

Stopping rape as an object of war

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Northeastern University assistant professor of sociology, Silvia Dominguez.
Photo by Craig Bailey

(PhysOrg.com) -- It is a disturbing truth that sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV) is used as a war tactic in developing nations. Silvia Dominguez, assistant professor of sociology at Northeastern University, recently visited Liberia to help develop a national mental health policy related to SGBV.

It is a disturbing truth that sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV) is used as a war tactic in developing nations. Silvia Dominguez, assistant professor of sociology at Northeastern University, recently visited Liberia to help develop a national mental health policy related to SGBV. Here, she discusses Liberia's current climate and offers examples of changes that can help prevent this violence and heal its victims.

Can you describe Liberia's history of sex- and gender-based violence?

It is a significant problem in all societies recovering from serious armed conflict. These cultures have changed through militarization, which affects gender-based relations, increasing the likelihood of sexual- and gender-based violence.

Since the systematic raping of women is now a war strategy, the problem has been aggravated. This not only involves systematically traumatizing victims but also the targeting of women who are identified as pillars of communities. In this way, not only women and children are affected, but also the communities in which they live. This makes recovery from armed conflict more difficult.

As a post-conflict society, the majority of women and girls in Liberia are victims of SGBV. While rapists were ostracized in the community before the armed conflict, norms about sexual conduct and relationships with women and children have changed, and now it is the women and children who, as victims, are ostracized in the community.

SGBV curtails the education of girls since teachers are among the top perpetrators. Girls attending school are at significant risk from SGBV. As a result, many parents try to marry off their young girls before they are raped. Of course, this also curtails the education of girls.

You recently spent time in Liberia to help develop a mental health policy. Your focus was on SGBV. What were some of your recommendations?

Liberia has two systems of justice, the community system and the legal system. Currently, there is more trust in the community system than in the legal system, but the country is trying to improve the legal system to encourage greater trust. One thing they are doing is creating a separate court that deals specifically with SGBV cases. They are also training the police and those who work in the court system to improve both their level of professionalism in dealing with cases of SGBV and the way they

gather evidence for these cases.

Mental health treatment must be provided according to the severity of symptoms following SGBV. The types of psychological treatment currently used in Liberia are appropriate only for people who have low-level symptoms. New programs of treatment need to be implemented where specially trained clinicians work to empower the survivors of SGBV and connect them with others in their community. These programs also have to include the entire family of the SGBV victim, since they are all affected.

In addition, there should be codes of conduct that lay out the rules of correct behavior across gender in a manner that guarantees the rights of women, children and men. These should include mandated reporting policies. When perpetrators of SGBV are reported and convicted, they must be mandated to enter treatment and service programs. Social workers must acquire the clinical skills necessary to be able to work with both mandated and voluntary clients, as well as with women and girls who have been victims of SGBV. Steps must be taken toward the development of a forensic clinic responsible for teaching, treating, evaluating and researching the intersection of [mental health](#) and the law.

Safety zones in schools are essential, given the fact that teachers are among the top three sexual abusers, and that girls require safety in order to remain in school. Liberia must work towards the establishment of zero tolerance policy on the violations of human rights, including rape and sexual exploitation in schools.

The Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia, who spearheaded the introduction of the SGBV court and crime unit, is also identifying and training men to reach out and train other men in their communities on SGBV. The emphasis on men is a necessary component of creating a cultural change in normative behaviors that moves away from violence

against women and children.

What changes must be implemented in order to see positive change in post-conflict nations?

In times of armed conflict, NGOs play a pivotal role in securing the continuation of basic services that safeguard the population. As a result, people become dependent on NGOs for survival. In post-conflict societies, these NGOs need to change the role they play in the nation, to empowerment. This is difficult since the population has become dependent, but it is necessary. It also will aid in the systematic empowerment of the entire society. Funding organizations need to insist on NGOs not just delivering services but also developing the capacity of the native population to take care of their own needs.

Provided by Northeastern University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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