn a lot about the many dirty things and behaviours that were carried out by those soldiers. I have also learnt how to counsel whenever someone needs my help for counselling. I am well educated now. (female)*

*This interview process has helped me to gain knowledge on how women were affected emotionally, physically and sexually. It gave me the opportunity to console a lot of women that were affected by the war. The situation is very much grievous and pathetic. I pray and hope that some assistance will be provided for them as needed. (male)*

### **Reflections about the needs in the country for the future.**

*I personally learned from all of the interviews I conducted. I also share sympathy with many of the women for the kinds of physical and sexual violence they experienced during the war. I think that the men that committed those crimes that can be identified should not go unpunished. (comment by a male student who had family members who had been traumatized by GBV)*

*I appreciated being a part of this survey, unique in itself. It afforded me to have a personal contact with some women who were greatly affected by the civil war. Their report clearly verify how terrible and badly they were treated and how traumatized they are. Their verbal expressions and physical appearance indicated to me how they are in need of assistance: physically, emotionally and psychologically. I was moved with pity (compassion/sympathy/empathy) in hearing the plight of these women and I pray that God will work through humanitarian individually and in groups to help them out of these traumatic and stressed conditions. (male).*





Pictures 27. The sixteen interviewers in front of the hospital bus.

### ***Promising future***

The students passed their exam about half a year after completing the second part of the survey. They all very quickly got jobs within the medical area in hospitals, clinics and public health projects, not only in Bong County but also in neighbouring counties. After a short period of work quite a few of them continued with supplementary training to become anaesthetic nurses in a newly started school for anaesthetic nurses at Phebe Hospital, the first training in this field in the whole country. A couple of the former students continued their studies to become medical instructors at the nearby Cottingham University.

### ***Comments***

I am very grateful for the involvement of the students in the survey. I also feel deep admiration for the passion they put into the work. The students witnessed how the work helped them to deepen their knowledge of the suffering of the people in Liberia. Through their own reflections and also in our group discussions they expressed not only ideas about trauma-healing efforts but also thoughts concerning the prevention of violence in war.

## **Final remarks by the author**

Women in Liberia, represented by women living in Bong County during the time shortly after the civil war, have given their testimonies of the unbelievable brutality committed against them during the civil war. They have also demonstrated how it is possible to survive such cruelty and cope with its longlasting effects and yet retain some kind of humanity. They have shown the strength of female power in caring for dependants in situations where care has been a big challenge within an unpredictable society. With fragile family units, often kept together by a female head of the family, women in Liberia have paved the way for a possible prosperous future for the country.

I hope that the stories told will be a useful part of the increasing knowledge concerning the role of women's bodies as a weapon of war. It is promising that the United Nations and other organizations have now taken steps to recognize rape as a war crime and have stressed forcefully the responsibility of states to end impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

That women play an important part in building a peaceful society with enduring stability should have been obvious long ago. Through unconventional female initiatives Liberia finally achieved peace after several failed attempts at peace negotiations.

Over the last few years female participation at decision-making levels has been recognized by the UN as an essential requirement for creating stability in a society. With the example of Liberia before us, let us hope that peace efforts in areas still affected by conflict may be viewed with more confidence.

Liberia's conflict has created a unique opportunity to address gender inequality at a fundamental level. The conflict forced a move away from established norms regarding women's role in society. As men became occupied with the fighting, women began to participate more in decision-making processes at home, in their communities and in the political sphere.

Liberia is committed to never again being the source of instability in the region. For peace to be sustainable, policymakers and the people of Liberia seem to have realised the need to build peace in a new way. Women's empowerment for gender equality in peace-building, recovery and development seems to be well recognised by different bodies in Liberia. The Network of Liberian Women Ministers and Parliamentarians has been established with support from UNFPA. Hopefully, the brutal experiences and the subsequent work to build peace involving women's empowerment in Liberia will be a source of knowledge to be implemented in other conflict areas in Africa.



Picture 28. Liberia is committed to 'never again'.

In Liberia it has also been recognised that increased participation by women's associations and networks is an important factor in different aspects of civil society in order to achieve progress towards gender equality.<sup>67</sup> In the process of rebuilding the country, gender equality, ensuring participation by both men and women, will surely result in a more stable society.

Reintegration and rehabilitation of communities is an essential first step in the long process of social reconstruction. When the last stage in my survey was reached, the reintegration of people returning from IDP camps was still an on-going process. The society in Liberia has now gone through the first ten years of the recovery and seems to have achieved the reintegration of returnees, both refugees and ex-combatants. Still a lot of difficulties are left to be faced before civil life fully returns and the wounds from the war are healed. As rape continues to be the most frequently reported serious crime in Liberia, the challenges for the Ministry of Gender and Development and associated networks are still large.

The UN action 'Get Cross! - Stop Rape Now' still needs to be spread over the world. Anybody can join and, through the action, contribute to bringing awareness of gender based violence in the world.

I am deeply thankful to the women who have shared their testimonies with me in person or through the sixteen dedicated student nurses who were the link to most of the women interviewed.

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67 UNCEF, 2012

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## **Appendix**

### **Acronyms**

#### **Questionnaires**

Questionnaire for the quantitative survey for women in Bong County June-July 2004

Questionnaire for the semi-quantitative survey in Nov. 2004 – Jan. 2005

Issues to be covered in in-depth interviews in November-December 2004

Questionnaire for interviews December 2004 with the interviewers taking part in the survey.

Issues to be covered at the follow-up interviews in Bong County 2007

#### **Letters of invitation/recommendations**

Letter of recommendations to town chiefs and camp leaders 2004

Letter of invitation 2005 for continuing the study started the year before. From the Medical Director of Phebe Hospital late Dr. Emmanuel Sandoe.

Letter of invitation from the Honourable Minister of Health and Social Welfare in Liberia Dr. Walter Gwenigale 2006

Letter of invitation from Associated Professor Tabe Freeman, College of Medicine, University of Liberia, 2006



## ***Acronyms***

CCC	Concerned Christian Community
D&C	dilatation and curettage
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
GBV	Gender Based Violence
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
LAMCO	Liberian American Swedish Mining Company
LCL	Lutheran Church in Liberia
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MCH	Mother and Child Health
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
STI	Sexual Transmitted Infection
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy
UMDAC	Computer services unit for the University of Umeå, Sweden
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

UNMIL United Nations Mission in Liberia

WFP World Food Programme

WHO World Health Organization

WIPNET Women in Peacebuilding Network

WRI Women's Rights International

## Questionnaires

### Questionnaire quantitative survey June - July 2004

Villages	IDP	OPD				
1. Age	15-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-80	
2. Original county:	Lofa	Bong	Nimba	others		
3. Single:	lives with family members		does not live with family members			
Married:	lives with husband		does not live with husband			
4. Years in school:	0	1-4	5-8	more than 8		
5. Number of times you were forced to leave your home during the war?	0	1	2	3	more	
6. Have any major belongings been stolen?						yes no
7. Was your house destroyed by someone during the war?						yes no
8. Were any family members killed during the war?	0	1	2	3	more	
9. Were any family members wounded during the war?	0	1	2	3	more	
10. Did the war situation prevent you from getting medical care?						yes no
If yes: has this had any longstanding influence on your health?						yes no
11. Have you experienced any physical violence against you during the war?						
From a family member	0	1	2	3	more	
From a stranger/soldier/rebel	0	1	2	3	more	
12. Have you experienced any sexual abuse during the war period?						yes no
If yes: once repeated						
13. If yes did you get any physical problems that have remained?						yes no
14. Did you become pregnant as a result of the sexual abuse?						yes no
Do you have a child/children as a result of the sexual abuse						yes no



**Questionnaire for a semi-quantitative survey in Nov. 2004 – Jan. 2005**

**Interviewer.....**

**Interview number.....**

**Hospital IDP**

**Village**

**Interview in privacy..... Not in privacy (who was present).....**

**1. Age: 15-19 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-80**

**2. Original county:.....Tribe.....Religion:.....**

3. Civil status:	Living with nuclear family	Living with extended family.	Not living with any family memb.
Not married			
married living with husband			
married not living with husband			
Widow			
Divorced			
not married but living permanently with a man			
Other social situation:			

**4. Years in primary school (0 - 9)..... additional school no yes**

**What kind of additional school.....For how long time.....**

**What is the reason for you not having gone further with your education?**

- a) Not encouraged by your family
- b) Needed for work at home
- c) The family economy did not allow this
- d) You did not want
- e) There is/was no school for further education close where you live
- f) School was closed due to the war
- g) You moved away from the school due to the war
- h) Pregnancy
- i) Other reasons.....





What was your reaction/action.....  
.....  
.....

How did this affect your health .....

Did anybody try to help you ? .....Who ?.....How ?  
.....  
.....

12. Experience of sexual abuse from soldier/rebel during the war period?                      no                      yes

How many times.....When did it happen.....

How many soldiers did take part in this each time.....

What were your reactions/actions.....  
.....  
.....

Where anybody witness to the sexual abuse?                      no                      yes.

Who.....

Did she/he/they try to defend you ?                      no                      yes

Did you get pregnant                      no                      yes

Did you get a child                      no                      yes

If you did not get a child – what happened with your pregnancy?.....

What feelings did you have for your child at delivery.....  
.....  
.....

How is the health situation for your child.....  
.....

What are your feelings for your child now.....



.....  
.....  
Did you get any physical problems after the sexual violence: .....

.....  
.....  
What have your psychological reactions been after the sexual violence? How do you feel now?  
.....  
.....  
.....

13. Experience of sexual abuse from somebody else than a soldier/rebel?      no      yes

How many times.....      When did it happen.....

What were your reactions/actions .....

.....  
.....  
Where anybody witness to the sexual abuse ?    no /yes    Who.....

Did she/he/they try to defend you .....

.....  
Did you get pregnant    no      yes

Did you get a child    no      yes

If you did not get a child – what happened with your pregnancy?.....

What feelings did you have for your child at delivery.....  
.....  
.....

How is the health situation for your child.....

What are your feelings for your child now.....  
.....  
.....

Did you get any physical problems after the sexual violence:.....

.....  
.....  
What have your psychological reactions been after the sexual violence? How do you feel now? .....

.....  
.....

14. Have there been situations when there was a threat of sexual abuse but it never occurred? no    yes

What/who prevented the incidence .....

15. Did the living situation you were facing during the war period force you to have sex with somebody who is/was not dear to you. no    yes

Why did you come into this relationship.....

.....  
.....

Have you tried/ succeeded to stop the relationship? How? If you haven't tried – why not ?

.....  
.....

Did you get pregnant no    yes

Did you get a child/children no    yes

If you did not get a child – what happened with your pregnancy?.....

How is the health situation for your child/children.....

.....  
.....

How are your present feelings for your child/children .....

.....

16. Have you had an illegal abortion done no    yes

Were you supported by your family to make the abortion no    yes

How was the abortion done.....

Who performed the abortion.....

Did you get any health problems after your abortion: .....

.....

.....

17. Do you know about anybody who died due to compl. after an illegal abortion? no yes

18. How have the sexual activities that you have been forced into (question 12 - 16) affected your relationship with your family members? .....

.....

.....

19. Have you had any possibility to talk and express your feelings about what has happened to you? With a friend/family member no yes

Who.....

Are you satisfied with the support.....

With a professional person no yes Who.....

For how long time/how many times did you get support ? How has the support been done ?

.....

Are you satisfied/not satisfied with the support.....

.....

Would you like some additional support ? What kind of support ? From whom (family, friend, neighbour, village, government, church, NGO:s?) .....

.....

.....

20. To get an idea about your current psychological health could you please answer the following questions:

a) Do you often have headache no yes

b) Is your appetite poor no yes

- |   |    |     |
|---|----|-----|
| c) Do you sleep badly   | no | yes |
| d) Are you easily frightened  | no | yes |
| e). Do your hands shake   | no | yes |
| f). Do you feel nervous, tense or worried                                       | no | yes |
| g). Is your digestions poor   | no | yes |
| h). Do you have trouble thinking clearly  | no | yes |
| i) Do you feel unhappy  | no | yes |
| j) Do you cry more than usual   | no | yes |
| k) Do you find it difficult to enjoy your daily activities                      | no | yes |
| l) Do you find it difficult to make decisions                                   | no | yes |
| m) Is your daily work suffering   | no | yes |
| n) Are you unable to play a useful part in life                                 | no | yes |
| o) Have you lost interest in things   | no | yes |
| p) Do you feel as if you are a worthless person                                 | no | yes |
| q) Has the thought of ending your life been on your mind                        | no | yes |
| r) Do you feel tired all the time   | no | yes |
| s) Do you have uncomfortable feelings in your stomach                           | no | yes |
| t) Are you easily tired   | no | yes |
| <br>  |    |     |
| 21. Has the interview been a step in counselling for you                        | no | yes |
| 22. Are you willing to give a more detailed interview about your life situation | no | yes |

If yes: Name.....Address/ward.....

Knowledge in English: limited / good enough for an interview.

## Issues to be covered in in-depth interviews in Nov.-Dec. 2004

Personal about the woman                      Age, family, language, ethnical group

Life before the war

Child-hood, family-history, maintenance, living-situation, food, education

When the war come                      First signs.

What happened in the village? Relationship to neighbours, social net-works, neighbours becoming enemies?

The home, relatives, the family, children. Separations, maltreatment, imprisonment

The house

Resistance

The outrage

The raping, sexual assault

Physical abuse

Threat

The perpetrator

Witnesses to the abuse (husband, children)

Rescue

The way back

Coming home, to what?

Pregnancies after raping or sexual assault (miscarriage, abortion, children)

Injuries, remaining detriment after physical and sexual assault

Medical care

Experience about rehabilitation

Support/not support from husband/families/friends

What have been supportive?

Belief, the church

Opinion about reconciliation, the feelings

Life today

Daily living, maintenance, housing, networks

Memories

Flash backs

The suffering today

PTSS

Actual sexual life

**Questionnaire for interviews December 2004 with the interviewers taking part in the survey.**

Interviewer..... Name..... Male/female

I have been forced to leave my home.....times

In my family (parents, sisters/brothers, grandparents, wife/husband/fiancée, children) ..... people have been killed during the war.

Someone else dear to me has been killed.....

Have you experienced any physical violence during the war ? no yes

Have you been affected by any sexual abuse during the war ?

personally no yes

your wife/fiancée/girlfriend no yes

someone in your family (mother, grandmother, sisters, sisters in law, mother in law) no yes

Can you try to evaluate on a scale 1-10 if it was more difficult or easier to talk to somebody if she was affected by the some trauma as you have been affected by.

1 means easy, 5-6 means indifferent and 10 means that it was very difficult for you to talk about this specific issue.

easy difficult

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Personal comments .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

## Issues to be covered at the follow-up interviews in Liberia Jan. 2007

1. Reflections about the previous interview
2. How is your life today?
  - a. Close family-members
    - Support from them
    - Responsibilities for them
  - b. Way to earn living
  - c. Daily life
3. Reflections today about war-trauma
  - a. Still affected by a psychological trauma
  - b. Remaining physical trauma
  - c. Acceptance
  - d. Coping mechanism
  - e. Reflections about the general war trauma
4. Views about the future
  - a. Private
  - b. Community based



*Letters of invitation/recommendation.*

**Letter of recommendations to towns-chiefs and camp-leaders 2004**



**PHEBE HOSPITAL & SCHOOL OF NURSING**

P.O. BOX 10-1046 1000 MONROVIA 10, LIBERIA, WEST AFRICA  
Email: [phebe@phebehospital.usps.com](mailto:phebe@phebehospital.usps.com)

Tuesday, July 06, 2004

To: All local village chiefs, and  
All IDP camp administrators  
Bong County, Liberia

This letter is sent as an introduction to you of Dr. Margareta Sidenvall, visiting Gynecologist. She is here in her capacity as doctor conducting some research for Phebe Hospital concerning the affect of the war on local women. She wishes to interview a number of women for this purpose.

Please accord her your full support and cooperation as she performs this work on behalf of Phebe Hospital & School of Nursing. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Blessings to you and hope for a peaceful Liberia.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emmanuel M. Sandoe MD.' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Emmanuel M. Sandoe MD.  
Medical Director/Bong County Health Officer

EMScmejl

**Letter of invitation 2005 to continue the study started the year before. From the Medical Director of Phebe Hospital late Dr. Emmanuel Sandoe.**

From:	Emmanuel M. Sandoe <emsandoe@uuplus.com>
Sent:	9 May 2005 20:30:30
To:	Margareta@uuplus.com, Sidenvall\@uuplus.com, msidenvall@hotmail.com
Copy:	Eva@uuplus.com, Jensen@uuplus.com, Eva_Jensen@elca.org, "David@uuplus.com, P.@uuplus.com, Jones"@uuplus.com, dpjones@uuplus.com, "Maria@uuplus.com, Lundberg"@uuplus.com, Maria.Lundberg@svenskakyrkan.se, "Sumoward@uuplus.com, E.@uuplus.com, Harris"@uuplus.com, sumoward@yahoo.com
Subject:	LETTER OF INVITATION FOR DR. MARGARETA

Dear Dr. Sidenvall,

Greetings from Phebe Hospital in Liberia. This is a letter from the Administration of Phebe inviting you to help at Phebe for six weeks in the department of Obstetrics/Gynecology in October/September 2005. As you are aware, Liberia suffered a 14 years of civil war which destroyed most of our health institutions. This prevented most of our child bearing mothers access to health care there by undergoing complicated deliveries by themselves or at the mercy of Traditional birth attendants. Many of them were left with defects such as VVF, RVF, and other gynecological problems that need gynecologist attention.

Phebe would also want you to continue the study you started on "Effect of the war on the women in Liberia".

We stand ready to support you in this study as it will help us as an institution and the country in taking care of our war affected women. Your immediate supervisors are the Chief of Medical Staff/Medical Director. We hope our request will be accepted by you.

Thank you and the people of Sweden for always assisting us. We look forward to see you.

God Bless.

Emmanuel M. Sandoe, MD.

Phebe Hospital & School Of Nursing

**Letter of invitation from the Honourable Minister of Health and Social Welfare in Liberia  
Dr. Walter Gwenigale 2006**

**Ulf Högberg**

---

**Från:** wtgwenigale@uuplus.com för wtgwenigale [wtgwenigale@uuplus.com]  
**Skickat:** den 18 mars 2006 04:29  
**Till:** ulf.hogberg@obgyn.umu.se  
**Ämne:** Re: research in Liberia

Professor Ulf Hogberg  
University of Umea  
Sweden

Dear Professor Hogerg:

Please accept my greetings from Phebe Hospital & School of Nursing and the Ministry of Health & Social Welfare in Liberia. My name is Walter T. Gwenigale. I have served at Phebe Hospital since 1973. Though I am now the Minister of Health & Social Welfare in the government of our woman President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, I continue to go to Phebe Hospital on weekends to help perform special surgical procedures there.

I write this letter to commend to you Dr. Margareta Sidenvall, a Swedish physician who has brought joy and happiness to many rural Liberian women by repairing their vesicovagina fistulae (VVF's). Twice as a volunteer to Phebe Hospital, she has not only brought her surgical skills to us, she has shown us true Christian love through her kindness to her patients and very good working relationship with her Liberian colleagues.

In addition to doing C-sections and repairing VVF's, Margareta has also investigated violence against women in the prolonged Liberian civil war. I have discussed her research project with her and like what she is doing. I kindly ask that you encourage Dr. Sidenvall with your support for her research so she can conclude it successfully.

Sincerely yours,

Walter T. Gwenigale, MD  
Still surgeon at Phebe Hospital &  
Minister of Health for Liberia

Letter of invitation from Associated Professor Tabeh Freeman, College of Medicine,  
University of Liberia, 2006

1/04 2006 03:25 FAX 231 226747

W H O LIBERIA

001



A. M. Dogliotti College Of Medicine  
**UNIVERSITY OF LIBERIA**  
MONROVIA, LIBERIA  
WEST AFRICA

April 10, 2006

OFFICE OF THE DEAN

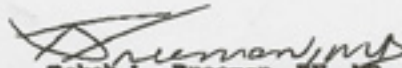
Ref.: S10/TLF/jsn/'06

Fax: 004690138977

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN"

I hereby certify that the Department of Public Health & Community Medicine, A.M. Dogliotti College of Medicine, University of Liberia, is supporting and in the process of establishing a scientific collaboration for the research process, women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence during the civil war in Liberia - experiences, health consequences and trauma healing with the Department of Epidemiology & Public Health Sciences, Public Health and Clinical Medicine, Umea University, Sweden. I have met with Dr. Margareta Sidenvall and discussed the project and look forward to a collaboration.

Kind regards.

  
Tabeh L. Freeman, RN, MD, MPH  
ASSOC. PROF. & ACTING DEAN





The author Margareta Sidenvall making the 'Get Cross' gesture to join the UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflicts, 'Get Cross!' - Stop Rape Now. Photo Ragnar Sidenvall

Margareta Sidenvall is a Swedish gynaecologist who has been working with female health issues in several countries. She first came to Liberia in 2004 when the country was starting to recover from a devastating civil war that had ravaged the country for the previous 14 years. During the years 2004 – 2007 Margareta Sidenvall made surveys in Bong County in the north-east part of Liberia to assess how that civil war had affected women. More than 1300 women were interviewed about their war traumas with emphasis on sexual violence.

The book is a useful complement to shed light on the position of women in war and how women can survive horrifying situations while still taking care of their dependants. In the recovery of the country it is obvious that women in Liberia are starting to demand their rights in society.