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Political Economy of Wartime Violence Against Women: The Case of Liberia

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DRAFT for discussion

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Abstract:

Intimate partner violence, which is also wartime violence against women, is an age-old problem across the world. In Liberia, it is still a considerable problem, incredibly prevalent and remains the most widely reported crime affecting hundreds of thousands of women and girls in every socio-economic group. It is the critical barrier to achieving the objective of equality. This study aims to describe the duality of experience and dynamics of intimate partner violence of rural Liberian women and girls with the emphasis on local political-economic processes, armed conflicts, and other crucial crises through structural inequalities in Liberian society. It is hoped that the experiences of the women and girls in this study will foster dialogue on promptly and effectively addressing the wellbeing of women and girls by eliminating all forms of violence in intimate partner relationships.

Introduction

Conflict-related violence against women and girls has been referred to as “one of history’s great silences” (Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, 2005, cited in Ward 2005 page 67.) In December 1989, civil war broke out in Liberia, resulting in different forms of conflict-related violence perpetrated on women and girls. Violence against women and girls has been a predominant feature in all societies and more so in Liberia, where women do not share the same social and economic rights that men do. There are existing and extreme forms of violence such as rape, sexual harassment, loss of livelihood, forced trafficking, maternal deaths and early marriages contribute to an exceedingly pervasive violation of human rights that has been increasing for the past two

decades. According to the Liberian Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection 2018 statistics, more than 500 girls are genitally mutilated, more than 200 girls are forced into prostitution and more than 500 women are physically abused by their intimate partners every year in a population of less than five million. (Liberia Ministry of Gender 2019). As the availability of resources evolves, an increasing number of post-conflict local and international NGOs are taking up the issue of violence against women and girls in post-conflict Liberia. Regardless of these efforts, programmes that address violence are grossly inadequate compared to the scope of the problem.

The protection of victims and survivors remains limited to non-existent while prevention initiatives are often ad hoc, and the justice system remains ineffective and often biased. In many instances, lack of government resources to support short-term funding and shifting of donor priorities have undermined sustainability and impact the ability to implement the comprehensive services required to combat violence against women and girls. However, the creation of new challenges for women and girls through economic globalisation and development provide opportunities for advancing women's economic equality and independence.

This study highlights global political economic processes and their effect on the prevalence of violence against women and girls at all levels within Liberia, with the emphasis on intimate partner violence against rural women through structural inequalities.

Objectives

The study aims to provide an understanding of the extent of intimate heterosexual partner violence against rural women and girls, considering the political economy situation in wartime violence; linking structural inequalities as well as political-economic processes from household to transnational levels within Liberia.

The specific objective of this study is to describe ways in which intimate partner violence affects rural women's and girl's contributions to the local economy and shapes economic processes that continue to make women and girls more vulnerable to violence.

Methodology

The use of an ethnographic approach as an effective tool to identify dominant socio-cultural discourses was used in this study because of its potential to highlight different aspects of a complex social phenomenon (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, pp 242-243). This study focuses on structural inequalities, patriarchy and political processes of intimate partner violence in the Liberian context. The study was conducted in districts within Montserrado County, which hosts Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, where issues of inequalities are often reinforced. In an effort to gather the data, unstructured interviews were conducted with groups of women including, rural women leaders, marketers and other rural women. The method of frequency and percentage analysis was adopted. Participation in this study was by voluntary informed consent and results were communicated to the participants. Observation of social structures was also employed to validate findings.

This study was informed by context-sensitive application and analysed in alignment with feminist theories that analyse structures of power that oppress women and girls. Consistent with other studies of violence against women and girls, this study also found that violence against women and girls continues to remain prevalent in Liberia. In-depth interviews and observations were conducted in three different communities. The interviews were conducted in person with six women and girls between the ages of 15-60, who live in rural communities; two widows, three married women and one unmarried. The women were interviewed individually in their own time in secure locations, having to take account of concerns of their personal safety. The analysis primarily involved the desegregation of data and the identification of a broad range of structural inequality beliefs, attitudes and practices adhering to the grounded theory of this study. Selected data was ultimately synthesised into a coherent conceptual description.

Findings/Results

Throughout these communities, the prevalent issue that kept being voiced was that 'violence against them by men was the norm'. For instance, there were repeated comments such as: *'when your man beat you it's discipline'*; *'it is not a crime for our husband to mistreat you'*; *'it's our culture'*.

However, over time and with staying and working with women and girls in different localities, the narratives changed, especially when trust and rapport was built. It was then that these women and girls opened up about their experiences, as detailed below.

Garmai is a 53-year-old woman and high school graduate with four children. She lives in Todee, a rural area in Montserrado that is involved in farming and harvesting rice and is a major supplier of rice which is Liberia's local and most consumed food. As a farmer, Garmai works as a supervisor on the farms owned by a company that cultivates and packages rice. On her free day, once a week, she sells foodstuff at the local market. For more than three decades, Garmai has continued to experience physical and psychological abuse from her husband. She explained that at the age of 17, her parents forcefully had her married off to generate money aimed at sending her younger brother abroad. Her husband is mostly unemployed and spends most of his days at home, sometimes working as a wine tapper. He beats her all the time over everything. She stressed that his doing so is an expression of his anger. This implies that her husband is unable to control himself and vents his anger on her, causing injuries preventing her from earning a living both from her job and her mini business. Whenever there is confusion, whether or not she is guilty, he harms her through physical aggression (beating, slapping, kicking) and psychologically. Whenever he beats her, she becomes unable to work at her farm supervising job, which results in low harvesting, scarcity of rice on the market and loss of her salary for the time of her absence. It is also difficult for her to make market sales when he hits her. She has lost an eye from his physical violence, as was noted during the interview (June 29, 2019).

Another participant explained that she is currently in her second marriage- in both of her marriages, both her husbands have always maltreated her. Korto, who is 49 years old, is illiterate and lives in lower Montserrado. During the war, there was tribal conflict there and Korto, then 19 years old, said both her parents died from bullet wounds, and she was left with her aunt and her aunt's husband. At a checkpoint, in order to pass through, a soldier insisted on them giving her to him or he would kill them. Her aunt resisted and

the soldier, along with other soldiers, gang raped her aunt to death. Her uncle then gave her to the soldier, and he was let go. Though not through any formal or legal way, she was forced to become his wife. The soldier was an amputee and threatened to kill Korto if she attempted to escape, so she remained with him to protect her life. Soon after the war, she began selling dried goods, but her business later collapsed as her husband became a drug addict and squandered all the money, he demanded from her after each day of sales. She said that one year after he died, her ex-husband's elder brother claimed her as his wife and began mistreating her. At first, she used to work as a maid to feed her family while her husband worked at a palm oil mine, but he, unfortunately, spends his wages on alcohol and so depended on hers. However, she managed to establish a market table using palm branches to earn enough to pay off some of their financial debts, but this was destroyed by her husband – making her walk around to do her business while he collects whatever money she generates. Similarly, to the previous respondent, Korto's husband beats her all the time and even worse whenever he wants to have sex with her, especially when she does not give consent. When he beats her, she often becomes so ill that she has to be admitted to the hospital, making her unable to carry out business from which she is supposed to earn enough to feed the family. The consistent physical violence that has been inflicted on Korto, leaves her unable to explore economic opportunities or manage money and so she remains burdened with debt. She said she idolised her husband as a god because that is the way she has been disciplined.

In another community, a 32-year-old woman, Korpo, who lives in deplorable conditions at the extreme edge of a riverbank experienced rape and torture. She recounts how, in the height of the April 6, 1996 Liberia civil war, she was kidnapped by soldiers who raped her all the time. Pointing to scars on her body, she explained that she had been a sex slave for many soldiers at their residences. On several occasions she fell pregnant, but miscarried due to constant torture. Currently, Korpo lives with her husband who constantly bullies and violates her rights, blaming her for what happened to her. Due to her wounds, she is unable to work and is dependent on her husband. She feels that all hope is lost as she juggles with survival each day, hoping for her neighbours' sympathy to provide her with a meal, as she lacks the ability to be financially independent. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she disclosed that she really wants to open her own shop but she cannot, and it hurts her so much.

Another woman with maimed feet conveyed how every time she refuses to have sex with her husband, he calls upon members of the town leadership to tie her up, while he beats her mercilessly. For example, one day while they were quarrelling, her husband waved a knife across her throat and stood glaring at her while she bled profusely. She was so scared and thought she would die. She once attempted reporting the ill-treatment to the police as she was terrified and had bruises all over her body. Unfortunately, the police sent for her husband and without investigating, instructed him to take her back home saying, "go and settle it at home." The police also said for her to "learn to respect your husband, or else you will continue to suffer." The justice system as a structure not only fails to address gendered violence but continues to allow it to be perpetrated. She mentioned that she cannot leave him because they have children. A year ago, with financial support from a family member, she successfully established a loan business for market women in the community but was unable to sustain it due to her husband's abusive behaviour. Today, along with her two children, they are daily street beggars who go begging from community to community to survive.

Ma Kou, a widow, experienced verbal and physical abuse from her partner for 19 years until his demise. She is a teacher by profession, but her husband stopped her from working, despite her many pleas. She explained that she used to sneak out to a nearby school, but one day her husband found out. He humiliated her in front of the students and dared her never to do so again because doing such a job is not for women but men. She had money saved from her previous income and planned to buy shares in Orange, a local GSM Company. However, her husband demanded and misused the money that she had saved for years. She gave her only daughter to another family to look after. This stress caused her to have a mental breakdown and stopped her from associating with others in her community, and now she cannot afford to fulfil her dreams and ambitions.

One of the community women leaders, a widow, echoed the sentiment that many of the women in the community ‘always disrespect their husbands’. She stated that frustratingly, her peers do so sometimes by refusing to sleep (have sex) with their husbands, by going places and staying longer than expected, leaving their men lonely and so forth. She added that these are rules for their communities that she thinks women, including herself, must not violate.

In one of the communities visited, it was found that there is a group of elders who are charged with the responsibility of conflict resolution. They placed lower value on conflict affecting women, which increases the likelihoods of women experiencing violence.

As a researcher, to observe the daily lives of the respondents, I stayed in the communities of two of the women participants for over a week in each. Also, visits to the nearby social institutions for conflict resolution, such as the police stations in two of those communities, case files samples revealed a wide range of allegations along a spectrum of intimate partner violence and abuse, where unfair justice rendered.

The study found that some men feel insecure because their women work and earn money instead of them. However, some women respondents seem to remain in these abusive relationships based on the uncertainty of security in their lives and because they are afraid that they may be harmed whenever they began to think seriously of leaving. While some respondents remained with husbands based on financial needs, others preferred to stay with their partners for the sake of their children. Findings also showed that the beliefs of men maltreating their women for whatever reason(s) was considered a norm for some respondents and the communities, reinforcing patriarchy.

Discussion/Analysis

It seems that women generally experience emotional, social, sexual and physical violence during the war and more even after the conflict ended. For women in rural communities that reinforce patriarchal practices and beliefs, it is common for this to contribute significantly to women living in extreme poverty and making them unable to participate in their local economies. Regardless of the different levels of domination, these acts also affect morbidity and mortality. It is important to note the extent to which the women interviewed emphasised ‘fear’ as a way to characterise their relationships.

The respondents stressed that their abusive partners have disrupted their ability to participate in local economic processes by intentionally failing to provide money or not

allowing them access to money, socially controlling their mobility, as well as using physical and sexual violence- all of which have enormous economic implications. Among those respondents who reported experiencing disruption from work, one said she was unable to establish a business for herself and another reported to have lost her job because of the abuse. Yet another one missed work for days and was unable to make sufficient earnings. One survivor spoke of injustice from a structural institution which, rather than helping her, supported her abuser to inflict more abuse on her. The women in this study faced structural violence from the family, repressive governance structures, patriarchal legal justice systems and weak rule of law at the community level, all of which are heavily androcentric.

From a radical feminist perspective, the collectivist nature of the Liberian culture in which the needs of the family and family values take precedence over the needs of women as individuals, play an integral role in women remaining in abusive relationships that not only affects their financial wellbeing but the affordability of their basic needs. The constant occurrence of the violence leads to lasting emotional, mental and physical trauma to women and to those children who witness it. The women are denied their fundamental rights. Their mental health is ruined by patriarchal structures, there are direct costs including expenditure on treatment and social services as well as indirect costs including days of work lost leading to reduced productivity and the resultant impact on the overall economy.

Although the different forms of violence vary in nature, the women face insurmountable obstacles from their intimate partners, ranging from abandonment and low self-esteem to war waged on their bodies. Many of these women hesitate to seek help while those who battle against it are often difficult to identify. Radical feminism would argue that the occurrence of this violence, especially sexual violence, also hinders women from contributing to their local economy, lowering their economic potential and making them unproductive and dependent (Beechey 1977). This is evident from the participants' responses which together indicate that abusive relationships financially affect them and make it difficult for them to obtain or retain employment or to build economic security.

Communities that do not resolve violence are suppressing female power, autonomy in and outside the home as well as financial stability. Their men control every part of these women's lives through mental torture and physical abuse. A look at the causes leading to many broken women and problems within society at large, by themselves indicate that in addition to intimate partner violence, that of institutions including family, community leadership, police stations, etc., have stalled women's economic progress and stability. Three of the respondents interviewed, expressed different visions for their future, all of which emphasised economic independence and personal safety, with one desiring to establish and own a store while another desired to enjoy a life where she is financially capable of providing for her children and enabling them to thrive.

As evident from this study, the discussions established the significant negative impact that intimate partner violence has on the dynamics of the local economy, the economic costs of inaction and the urgent need for a systematic response by local policy/decision makers as well as civil society organisations in addressing violence against women.

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