THE WORST FORMS
OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN LIBERIA
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 About the project

“Engaging Children and Youth as Partners in Preventing Violence against Children” is a regional project implemented in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia, three border-sharing post conflict countries in West Africa. In Liberia, the project is implemented by Search for Common Ground in coalition with Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). The regional project is financially supported by the European Union.

The global objective is to contribute to the eradication of all sorts of violence against children. The project, implemented between 2014 and 2015, has three specific objectives:

1. Identify the worst forms of violence against children and understand the cumulative impact of current approaches addressing them;

2. Utilize children and youth recommendations to influence country-level programmatic and policy actions to involve children and youth;

3. Mainstream findings at a societal level to enable communities to prevent worse forms of violence.

The cross-cutting objective is to build capacity of children and youth to advocate for their needs and
prevent violence against their peers.

The 18-month project engages youth in identifying the worst forms of violence against children and youth and evaluating the cumulative impact of current approaches addressing them in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. To do this, youth in each of the three countries were engaged in the implementation of the three phases for the project. For the initial phase, youth led an action-based analysis, discussing directly with youth and children\(^1\) on their views of the worst forms of violence faced in their daily lives, leading to the production of this report. For phase 2 and 3 of the project, youth, with Search for Common Ground and local partners, will utilize their findings to create concrete alternatives to violence and use communication tools, such as radio, to mainstream the findings at a societal level and engage a wider-audience in the discourse of the findings. The outcomes of this project will serve to influence country-level programmatic and policy actions to involve children and youth and to enable communities, themselves, to prevent worst forms of violence.

1.2 Research objectives and methodology

The research aims at contributing to a better understanding of violence against children and youth in Liberia. Based on the youth and children perspective on violence, this research intends to feed and complete the existing data and analysis. It aims also to offer a new insight on cause and consequence of violence in taking into account children and youth understandings of violence. This research also sheds light on children and youth capacities to identify the causes of violence but more on their capacities to propose solutions to prevent violence.

Six research questions drive this study:

- What forms of violence affect children and youth in their communities?
- What meaning do children and youth ascribe to violence at the individual, familial, community, and societal levels?
- What are the consequences of violence at individual, familial and community level?
- What are the risks and protective factors, including protection mechanisms, for violence against children?
- What role can children and youth play in mitigating violence against children?
- Who do children and youth feel most safe with to support them so they can advocate for themselves?

Participatory Action-Research and the Listening and Learning Approach

The research is based on an innovative methodology grounded in participatory action-research. The research is entirely conducted by young researchers aged from 17 to 34 years old, who are technically advised and supported by adults. The youth are then fully engaged as genuine actors of the research. As such, they use their research findings to build a comprehensive analysis of violence against children and youth and utilize

\(^1\) Children are considered for this study as any child between 0 to 18 years old while the definition of youth is any individual from the age of 18 to 35.
their research as a means to positively influence social change.

The Listening and Learning (L&L) approach is used, and is based on conversations as a data collection tool. The conversation is a free verbal exchange based on trust and mutual comprehension. Conversations are like everyday conversations between two or three persons who are communicating with sincerity and respect. They are based on mutual comprehension and self-identification between the researcher and the child or youth. This means that researchers give the opportunity to children interviewed to guide the conversation and to use their own words to explain a violent situation as they experience it. It creates a framework in which children and youth feel confident and secure to speak about sensitive issues. Consequently, the research is based on a qualitative approach in which children and youth perceptions of violence constitute the central argument.

1.3 Research findings

A. FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN LIBERIA

The research was conducted in 6 counties namely: Lofa, Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Montserrat, Grand Cape Mount and Nimba County. 667 conversations were conducted with children and youth aged from 10-35 years old, female and male equally represented.

The research identified five broad categories of violence, which were self-identified as the worst forms of violence experienced by children and youth in Liberia:

- Domestic violence
- Gender-based violence
- Child exploitation
- Violence at school
- Social violence

**Domestic violence** was the most frequently mentioned form of violence against children and youth during the conversations. Beating, harmful punishments and denying right to education were identified by children and youth as violence against them mainly performed by their parents or guardians. **Gender-based violence** as a broad category brings together several forms of violence such as rape, sexual harassment, early marriage or prostitution of which girls and young women are the main victims. **Child exploitation** understood as both child labor and child trafficking came across many conversations and was often underlined as the main factor for not attending school. **Violence at school** takes several forms such as sexual violence, harsh punishments, bribery, or work in exchange for grades. Violence at school is still very high in Liberia despite the introduction within all schools of the code of conduct by the Ministry of Education. Finally, **social violence** was identified as a form of violence mainly occurring within communities of which youth and children were both perpetrators and victims. Social violence takes several forms such as street violence, gang violence, and harassment of younger children. Social violence brings about feelings of insecurity and fear within communities.

B. MAIN FACTORS OF VIOLENCE
In addition to the identification of the worst forms of violence, conversations allowed the research team to explore the leading factors responsible for violence. Poverty is a major leading factor for violence against children and youth. The poorest children are commonly subjected to several forms of violence. Children and youth while explaining high occurrence of violence against them and in their communities highlighted ignorance and lack of knowledge about children’s rights and alternative methods of resolving violent conflict. Further, this research sheds light on the specific vulnerability of children who do not live with their parents. Generally sent to relatives for pursuing their education, they are subjected to exploitation and various maltreatments with their foster family, with few protective mechanisms available for them. Finally, gender inequality and some cultural practices render women and girls particularly vulnerable to violence. They often find themselves excluded from decisions that impact their life.

C. CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE

There is a huge impact of violence on children and youth and is often dreadful. The research shows that violence has impact on the right to education to all children. Children who are forced to work are usually not able to attend school on a regular basis. Children subjected to violence at school also frequently highlighted the negative impact it had on their education and capacity to learn. Violence damages children’s health and well-being by causing injuries, social isolation and even sometimes death. Social violence brings feelings of insecurity within communities and negatively impacts social and recreational activities available for children and youth.

D. PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

Despite progress made in child protection in Liberia particularly through the passage of the children’s law in 2011 and through the implementation of child protection institutions at several levels, this research shows that protective mechanisms are still too often lacking in rural areas. Most of the protective mechanisms cited by children and youth throughout this research come from their close entourage: friends, family and community members. Formal protective mechanisms such as child protection institutions (Child Welfare Committees), Police, NGOs are either unknown or inaccessible to children and youth in Liberia.

E. ROLE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE

This research also underlines the capacity of children and youth to identify possible solutions to prevent violence as well as the role they play or wish to play in mitigating violence. They have been able to formulate recommendations that are faithfully transposed in this report. Everywhere that children and youth clubs were present in communities, they were very active in preventing violence, particularly in sensitizing their pairs. Nevertheless, little support is provided to enhance children and youth involvement in violence prevention. Children have been asking for stronger support from adults to prevent violence against them.

1.4 Recommendations

Drawing together children and youth recommendations and analysis produced by this research, the young researchers address the following recommendations to Ministries, authorities and nongovernmental organizations working in the child protection sector.

To local authorities and NGO’s:
1. **Involving children and youth in preventing violence, in enabling them to recognize violence and violation of their rights, to report violence against them and to know their rights and duties as children or youth. The active participation of children and youth in preventing violence can be fostered through:**

   - Their active participation in peer awareness and peer education in their communities, participation in drama and radio programs to raise awareness on Children’s Act and impact of violence on children;
   - The establishment, empowerment and support of children’s clubs and youth associations;
   - Children should have the right to refuse to go to Bush Schools

2. **Creation of safe playing areas for children in communities where children can play under the supervision of community members.**

   To Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and NGOs and Ministry of Internal Affairs:

3. **Community-based child protection institutions such as Child Welfare Committees (CWC) should be created and empowered throughout the country in order to**

   - Monitor child trafficking and child labor cases. CWCs can play a leading role in identifying child labor cases in the community, in tracing trafficked children through cooperation of the Child Welfare Officer at the county level, and in repatriating those children.
   - Raise awareness within families on alternative methods of disciplining at home and schools. Parents-children dialogue should be promoted.
   - To report to the police station any crime against children such as rape and sexual offenses
   - CWCs should be trained to recognize and report gender-based violence (no rape case should be settled at the community level).
   - Children and youth’s voices should be heard and taken into account through their active participation in Child Welfare Committees.

4. **Extend & support the protection system for gender-based violence coordinated by the gender based violence Unit throughout the country (WACPS/hospitals/NGOs/CWCs)**

   - More financial means should be provided to the Women and Children Protection Section of the Liberian National Police, particularly vehicles to reach remote areas
   - Coordination between hospitals, police and NGOs should be reinforced through training and financial support. In case of rape, a complete protection system should be provided to victims (case report and prosecution, medical assistance and psycho-social support)

5. **More awareness at the community level, targeting traditional leaders, town chiefs & CWCs on early marriage, teenage pregnancy & prosecution of rape cases.**

   - The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection should raise funds to organize workshops on children’s law and child protection mechanisms targeting traditional leaders, town chiefs and CWCs.
• The Ministry of Internal Affairs should monitor through local councils the interdiction for Bush schools to take place during academic time.

To the Ministry of Education, school administrations (including principals and deans of students) and school related NGOs:

6. *Schools free of violence should be available for all children 6-16 as stated by the Education Law. The Ministry of Education should take measures to ensure that:*

• Code of conduct should be displayed in visible areas in every school
• Teachers should be trained to respect the code of conduct.
• Severe punishments must be applied to any teacher violating the code of conduct. In case of sexual offense, teachers or school administrators should be prosecuted.
• Every child should be informed at the beginning of school year about the code of conduct. They should be made aware of the reporting procedure.
• Student Councils should be set up in every school in order to designate child counselors who could mediate conflicts, educate their peers on violence and represent students to school administrations.
• Every school administration should create an avenue for students to evaluate teachers through suggestion boxes. Students’ complaints should be discussed and addressed before the next school period begins.
• Include peacebuilding education into the national curriculum.

7. *More school facilities should be available in remote areas to allow access to all children to education. More school facilities will contribute to reducing children moving and relocating within the country and thus reducing child trafficking and child abuses in their foster families.*

To the Ministry of Youth and Sport, NGOs and Donors:

8. *Youth associations should be financially and technically supported and youth involvement in community development promoted.*

• NGOs working with youth should empower them to peacefully solve conflicts. The Ministry of Youth and Sport, NGOs and Donors should support youth associations financially and technically in order for them to play a peer education role in communities and to mediate conflicts.
• NGOs, Donors and Ministry of Youth should provide training and financially support the capacity for youth to advocate their needs and rights at the community and national level. For example, a youth forum could be created by Ministry of Youth for youth voices to be heard in national youth policy-making process.

9. *More vocational and technical schools should be created. Job opportunities assessment should be conducted in Liberia to make corresponding vocational training with sectors lacking skilled people.*
2. ABOUT THE PROJECT

2.1 Presentation of the project

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The 18-month project engages youth in identifying the worst forms of violence against children and youth and evaluating the cumulative impact of current approaches addressing them in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. To do this, youth in each of the three countries, are engaged in implementation of the three phases of the project. For the initial phase, youth led an action-based analysis, discussing directly with youth and children their views on the worst forms of violence faced in their daily lives, leading to the production of this report. For phase 2 and 3 of the project, youth, with Search for Common Ground and local partners, will utilize their findings to create concrete alternatives to violence and use communication tools, such as radio, to mainstream the findings at a societal level and engage a wider-audience in the discourse of the findings. The outcomes of this project will serve to influence country-level programmatic and policy actions to involve children and youth and to enable communities to prevent worst forms of violence.

2.2 Violence against children in Liberia

An external comprehensive review of existing literature indicates that the major issues faced by children in Liberia can be categorized in the following manner: loss of one or two parents, children living in the street, sexual and gender-based violence; teenage pregnancy; child labour; harmful traditional practices; human

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2 Children are considered for this study as any child between 0 to 18 years old while the definition of youth is any individual from the age of 18 to 35.
trafficking and kidnapping; child maltreatment and torture. Children in War torn countries are particularly vulnerable to many forms of violence, even though a lot of progress has been made in child protection and social welfare in the last decade. A situation analysis conducted by UNICEF in 2012 highlights fragile livelihood, youth unemployment, female vulnerability and food insecurity as critical issues affecting children and youth. There is also very irregular access to basic services with much lower access in rural areas, particularly in Northwest and Southeast counties of the country.

According to the Child Protection Network in Liberia, many children issues and abuses stem from the poverty of a large part of the population since the end of the war in 2003. Poverty makes some parents unable to provide the basic necessities that are granted to all children by UN Charter on the Rights of the Child. Additionally, lack of parental guidance or separation from parents are also major factors related to violence against children and child abuse.

Liberia’s Children’s Act was passed in 2011, largely due to the advocacy efforts of local NGOs HOPE and THINK in partnership with AGALI. This law covers all aspects of child protection, from rights to responsible parties, to formal system to be set-up and establishment of a National Children’s forum to encourage children’s participation. The Children Act includes basic rights (food, water, shelter, education, etc.); protection from harmful work practices and protection from sexual abuse among others. Articles VI and VII include additional protection from early marriage, forced labour, domestic violence, torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and other harmful practices.

Article XI of the Children’s Act calls for the establishment of Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) at the town or community level and suggests children’s representative fora to be established at the town, district and county levels. CWCs have the responsibility to identify vulnerable children, monitor their needs for services and refer them to the necessary social services available in the community and beyond. The CWCs are to include “a traditional leader, a man and woman representing parents, a female child, a male child, two representatives of organizations in the community, and three other local members from a variety of religious faiths.”

Liberia’s Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP) is the government institution responsible for coordinating and implementing the Children’s Act, in cooperation with other agencies and ministries. To date, the MoGCSP has established 420 initial CWCs in 10 of 15 counties. NGOs have also

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taken action on this front; Defense of Children International-Liberia has been involved in strengthening and establishing 20 child welfare committees in Montserrado and Bomi counties, and UNICEF has partnered with the MoGCSP in establishing CWCs as well. According to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in 2015, CWCs were established in a total of 10 counties: Bomi, Grand Cape Mount, Montserrado, Maryland, Grand Kru, Bong, River Gee, Lofa and Grand Bassa. The MoGCSP lacks fund and resources to be able to implement at the same time CWCs in all the districts.

Instrumental in the passage of the Children's Act was the Liberian Children's Parliament, which is organized by the MoGCSP's Division of Children Protection and Development. The Children's Parliament meets the Children's Law requirement for children's representative fora at the town, district, and county levels. This national children's representative forum was established in 2002 as a result of a United Nations (UN) Special Session on Children, and its mission is to advocate on behalf of the voiceless and report on community children's issues. The parliament consists of two representatives from each of the 15 counties in Liberia. Leadership positions in the Children's Parliament include speaker, deputy speaker, and secretary-general. Elections are held every two years. The Children's parliament has represented Liberia to other Children's parliaments around the world, including participating in the Mano River Union Youth Parliament with Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Children's Act is sometimes perceived as "Western influence in relation to traditional practices, to corporal punishment and child labour" and ministries in charge of its application face some difficulties especially in rural areas. Most of the obstacles for passing the laws were related to traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilations forbidden by the Children's law.

Several other mechanisms have been put in place over the past decade to address children's issues. The Liberian National Police added in 2006 a Women and Children Protection Section (WACPS) while the Ministry of Youth and Sports developed a Working Group in Adolescent Girls in Liberia to address security issues. These protective mechanisms were put in place in line with the 2011 Children's Law.

A Child Protection Network (CPN) was also set-up by the Ministry of Gender and Development.

This network is formed by multiple child protection actors such as INGOs (Plan, IRC, and Save the Children among others) members of international organizations (UNICEF, UNMIL) and national NGOs.

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13 Interview with Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection.
14 Interview with child protection Unit of MoGCSP.
17 Monica Tulchinsky, Desk review Liberia, SFCG Internal document, 2014
20 Youth and Sports, Internal Affairs, Information, Culture and Tourism, Justice, and National Defense, with particular emphasis on Health and Social Welfare, Education and Gender and Development.
21 Interview with UNICEF.
The CPN works as a referral system for children abuses and is strongly advocating and reinforcing the formal child protection system.

According to UNICEF,22 child protection system works differently in rural and urban areas. While urban caregivers will go to the WACPS first in case of child abuse, in rural areas, the community chief is the first person contacted. The chief is viewed as the connection to both the community-based child protection mechanisms and the National Child Protection System.

Another study shows that in cases of rape, prevailing practices in rural areas is to report at the community level first. Then, the community sometimes brings the cases to a formal body, such as the police, but only when settling at the community level did not work23.

The vote of the Children’s law brings out a lot of progress considering child protection in Liberia even though the implementation of CWCs is not completed throughout the country.

2.3 Structure of the report

The first part of the report introduces the research methodology and the “Listening and Learning” innovative approach utilized for this youth-led research. Research questions and scope of the research will also be explained.

The second part presents the quantitative results of the research. It shows the data disaggregated by sex, age, and regions. The data corresponding to different categories of violence against children and youth was collected during fieldwork through conversations. During the national analysis, a classification process was established, allowing this report to present five broad categories of violence.

The third part of the report provides further details for those five categories namely: domestic violence; Gender-based violence; child exploitation; violence at school; social violence. Analysis of the five categories includes their different forms, the factors leading to, and consequences of the violence. The analysis also provides the identified protective factors, the role of children and youth in mitigating violence and recommendations made by children and youth during the conversations.

The fourth part of the report proposes a set of recommendations based on the results of the study and recommendations emanating from the field.

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22 UNICEF, The situation of children and women in Liberia, From conflict to peace, 2012,
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objectives and research questions

The study aims to identify the worst forms of violence against children and youth, understand the factors leading to and consequences of the worst forms of violence as experienced by children and youth in Liberia, as well as to understand the protective measures existing for the victims of violence. Through the involvement of young people in the implementation of the project, youth are engaged not only as victims but as active stakeholders in the prevention of violence against young people. The study highlights the recommendations from the 667 in-depth conversations with youth and children in Liberia.

Several research questions determined the scope of the research:

» What forms of violence affect children and youth in their communities?

» What meaning children and youth ascribe to violence at the individual, familial, community and societal levels?

» What are the consequences of violence at individual, familial and community level?

» What are the risks and protective factors, including protection mechanisms, for violence against children?

» What role can children and youth play in mitigating violence against children?

» Who do children and youth feel most safe with to support them so they can advocate for themselves?

3.2 The methodology: Listening and Learning approach

The research is based on a unique and innovative method called “Listening and Learning”. The “Listening and Learning” (L&L) method is a youth lead, technically advised and adult supported approach utilizing conversations to capture individual perspectives and experiences.

Grounded in principles of Participatory Action Research, L&L shifts the act of gathering information from a one-sided interview, where only subjects share intimate and private information, to an exchange of experiences where the researchers themselves participate in the sharing of personal views, experiences, and emotions in a non-adversarial manner. By allowing vulnerability to be mutual, this two-sided participatory dialogue alters power dynamics and induces a more sincere and fruitful conversation. The basis of this approach is founded on an activity performed in everyday life: conversations.

24 Participatory Action Research is a process through which people investigate meaningful social topics, participate in research to understand the root causes of problems that directly impact, and then take action to influence policies through the dissemination of their findings to policy makers and stakeholders” in Powers and Allaman, How Participatory Action Research Can Promote Social Change and Help Youth Development, 2012 http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/KBWParticipatoryActionResearch2012.pdf
The L&L method equips youth researchers with the skills to transform the art of having conversations into a rigorous inquiry process that is easily adaptable to local contexts, especially in cultures with a deep oral tradition. Unlike an interview questionnaire the uniqueness of holding conversations for gathering qualitative data is that it allows the researchers to delve deeper into the issues of violence against children and youth.

Because the project is based on trust and an empathic relationship, the conversation allowed children and youth to have time to speak their mind with a research team they can identify with. Therefore, the definition of the worst forms of violence is based on the meaning as children and youth view it. This approach doesn’t impose what violence is; instead children and youth can decide what they want to talk about when they are asked about their experience of violence.

This approach aims to faithfully transpose children’s words and at reaching a comprehensive understanding of children’s perception of violence through the tale of their everyday experience of violence within their communities.

### 3.3 Definitions

#### A. VIOLENCE

In this research, the definition of violence relies on the way children and youth define violence. In other words, we consider as violence any act or phenomenon youth and children conceive or define as violence.

Children and youth were asked to define what violence is for them.

- “Violence means forcing you to do something” (Girl, 12 years old).
- “Violence means someone doing something against your will” (Young Woman, 25 years old).
- “Violence is bad thing that can happen in our community” (Boy, 17 years old).
- “Violence means taking somebody from his country and bringing to your country with the intention of helping him but you don’t” (14 year-old boy).

#### B. CHILDREN AND YOUTH

In Liberia, the Children’s law as well as the International Child Right Convention defines the child as any person below the age of 18.

Youth definition overlaps the child definition; the African chart defines youth as every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years²⁵.

For the purpose of this research, children are defined as every person below 18 and youth as every person between 18 to 35 years old.

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3.4 Research team

The research has been entirely conducted by a team of young researchers technically supported by Search for Common Ground, and the community partner YMCA. Therefore 25 young researchers aged 17-28 were selected with an average age of 23.5 years old and trained to carry out the L&L methodology across 6 counties based on their past experiences of leadership. The composition of the team also answered to criteria such as gender balance of the team and diversity of social, cultural and linguistic background of team members. Young researchers were selected on several criteria described below:

1. **Age** (17 to 35 years old)

2. **Level of commitment**: Youth participants must be active and engaged in a group at the time of selection, such as association or a youth group, a club, an informal group of neighborhood kids or any other structure formal or informal

3. **Traits of leadership**: The ability to mobilize other young people to engage in an activity to be enthusiastic and motivated peers, also with strong communication skills and being well organized.

4. **Ability to learn new skills**: The ability to learn new skills required for the execution of the research according to quality standards through the capacity building sessions.

The researchers have been trained and supported throughout the research process by the technical advisor, a social scientist experienced in youth leadership program, who coordinated the research in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

3.5 Data collection and research tools

**A. CONVERSATIONS**

Conversations were the principal tool of data collection, 667 conversations were conducted for the purpose of this research. Although researchers have in mind their research questions, conversations are not conducted like an interview because the conversations aim at building a relationship of trust in order to give a strong feeling of security to children to speak about sensitive issues.

Two-person teams conducted conversations during which, one was conducting the conversation while the other was taking notes. In order to allow for a systematization of data collection, researchers filled a conversation sheet after the conversation. This method permitted us to cross reference data collected and verify potential misinterpretation linked to translation of local languages.

**B. KEY INFORMANTS INTERVIEWS**

Semi-directive interviews were conducted by researchers with key informants from the child protection sector. Twenty-five (25) interviews were conducted with INGOs such as Plan International, International Rescue Committee, as well as national NGOs (THINK, SEARCH, etc.) or Governmental department

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26 See appendices for conversation sheet
and ministries (Ministry of Education, MoGCSP, Ministry of Youth and Sport). Key informants interviews aimed to strengthen our knowledge of existing interventions and policies related to violence against children.  

**C. DESK REVIEW**

In order to best inform the field research, an international consultant produced the desk review. The desk review provided background information on the worst forms of violence against children in Liberia and the cumulative impact of current approaches addressing them.

### 3.6 Research targets

**A. RESEARCH AREAS**

Six counties were targeted by the research:

1. Montserrado County
2. Grand Bassa County
3. Grand Gedeh County
4. Nimba County
5. Grand Cape Mount County
6. Lofa County

![Administrative map of Liberia with Counties](https://example.com/)

The six counties of the research were selected upon 8 criteria designed to represent the economic, social, political and cultural diversity of the country. The county selected needed to target at least one criterion among the following:

1. Zones with a high concentration of plantations
2. Populations affected by mining and concessions
3. Commerce Routes (Ports, major commercial road routes, etc.)
4. High Children and Youth Population Density

---

27 See appendices for the list for Key informants interviews
5. Areas with limited access to justice institutions (police, court, etc.)

6. Rural vs. Urban Access to Basic Social Services

7. Regional Synergies/Border Areas

8. Ethnic and Religious Diversity

The table below represents the criteria for each county of the research:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nimba</td>
<td>• High Children and Youth Population Density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Commerce Routes (Ports, major commercial road routes, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rural vs. Urban Access to Basic Social Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Regional Synergies/Border Areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montserrado</td>
<td>• Ethnic and Religious Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rural vs. Urban Access to Basic Social Services (both rural and urban areas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Cape Mount</td>
<td>• Populations affected by mining and concessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rural vs. Urban Access to Basic Social Services (rural county)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Gedeh</td>
<td>• Zones with a high concentration of plantations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Regional Synergies/Border Areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lofa</td>
<td>• Regional Synergies/Border Areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ethnic and Religious Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rural vs. Urban Access to Basic Social Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Bassa</td>
<td>• Populations affected by mining and concessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Commerce Routes (Ports, major commercial road routes, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 1:** selection criteria for research counties

In each county of research, researchers targeted both rural and urban settings in order to represent the living diversity of the population. Each team spent one entire day in a selected village interviewing 8 children and youth per day.

**B. TARGET POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

Research teams conducted a total of 667 conversations throughout the country following a “purposive sampling” technique as the study aimed at representing the cultural and social diversity with an equal gender representation. The research teams also focused their effort to engage with marginalized groups such as disabled youth or street children. The target population was youth and children aged from 10 to 35, although there was a special focus on children and youth from age 10 to 25. In having 8 conversations per day, researchers’ sub-team targeted 4 males and 4 females, 4 children (10-17) and 4 youth (18-35) in order...
to have an equal gender representation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Young Men</th>
<th>Young Women</th>
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<td>56</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>Grand Bassa</td>
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<td>Grand Gedeh</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Montserrado</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimba</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<td>Cape Mount</td>
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<td>56</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>154</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>148</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>326</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2:** Number of conversation in each county disaggregated by sex and age

667 CONVERSTIONS

**FIGURE 1:** Number of conversation disaggregated by sex and age at national level

A total of 335 women and girls were reached during conversation representing slightly more than 50% of the sample.

The “snowball” sampling technique was used for key informants’ interview in order to target the principal actors in child protection in Liberia. Therefore, 25 interviews were conducted with representatives from international and national NGOs, representatives from ministries (Ministry of Education, Gender, Children and Social Protection, etc.), the police as well UN agencies such as UNICEF or UN Women.
3.7 Activities

A. REGIONAL TRAINING

The research phase started with a three-day training of trainers (ToT) organized at SFCG office in Freetown, Sierra Leone, from the June 9-11, 2014. The training brought together 17 people, including 3 SFCG project focal points, members of partners’ organizations, and young researchers selected for the project from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. The ToT informed participants on how to train their fellow teammates in their respective countries to apply the “Listening and Learning” methodology to engage youth and children in conversations on violence.

B. RESEARCHERS TRAINING

The 25 researchers from Liberia were trained in research methodology by the research coordinator for five consecutive days in Monrovia in July 2014. The trainers who attended the ToT in June 2014 in Freetown assisted the research coordinator. During the training, they learned data collection and analysis methods; they also conducted a field test in Monrovia in order to pilot the L&L methodology. Finally they were trained on team management and conflict resolution.

C. DATA COLLECTION

After the training, the 25 researchers were sent to the six counties of the research. They collected data through conversations from July 14-28, 2014. The 25 researchers were split into 6 teams to cover the six counties. At the end of the fieldwork, they conducted 667 conversations.

D. DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORT WRITING

The research methodology is based on a qualitative method of collecting field data. The data analysis fell within participatory action-research, which gives a prevailing place to the views of the children met during the fieldwork. The research is based on an inductive approach of data analysis by which analysis categories were built up on the data collected. This means that categories of violence were not designed before data collection but have been built on what children and youth said during conversations. The analysis process followed two main steps: the regional analysis and the national analysis. The regional analysis took place in July 2014 after the data collection period; research teams in each county targeted by the research analyzed their data during three days in order to produce a regional analysis at the county level. National analysis took place in Monrovia in March 201528 and gathered all the county-based research teams. During national analysis, data collected in the 6 counties was put together in order to produce an analysis at the national level. Both regional and national analysis followed the same data analysis process that involved four distinct steps:

1. Classification: identifying the forms and nature of violence from the children and youth’ stories collected from the field

2. Diagnostic: examining the reason for or causes of violence as well as identifying the protection

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28 The national analysis was supposed to take place right after the regional analysis but the Ebola outbreak obliged us to postpone this step for security and sanitary reasons. This is further explained in difficulties and limitations section.
mechanisms, based on the children and youth’ stories collected from the field.

3. Interpretation: defining concepts, linking diverse categories; examining data disaggregated by region, sex and age.

4. Recommendation: linking recommendations made by children and youth with the analysis produced by the researchers.

In the framework of this research, the classification process consisted of the researchers grouping together different themes or problematic according to either the place of occurrence (i.e. violence at school), or an affiliation to same component of violence (i.e. gender based violence). This process permitted the research team to group all the themes collected during the conversations into five broad categories mentioned below:

1. Domestic violence
2. Gender-based violence
3. Child exploitation
4. Violence at school
5. Social violence

Although the research methodology was designed to collect qualitative data, the research tool allowed us to produce quantitative data as well. Quantitative data was produced by counting the number of times category and sub-category of violence appear in each conversation. The data quantification was processed twice, once during regional analysis and second during national analysis. During the national analysis, the quantification has been done once all regional teams agreed upon the definition of each category of violence. Each regional team recounts the categories and sub categories appearing in their conversation within the agreed research analysis framework.

A writing committee was then assembled comprising researchers from each targeted area to write the report based on the national analysis, key informants interviews, and relevant literature and reports. The research coordinator supervised the writing.

3.8 Data quality

Several mechanisms were put in place to ensure the quality of data. Dealing with children and youth on sensitive issues such as violence especially imply to apply a rigorous do no harm approach during data collection.

A. DATA COLLECTION AND RECORD

In order to record the data collected during conversations, researchers have been provided with a field note form where they wrote the transcription of the entire conversation. To do so, two researchers were appointed to conduct a conversation, one leading the conversation and the other taking notes. To ensure the quality of data, both researchers after the conversation verify the accuracy of data collected.

B. CONFIDENTIALITY AND INFORMED CONSENT
Every child or youth met during the fieldwork was informed the objective of the project and the purpose of the research. They were informed regarding how their story could be used for research purposes so as to gain an informed consent before taking to the conversation. They have also been ensured that their identity will remain confidential. To ensure the interviewees confidentiality, no names were recorded, the only personal information recorded was the age and sex of the participant.

**C. RESEARCHERS’ CODE OF CONDUCT**

Conducting a research requires setting up of an assortment of principles, which will ensure compliance with ethics. During the researchers’ training, a code of conduct was set up including several mechanisms for ensuring compliance with ethics, security and *do no harm* approach within the research. The code of conduct includes guidelines on dealing with conflict, situations wherein researchers should stop the conversations, situations wherein researchers should not start the conversation, sensitivity to cultural taboos and traumatic experiences and security and safety management.

**D. RISK OF HARM PROTOCOL**

In carrying out Listening & Learning conversations, researchers may be exposed to events or disclosures that cause them to develop concerns relating to the safety of particular children or young people. A risk of harm protocol was put in place in order to safely manage a situation wherein a child could be at risk of immediate harm. This protocol is binding where concerns arise during the course of research work for the safety of participants. Where a researcher may have had a reasonable suspicion that a child is at risk, particularly when a disclosure by a research participant activates such suspicion, research supervisors from partner organizations have been appointed as the most qualified and informed people to assess the need for referral. The protocol demands the researchers to refer any suspicious case to the research supervisor. Research supervisors have a wealth of experience in working with children and youth and are familiar with the service landscape in the context. Therefore, researchers should report any concern to the relevant research supervisor rather than act independently. Research supervisors will take action as soon as possible. Nevertheless, the protocol has never been activated during the research.

**E. RESEARCHERS’ EMOTIONAL SAFETY**

Listening to children’s stories might be emotionally strenuous for researchers. During the training, researchers were trained to recognize feelings and reactions that might arise from listening to difficult stories. Besides, a special time was set up every night to discuss and share feelings of the day. Researchers also had the opportunity to contact at any time partner field coordinator and SFCG project coordinator if they felt they needed emotional support.

### 3.9 Difficulties and limitations

**A. GEOGRAPHICAL LIMITATIONS**

The research was conducted in only six (6) out of the 15 counties of Liberia. This geographical limitation is principally due to restrictions linked to the dimension of the team (25 researchers split into five teams of five researchers) and budget restrictions. The choice operated for the counties targeted by this research was based on a fair representation of the social and cultural diversity of Liberian population as well as access restrictions for some areas due to the monsoon season.
B. LIMITATIONS EXTRAPOLATING FREQUENCY OF RESULTS

The methodology is founded on collecting qualitative data through conversations. While the data has been analyzed and presented in a quantitative manner by disaggregating the responses by various categories, and presenting results in charts and graphs, it is important to note that this analysis is not statistically representative of the entire children and youth population. Hence, the analysis presented represents the prevalence of themes raised during the 667 conversations, but does not necessarily represent the prevalence of themes in the same frequency in the entire children and youth population. Therefore, while this study helps us to have a picture of the situation, it cannot be considered as statistically representative of the entire target population.

C. DIFFICULTIES RELATED TO THE EBOLA OUTBREAK IN LIBERIA

In March 2014, outbreak of Ebola virus disease was declared in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. This outbreak has negatively impacted the research, especially data collection. When researchers conducted their fieldwork in July 2014, more and more cases were declared throughout the country bringing fear in communities. In some areas, the population mistook researchers for Ebola medical teams. Because of the population’s fear of Ebola, researchers’ teams have sometimes been denied access to some communities and some people also refused to talk to them fearing Ebola transmission. Researchers managed to lessen the impact this could have had on both the number and quality of conversations by applying a strong communication strategy with local authorities before entering any community. Ebola outbreak also forced SFCG and its partners to suspend the project in August 2014. For that reason, national analysis, which was supposed to take place in Monrovia in August 2014, was actually organized in March 2015 when security conditions allowed us to resume the activities.

D. DIFFICULTIES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF QUANTITATIVE REGIONAL VARIATIONS

While the quantitative results give us a trend of children and youth concerns regarding violence, variations appear between the counties. It is particularly the case for Nimba County for which we counted less occurrence of violence. This variation is difficult to explain with certainty. Several explanations can be exposed. First it could be that less violence against children is occurring is this county. We do not give priority to this explanation for the main reason that no other sources or data acknowledge that Nimba County would be less exposed to violence against children and youth. Second, it could be due to the research methodology. To obtain quantitative results, we counted in the narrative of each conversation the occurrence of each form of violence. To lessen the probability of researcher’s mistake, all the conversations have been reviewed during the national analysis and occurrence recounted. Finally, this variation can be explained by the fact that quantitative data is built on children’s choice to talk about violence they may have experienced. Social taboos around particular forms of violence can explain the choice to disclose some forms of violence. Normalization of violence, in other words, the non-recognition of particular act as what people usually label as violence could also explain the variation. If children and youth have not been sensitized to recognize and report violence, it is likely they may not consider or disclose it as violence. On the other hand, if Nimba County has less occurrence of violence compared to other counties, it has a high record of violence at school. According to our data, several interventions especially NGOs programs specifically target violence at school. Children are sensitized to this form of violence after which they have been able to recognize and report it during conversations with the research team.
4. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

4.1 Recurring terms used by children and youth to talk about violence

The research methodology relied on using conversations as a free verbal exchange between the researcher and the child. Speech and words of children are the foundation of our research. Thus, it seemed important to transcribe the exact words used by children when they spoke about violence.

Among the most recurring terms, beating (416) and fighting (174) were particularly high. Physical violence appears to be one of the main concerns for children and youth in Liberia. The term beating was mainly reported to refer to the harsh punishment given to children by their parents, guardians or teachers. Fighting usually relates to violence occurring in public spaces such as football playground, streets or ghettos. Farming and selling also have many occurrences in the conversations highlighting types of work children are involved in Liberia.

4.2 Categories of violence at the national level

Quantitative data does not represent statistics of the occurrence of violence against children in Liberia. Quantitative data has been produced by counting the times children and youth refer to a specific form of violence in the 667 conversations. This means that the figures presented in our research represent a trend of what children and youth consider as worst form of violence in each county more than a precise rate of violence occurrence. The figures below (3 and 4) show the quantitative results at the national level. The chart n°11 shows the repartition of violence occurrence at the national level. Through this graph, we can see that domestic violence is the most often mentioned form of violence cited by children and youth followed by social violence, gender-based violence, child exploitation and violence at school. “Domestic violence” records high occurrence for several reasons. First, violent disciplining is quite widespread within Liberian families. Second, violence is cumulative, for instance, most of the children who have mentioned child exploitation
in the conversations, have also mentioned domestic violence as we will analyze in each of the categories of violence (Section V.) Therefore, the graphs below show the frequency in which children and youth talk about each category of violence during the conversations.

**FIGURE 3:** Repartition of categories of violence at national level

**CATEGORY OF VIOLENCE DISEGREGATED BY SEX**

**FIGURE 4:** Category of violence desegregated by sex at national level
### 4.3 Categories of violence at the national level

Figure n°5 shows the repartition of each category of violence in each research county. Figures 6 to 11 show the rate of recurrence of each category of violence for each county, disaggregated by the gender of the respondent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRIES</th>
<th>OCCURRENCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LOFA</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAND BASSA</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAND GEDEH</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONTSERRADO</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPE MOUNT</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIMBA</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 5:** Categories of violence by county

Figure n°5 shows that in the six counties, domestic violence is the most often mentioned form of violence by children and youth. Social violence is lesser in Grand Cape Mont and Nimba counties than in others. Child exploitation is particularly high in Grand Bassa County.

Figures 7 to 11 shows that in six counties social violence was more mentioned by males than females. On the contrary, issues relating to gender-based violence were brought up more by females than males except in Montserrado County.

Roughly the same proportion of males and females mentioned child exploitation, violence at school and domestic violence during the conversations in the six counties of the research.
FIGURE 6: Categories of violence in Lofa County

FIGURE 7: Categories of violence in Grand Bassa County
FIGURE 8: Categories of violence in Grand Gedeh County

FIGURE 9: Categories of violence in Montserrado
NIMBA

FIGURE 10: Categories of violence in Nimba County

GRAND CAPE MOUNT

FIGURE 11: Categories of Violence in Grand Cape Mount County
5. PRESENTATION OF THE FIVE CATEGORIES OF VIOLENCE

5.1 Domestic violence

A. DEFINITION AND FORMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is one of the five main categories of violence identified in the conversations. For research purposes, domestic violence has been defined as any violence happening against children at home. Domestic violence was identified in the six counties of the research and is mainly perpetrated by guardians and stepparents or by the older siblings who became the child’s guardian. Beating and degrading corporal punishments are the most common form of punishment highlighted by children and youth during the conversations. Children have also cited Child abuse, defined as denying the child from his rights particularly right to education and the right to socialize with peers, as the worst form of violence against them.

Domestic violence is often linked to other categories of violence, particularly child labor. Children who do not live with their parents appear to be very vulnerable to violence within the place they live. According to available Demographic and Health Survey results from 2007, 76% of children aged 2 to 14 years received physical punishment such as spanking, hitting with a hard object, or slapping in the previous month. Psychological punishment was reported as even more prevalent: 83% of children were subjected to yelling
or name-calling.29

**FIGURE 12: Forms of domestic violence**

In total, from the 667 conversations, domestic violence has been mentioned 689 times. Children and youth gave their own meaning and definition of domestic violence:

» “Forcing someone to do work”
» “Beating on body’s child”
» “Going against child rights”
» “Forcing someone to do what they are not able to do”
» “Wicked things that people do to children”
» “Beating children for every small thing they do”

According to our data, children who are victims of domestic violence usually suffer from several forms of violence as illustrated by the story of this nineteen year-old female from Lawulazu, Lofa County who said: “I am the only one who can do all the work in the house. When I finish doing all the work, my Aunt sends me to sell. After selling, when I go home she forces me to cook. Anytime I refused to cook because I was tired, she would beat me, and not give me food to eat”.

**Forms of Domestic Violence experienced by children and youth**

**Parents beating children**

According to our data, parents and guardians use violence, especially beating as a way to discipline and educate their children. This nineteen year-old female living in Lawalazu community, Voinjama, Lofa County explains: “If they send us to work and we refused, they can beat us”. Another 11-year-old girl, from Rock, 29 Demographic and Health Survey Liberia 2007, [http://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR201/FR201.pdf](http://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR201/FR201.pdf)
Montserrado County also said: “*When my parents beat me nobody comes and tells them to stop*”.

**Harmful and degrading punishments**

Corporal punishment can be used as a way to educate children. Sometimes those punishments are very harmful or degrading for the children. They appear to be disproportionate and harm children’s dignity. These harmful practices can be whipping, putting chili in the eyes, or any other punishment that can hurt children physically. This 14-year-old girl living in Grand Cape Mount County spoke about the degrading and harmful treatment her aunt inflicted upon her: “*Sometimes when she beats me, she takes off my clothes first and then leaves me naked on the floor.*” Sometimes punishments are disproportionate and can therefore harm children.

**Withholding of food**

In Liberia, withholding of food is a common form of punishment. A thirteen-year-old male said this to us during research from Tennie/ECOWAS Estate, Grand Cape Mount County: “*My mother can keep my food until midnight if I refused to work*”. Another eleven-year-old male from Soul Clinic, Montserrado County also told us: “*My Grandmother used to ask me to go on the farm, when I come from school when I am tired and hungry. If I refuse, she beats me and denies me food*”.

**Denying children their right to education**

For diverse reasons, parents or guardians can deprive their children of their rights, particularly right to education and right to play and socialize with their peers. Most of the time, child abuse is a consequence of child labor as this young 16 year old girl said: “*Selling all day for my aunt makes me not go to school and I am not happy about that*”.

**Denying children their right to socialize and play**

Children, who working long hours, do not attend school and do not have the time to socialize and play with their peers. A thirteen-year-old male from Zleh Town, Grand Gedeh County said: “*Too much work at home don’t leave me any time to play*”.

**Disproportionate workload at home**

In Liberia, giving responsibility of a specific task, such as washing dishes or drawing water, to the children at home, is a way to teach them duty and obligation in their family. The task assigned is usually adapted to children’s age and organized in way that they still have time to go to school, to study and play. When the children are tasked with a disproportionate duty making them work long hours at home, children reported it as a form of violence. An eleven-year-old female from Grand Cape Mount County told us: “*My step mother gives me double the work when I already have another work to do at the same time*”.

**Bullying**

This is a form of psychological violence children experience at home. Verbal violence and insults harm children's dignity and self-confidence. An eighteen-year-old female from Buchana City, Grand Bassa County said: “*Anything I do wrong, my step mother insults me the whole day.*”
B. IMPACT ON VICTIMS AND COMMUNITIES

It gives children bad feelings and lack of self-confidence

When children are punished for not doing their work at home or when they are stopped from playing with their friends in the community, they feel bad and neglected. A 11-year-old male from Toe Town, Grand Gedeh County said: “Whenever I finished doing my work at home in the evening, my mother locks me up so I cannot go out to play with my friends”.

Moreover, several studies acknowledge that parents’ maltreatment is associated with a range of emotional and behavioral outcomes, including depression, anxiety, aggression, and anti-social behavior30.

Poor performance at school

Children are not given time to rest and study. Because of that, they score low grades in school. A 16 year-old female from Bo-waterside, Grand Cape Mount County said: “I can’t sleep because I work the entire day and all night. There is no time to study. I sleep in class and I can’t pass”. Children go to school late because they are assigned various tasks at home before going to school, like washing dishes or drawing water. This young 12 year-old girl from Sawmill, Grand Bassa County relates: “My mother tells me to wash dishes and draw water before going to school in the morning. By the time I finish all the work, I am late for school”.

Cause them to leave their home and live on the street

Harsh punishment and ill-treatment of some parents toward their children can leave no choice for the children but to leave home. Some children refuse to go back home and may decide to live on the street. This 22-year-old man living in Buchanan in Grand Bassa County explained: “because of mistreatment from my step mother, I fled home and started living on the street”.

Poor health condition and injuries

Sometimes when children are beaten up by their parents, they get sick and develop poor health conditions. A 14-year-old boy from Kolahun, Lofa County, testified: “If my father beats me, my head and body hurts for the entire day.” “The beating left marks all over my body”, asserts another 15 year-old girl In Montserrado.

C. FACTORS

Orphans and children sent to relatives are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence

Many children in Liberia do not live with their biological parents. This can stem from several reasons: financial reasons, when parents do not have the financial means to take care of their children, they entrust the child to other family members. When the child has lost one or both parents, he will also be usually entrusted to other relatives (uncles or aunties for example) or when the single parent gets remarried and therefore the child comes to live with stepparent. Finally, some parents may decide to send their children to their relatives in order for them to continue their schooling, either because schools are not accessible in

their area or because parents believe schools are better in Monrovia or other urban areas. Living with step
or foster parents appears to be a factor of vulnerability for domestic violence; children may not have access
to the basic necessities, may be exploited at home and deprived of their basic rights.

A 14 years old female child from Grand Gedeh County explained: “Because I am not living with my own
mother, my step mother always beats me for no reason”.

We talked to a 17 year-old girl from Sierra Leone living in Grand Cape Mount who told us that her father
and mother died in a car accident some years ago and since, she has been living with her uncle who never
sent her to school rather he sent her to Bush School (Sande Secret Society), made her farm and eventually
forced her to get married very early. She was desperate and felt helpless: “Only God knows why this is
happening to me and I can’t do anything about it”.

Poverty

Poverty plays also a crucial role in promoting child abuse, particularly, on denying right to education for
children. According to the government of Liberia “Almost half of school-age children who are not currently at
school stated ‘cost’ as being the reason.33” During our research, we met with this sixteen (16) years old female
from Vorzula, Grand Cape Mount County who said: “Because my mother and father did not have money
to send me to school, they sent me to my aunt’s place so that she sends me to school but my aunt never
sent me to school”.

Lack of knowledge about alternative discipline methods

Many parents do not have knowledge on alternative methods to discipline their children. UNICEF statistics
for Liberia show that 90% of parents in Liberia use violent forms of discipline. This lack of knowledge
about alternatives to violent discipline is also suggested in the 2014 study conducted by International
Rescue Committee in rural Liberia. Study suggests that “Non-violent forms of discipline, such as the removal
of privileges, (are) extremely uncommon and used with only one in 20 children. The use of physical punishment
is highly normalized among parents and caregivers in Liberia.” According to the same survey, six out of ten
households believe that children need to be physically punished in order to be raised properly.” Ignorance and lack
of knowledge were highlighted as factor for domestic violence during the key informants’ interview with
UNICEF “The fact that people are not getting the information about parenting, protecting their children, about
their responsibility as a community to our children, put children at risk.”

32 The Sande is a female secret society which is found among several ethnic groups in Liberia (Mende, Sherbro, Temne, Dei, Vai, Kpelle, Gola, Kono, Limba, Bassa, and Homwe). The education of young girls is the main role of the secret society performed by older women. This education takes place in “bush school” and can last from one or two months to over one year. During Bush school young girls learn about basic female values, domestic life and secret rites of Sande Society. Bush schools take place outside the villages in remote bush areas. The practice of Female Genital Mutilations is part of the initiation rites taking place during Bush School. Refworld, Information about the initiation rites of the Sande Secret society, 2002 http://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4be5e0.html
Lack of knowledge about Child’s rights and needs

Lack of knowledge about what children need to develop well can contribute to child abuse. For example, it is important to know what kind of work a particular child could do at home considering his capacities. For the UNICEF gender focal person in Liberia interviewed in the course of the research: “Child work is the process through which you tell the 10 or 12 years old you are responsible to wash these few dishes but it does not stop the child from going to school, playing with his friends, that makes the child to have the chance to grow and develop. In our African context our children work depending on their involving capacities, their age, this is not abusive.”

The right to play and to socialize with peers might not be considered as an essential need for child’s development by parents as asserted by article 31 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child. It states that, “Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.” This lack of knowledge can therefore lead to child abuse and maltreatment. We talked to this boy, 10 years old, who said: “When I go out to play with my friends and come back home, my mother and father beat me”.

D. EXISTING INTERVENTIONS AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

While the conversations found that extended family members can be abusive, a larger proportion of family members can also act as protective factors. In the six counties where the research has been conducted, the only protective mechanism children and youth mentioned during the conversations were the intervention of relatives and community members to mitigate domestic violence. Relatives were the ones talking or advising parents, step parents and guardians not to beat their children. This ten-year-old male from Sinje, Grand Cape Mount County related: “My aunty threatens to take my mother to the Police Station if she ever beats me again.”

Most of the interventions mentioned during our research were not fully effective. Most places we visited, people do not see beating on children as a form of violence but rather a form of discipline. Nevertheless, during our interviews with key informants, several interventions from institutions dealing with domestic violence come to our knowledge such as the Child Welfare Committees (CWC) or the Women and Children Protection Section of the National Police (WACPS). Unfortunately, CWCs are not active everywhere in the country (10 counties so far), but seem to play a mediation role within communities when it comes to domestic violence. Besides, they also carry out a role of sensitization within the community on child rights and child abuse.

Key informants interviews from the WACPS suggested that concerning domestic violence police intervenes when the situation become really critical and that someone report the case to the police. As UNICEF stated “the Children’s Act stipulates that violent or degrading treatment against children will be outlawed. However, at present harsh punishment is common in the home, in the community in school as well as in secret society, as part of initiation practices.” International Rescue Committee (NGO) runs a program called “parents make the difference” in Lofa and Nimba Counties that aims to train parents on alternative method to discipline children. According to their impact evaluation, this program has had a great impact on reducing harsh

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36 Interview with Ina Christensen, Gender & SGBV focal person, UNICEF, March 2015
punishment\textsuperscript{38}.

However, children and youth have not mentioned these interventions during the conversations. The only protective mechanisms known and available to children and youth were the relatives or the community members.

\section*{E. ROLE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN MITIGATING VIOLENCE}

When asked about the role of children and youth in reducing domestic violence, they have usually answered that they would better listen to their parents. This underlines the need of better dialogue and communication between parents and children. As quoted by a father in the IRC’s impact evaluation, better communication between parents and children improves how they fulfill their rights and duties: “\textit{First I use to beat them because they were not understanding me at all, but right after this training the people taught me how to counsel your children, how to talk to them so that they can change and be somebody better, which I did. My children now don’t hesitate to do things I ask them to do which is the change I saw in them… It’s because the way I use to treat them, I’m not treating them like that again [anymore].}”

Children also said that attending school or NGOs activities enabled them to understand their rights and advocate for it.

The role of children’s clubs has been highlighted in a village in Grand Cape Mount County notably the mediation role they play in addition to sensitization work: “\textit{If one of our members has a problem at home, we all can go there and settle that problem}”.

Recreational activities such as sports clubs can also play a role in advising children and youth, as it was asserted in Grand Gedeh. Their coach advises them on their roles as a child or youth at home and the way they should behave when they are together as a team: “\textit{Our Coaches always advise us not to be rude to each other and people that are older than us and to respect our parents}”.

Nevertheless, most of the children said that they didn’t know what role they can play to reduce domestic violence except trying to obey their guardians. Moreover, most children draw our attention to the fact that they find it difficult to play a role in mitigating violence in so far as their parents won’t listen to them and raising issues of violence at home could further lead to their guardians violently reprimanding them.

\section*{F. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FIELD}

The following are recommendations from children and youth during our research on Domestic Violence:

- Government should make sure that Child’s Rights be taught in all schools.
- Government should build Play Grounds for children.
- Government should tell the Police to arrest anyone who beat up their child.
- Government should judge children cases properly.

» Government should have Radio Programs to advice parents not to beat their children, because beating a child is a violation of their rights.

» Government should have huge penalty on people that will violate the rights of children.

» Government should jail any parent that will beat up their child badly.

5.2 Gender-based violence

A. Definition and Forms of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is one of the five categories of violence against children and youth in Liberia coming up from the data collected through the conversations. This form of violence was highlighted in the six research counties. According to our data gender-based violence has been mentioned 300 times during the 667 conversations. It is generally understood as a form of violence that is directly against a person on the basis of gender (social and cultural aspects of being a male or a female).

Considering our data analysis, gender-based violence is largely targeting women and girls in Liberia. Nonetheless, this violence has been spoken by both female and male members of the society, with a larger proportion of female (65%) except in Montserrado County where interestingly more males talk about gender-based violence than females (Figure n°13). Montserrado County has more urban areas than any other county in Liberia and it is where Monrovia, the capital city is located. Sensitization on gender-based violence through radio or NGO community mobilization have been probably more frequent and available than in any other county, and making therefore males from Montserrado county more aware of gender-based violence.

![Gender-based violence by sex and by county](image-url)

**FIGURE 13.** Gender-based violence by sex and by county
The research brings to light several forms of gender based violence as described in the charter below (n°14)

**FIGURE 14: Forms of Gender-based violence**

In almost all the key informants’ interviews we conducted in the framework of this research, child protection actors mentioned gender-based violence as being the worst form of violence in Liberia, particularly rape and sexual violence. Recent studies suggest that gender-based violence is particularly high in Liberia. The World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection have conducted in 10 counties a study on gender based violence during which 2828 women were interviewed. This study shows that 93% of the women interviewed had been subjected to at least one or multiple acts of abuses or sexual violence and 48.5% had been abducted and forced to work as sex worker.

Children and youth also gave their own definition and perception of gender based violence during the conversation.

“When people take advantage of female by forcing them into marriage and by using force to have sexual intercourse with them”.

“Spouse beating partners”.

“When the spouse neglects his family and does not provide basic necessities for children and wife”.

“Older men using penis or their fingers to rape girl children”.

“Small girls sleeping with men for money”.

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Rape

In 2006, an amendment to the Penal Code known as “rape law” was passed and defines rape in Liberia. Rape is defined as: “Intentional penetration (however slight) of a penis, another body part (such as finger) or any object(such as gun, stick, candle…) into the vagina, anus, mouth, or any opening of another person, without that person’s consent. Sexual intercourse (including any of the actions described above) between a person who is over 18 years of age and a person who is not yet 18 years of age, even if the younger person agreed to the act or was not forced into it.”

The latter form of rape is referred to as “statutory rape.” Most of the child rape cases involve forcible rape, but the Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) crimes unit at the ministry of Justice (MOJ) generally prosecutes these cases under Liberia’s statutory rape law in order to more easily prosecute and convict offenders.

According to our data, rape constitutes one of the most common forms of gender-based violence. The perpetrators can be relatives, teachers or community members. According to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 65% of rapes reported are committed on girls between the ages of 3 to 17 years old. A 24 year old female from Kordweh compound in Grand Bassa County said: “I was raped by an older man when I was 13 years old.”

Relatives also rape girls and women. An 18-year-old girl from Sinja, Grand Cape Mount County said: “I live with my aunt but any time she leaves the house and goes to work, her husband uses me as a wife to him.”

Finally, a recent report, “Passing the Test”, conducted by a consortium of government and non-government agencies states that a quarter of the students targeted by the research had been forced to have sex when they didn’t want to (30% girls and 22% boys). This result shows a high level of sexual violence among both girls and boys.

Teenage Pregnancy

Early pregnancy brings the girls’ childhood to an end at an early age. Girls are not yet mentally, physically, and emotionally prepared to bear the responsibility of a pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy can be the result of early marriage, rape or unsafe sexual intercourse. This 18 year-old-girl from Montserrado County relates: “When I was 15, I got pregnant by my boyfriend; I didn’t want to have children that early, now I have already two children.”

Early and forced marriage

Early marriage is a common practice in Liberia. According to UNICEF data, in 2014, 11% of the girls were married at the age of 15 and 38% by the age of 18. These rates are high despite the fact that the Children’s

42 “Passing the test”, The real cost of being a student
Law guarantees children under 18 cannot enter into marriage. Additionally, they cannot be betrothed into marriage or promised for marriage\textsuperscript{44}.

A 28-year-old girl from Grand Cape Mount County said: “\textit{My mother and Pa gave me to this man when I was small and I got pregnant. That’s how I started living with him}”.

It appears that in still many communities as soon as girls get initiated in bush school (Sande secret society) they are ready to get married. A young 17 years old woman from Grand Cape Mount County explains: “\textit{One day my uncle’s wife took me and carried me to the Sande Bush and after leaving the bush school, they forced me to get married to a boy. Only God knows why it happened that way}”.

Usually early marriages are arranged without the consent of the girl and this turns into forced marriage. Early pregnancy can also lead to forced marriage in order to avoid the dishonor of the girl’s family, as stated by this young man (23 years old) from Grand Cape Mount: “\textit{I faced traditional violence by getting a girl pregnant and her parents forced me to marry their child}”.

**Prostitution and transactional sex**

According to our data, this form of gender-based violence is particularly high in Montserrado County and Grand Bassa County which respectively represent 47\% and 39\% of the total people who mentioned prostitution and transactional sex\textsuperscript{45}. Transactional sex usually involves a sex relationship between a young girl and an older man in exchange for gifts; while prostitution involves sexual intercourses in exchange for money. A 2006 study by Save the Children documented this phenomenon particularly well among Liberian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). According to this study, girls were engaging in transactional sex with older men in exchange for money, food, and other provisions or favor. Older men that had power and money were exploiting girls, most of them in age range of 8-18 years old, with girls over the age of 12 regularly involved in transactional sex\textsuperscript{46}.

Most of the time when girls and young women are involved in prostitution or transactional sex, the reason relies on financial vulnerability. When these parents do not have the ability to care for themselves and their children, they use their girls as bread winners for the family. This leads to girls taking to the street and sleeping with older men for money. A female, 17 years of age, from Thomas Street, Grand Bassa County said: “\textit{The only means I have to take care of my mother is to do prostitution work}”.

**Wife and husband violence**

This violence includes physical, sexual, and verbal violence as well as neglect and abuse. This violence is usually performed by men to their wife or girlfriend. Violence between husband and wife can take the form of beating, insulting or forcing the wife to have sexual intercourse. A 19 year old female from Elwa Rock Hill said: “\textit{My boyfriend can make palaver with me and he can also beat me}”.

Neglect and abuse are related to the fact that sometimes the man doesn’t take responsibility for the children and can abandon the woman when she gets pregnant. One girl explained, “\textit{My boyfriend can’t do anything}”.

\textsuperscript{44} Children’s law article VI, Section 38 and section 45.

\textsuperscript{45} See Appendices for detailed data

\textsuperscript{46} Save the Children, \textit{From Camp to community: Liberia Study on exploitation of children}, 2006, \url{http://www.crin.org/docs/save_uk_liberia.pdf}
good for me in the village, I ask him for money to support me and the baby but he didn’t give me anything and he doesn’t care about his son. He did that until my son died.” This fact was confirmed during an interview by the Child Welfare Officer who stated that “In Montserrado County we have a lot of men who abandon their girlfriend when they get pregnant.”

**Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is usually defined as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature” including attempted rape or sexual assault. No law punishing sexual harassment exists in Liberia. During the time of our research, we also discovered that sexual harassment often occurs when girls are very young, before the girls get initiated. This phenomenon was highlighted in Grand Cape Mount by three different girls who related that men were abusing them before they went to the Bush school, as if the men believed it was permissible for men of their community to disrespect the body and integrity of girls before they get initiated. This harassment could even lead to rape as the testimony of this young woman (21 years old) from Grand Cape Mount suggests “Before I was taken to Bush School people used to be telling me about men and women’s business and be playing with my body. They can be forcing me to do it.”

**B. IMPACT ON VICTIMS AND COMMUNITIES**

**Health Problems and death**

Violence usually leads to bad health condition, injuries, and sometimes to death. Children’s rape is particularly harmful for the victims. Three girls have died during the period of January-March 2015 as a result of rape. When a spouse beats on his partner badly it may leads to body injuries as this woman explained to us: “When I am tired and refuse to have sex with him he can beat me badly and force me to have sex with him and after that I can get body pain, hurting marks on my body and my stomach can be hurting me”.

**Trauma and social isolation**

Gender-based violence impacts social and psychological well-being of the victims. More than damaging health, it isolates the victims, hinders the social abilities in engendering fear, impedes opportunities to participate to social life and can strongly traumatize women and girls. This may create fear in interacting in the community and stop her from having male friends. A 25 year old female from new Kru town said: “My boyfriend can beat on me every time, so this has made me very afraid of him and I start worrying as soon I see him coming so I can’t be free to sit with my friends.”

**School dropout**

Early marriage may stop girls from going to school as well as teenage pregnancy. The deprived girls who rely on prostitution to help their family usually bring to an end to their studies. A 15 year old girl from compound #1 said: “My grandparents were very old, so I started going on the street to do prostitution in order to get money to take care of myself. That caused me to drop out of school.”

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48 Social Institution and Gender Index, Liberia, [http://genderindex.org/country/liberia](http://genderindex.org/country/liberia)
49 This fact was disclosed during the interviews with UNICEF and Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection.
As a cumulating impact, school dropout impedes their future. They usually do not have the necessary educational background to install in a sustainable way of life and this can perpetuate cycles of poverty.

Early pregnancy

Sexual violence and early marriage are a strong factor for the high rate of early pregnancy in Liberia. According to the World Bank, in 2009 37.6% of women ages 15-19 were pregnant or already had children. Early pregnancies are more frequent in rural settings (42%) than in urban areas (24%).

C. FACTORS LEADING TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Lack of knowledge and justification of gender inequality

Gender-based violence takes its roots in gender inequality and also by the fact that parents, girls, and boys are not always aware of the harmful nature of certain practices. Parents are not always aware that early marriage hinders girls’ futures. Gender-based violence is still quite widely tolerated in Liberia and both men and women find violence against women justified. The 2013 Africa scorecard on multifaceted violence against young girls and women shows for Liberia that 30% of men and 59% of women believe a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife. “Passing the Test Report” shows similar results since 46% of boys and 34% of girls agreed that “sexual violence and abuse is a normal part of a man–woman relationship”; and 59% of boys and 63% of girls agreed that “men and boys sometimes have a good reason to use violence against women and girls”. According to Action Aid, in some communities, collective rape can even serve as punishment for girls and women.

Poverty

Poverty plays a role in gender-based violence, particularly when girls to turn to prostitution or transactional sex. This is mostly because of the parents’ inability to provide basic amenities for their girls that they might choose to turn to prostitution. Transactional sex also takes its roots in poverty; usually girls use older men as providers for small gift and basic amenities they cannot afford. When asked why she turned in prostitution, a 15 year old girl from Grand Bassa County answered: “My parents don’t have the money to support me.”

Cultural and traditional practices

Some cultural practices profoundly grounded in Liberia such as early marriage and children’s initiation in bush school can be wounding for girls and boys. An 18 year old girl from Vorzula, Grand Cape Mount County said: “I entered the bush school unknown to myself because I was very small and they got me engage into early marriage and also teenage pregnancy”.

D. EXISTING INTERVENTIONS AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

Most children and youth who are victims of gender-based violence will first report the case and talk to their

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52 For at least one of the specified reasons: burning the food; argues’ with him; goes out without telling him; neglect the children; refuses sexual relations. Africa Scorecard on multifaceted violence against girls and women, http://www.afri-dev.info/sites/default/files/2013%20Q4%20Africa%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20Multifaceted%20Scorecard-Figures%20%26%20Numbers%20-%20Analysis%20%26%20Findings.pdf
53 Interview with Action Aid
relatives or friends. “I took advice from my friends and family in order to get out of prostitution” said a 25 year old girl from new Kru town.

In some areas, the Women and Children Protection Section (WACPS) from the national police were mentioned as playing a positive role in case of rapes. Children and youth referred to the WACPS as the “gender women”. The WACPS intervened to prosecute and put under protection. When referred to the WACPS, rape victims also had access to medical care and psychosocial support. Unfortunately, this has been mentioned in few cases mostly in Montserrado County. Most of the time, the case is settled at the community level without any prosecution or specific support to the victim. Sometimes rape victims are even forced to marry the perpetrator.

This 17 year old girl from Grand Gedeh relates: “I was raped one day by a man and he left me in the room and ran away. I got pregnant and the community people caught him and the town chief settled it and told us to move in together.”

According to the MoGCSP, a protection system was set-up coordinated by the SGBV unit of the Ministry of Gender (MoGCSP) in some counties of the country. This system groups together the action of WACPS, medical care (hospitals), psychosocial support, prosecution by justice. In some hospitals in Montserrado, this mechanism is available at the hospital, sparing the victim the hassle of going to all services separately. This system is not available everywhere and the WACPS seriously lack funds and materials to be able to reach all the communities.

E. ROLE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN MITIGATING VIOLENCE

Wherever children and youth clubs are present in the community, they have been active in raising awareness on gender-based violence. NGOs such as ActionAid or HOPE have supported in some areas the creation of youth clubs and networks and empowered them to advocate for their rights and raise awareness in their communities. More often, our research team came into contact during the field work with informal peer support. Youth said that most of the time, their peers are the one they feel comfortable speaking with for advice. For youth, informal and formal youth networks and clubs can play a great role in raising awareness on gender-based violence, but most of the time they raised the issue of both technical and financial support as an obstacle for them to play a role in their community.

F. RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth and children have raised some recommendations during field work regarding gender-based violence in Liberia:

- Traditional leaders should stop encouraging early marriage and parents should wait until their children reach the legal age for marriage;
- Government should open more vocational training and schools for girls in order for them to learn a profession and make money for themselves;
- Government and NGOs should provide workshops for men who think that they have the right to beat on women;

54 From the information we gather: Montserrado, Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Bong
55 This information was given during the KI interviews
5.3 Child Exploitation

A. DEFINITION AND FORMS

Child exploitation brings together two categories of violence: child labor and child trafficking. This form of violence has been equally mentioned by both girls and boys in each of the research counties.

Child labor has been defined by children as:

“Making children sell and not sending them to school”;

“Doing contract for work and pay”

Child trafficking is a form of child labor where the child has been moved within the country, across borders, whether by force or not, with the purpose of exploiting the child. Child labor is different from child work, which is a work that is appropriate to the children’s age, and does not affect their health or interfere with their schooling. Child work contributes to children’s education and development. On the contrary, child labor is a “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and it is harmful to physical and mental development”.

The figure number 15 below shows that both female and male are subjected to child exploitation in the six counties of our research.

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Children mentioned several forms of child labor that deprived them of their childhood: farming (which is the most widespread form), selling, domestic work, gold mining, and fishing. According to the 2014 Labor Force Survey in Liberia, 16.6% of children from 5-14 years are involved in child labor, and 78.4% of the child laborers are involved in agriculture work\textsuperscript{57}.

**Farming:**

In Liberia, many children help their parents in farming works. This can be daily help after school but in many cases children are used as a real labor force even when children are very young and are at the age of going to school. According to the Child Labor National Commission, this form of child work is the most widespread in Liberia\textsuperscript{58}. A 14 years old female from Lofa County says, “\textit{Sending us to the farm is our parents’ every day thing.}”

**Domestic work**

Some children are used as domestic workers either for their family or foster family. This form of work is sometimes associated with other forms of work and maltreatments. In Grand Cape Mount, this 14 year old girl relates about her foster mother, “\textit{She makes me do all the work at home. When I finish she sends me to sell bananas the whole day. When I come back, she can make me to cook in the night. Whenever I tell her that I am tired, she will beat me, pepper me and mean me with food.}”

**Selling**

Children living with parents or guardians and relatives are used as bread-winners for the family and are sent to sell in the street. This form of work can be cumulated with other domestic work or farm work. Usually, children are sent to the street to sell long hours, sometimes until very late at night and until they collect

\textsuperscript{57} United States Department of Child Labor, \textit{Findings on the worst forms of child labor}, 2013, \url{http://www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/liberia.htm}

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with National commission of child labor, Ministry of Labor
sufficient money. “When I go to sell I can’t eat until I come with the correct money,” said a 12 year old girl living in Grand Bassa County:

Fishing:

During our research field, we found out that children in the port city of Grand Bassa County are engaged in fishing for survival. They see fishing as a means to survive and provide financial assistance at home. Most of them, therefore, do not have access to education. According to our data from the field, in Grand Bassa County, big Fanti town, most children at age 9-17 can be found fishing on the beach. A 16 year old male from Grand Bassa County said, “My parents are poor people. They said I’m big enough to take care of myself.”

Gold Mining

Cases of children involved in gold mining have been mainly found in Grand Cape Mount County.

In Grand Cape Mount County, some children are going with their parents on the gold mining field to dig gold; this is usually the only means for children to get money to take care of themselves and sometimes to pay the school fees. Children see it as a means of employment by working for people on the gold mine. “Here at the gold mount we do contract for people then they pay us,” explained a 10 year old female from Grand Cape Mount.

Child Trafficking

Trafficking, as a form of child labor where the child has been moved within the country or across borders, whether by force or not, with the purpose of exploiting the child, has been internationally defined by the Palermo Protocol and ratified by Liberia. According our data, the most widespread form of children trafficking is happening within the country. Parents who do not have the financial means to support their children’s needs especially in terms of schooling send them to their relatives somewhere else in Liberia. According to our data, on the 282 cases of child labor gathered by the conversations, 52 were related to child trafficking.

Moreover, our data shares the analysis of the US report on trafficking in Liberia which states that “traffickers operate independently and are commonly family members who may promise poorer relatives a better life for their children. The report noted that children sent to work as domestic servants for their wealthier relatives are vulnerable to forced labor or, to a lesser extent, commercial sexual exploitation. Orphaned children remain susceptible to exploitation, including in street selling and prostitution.”

59 Palermo Protocol defines Trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children, Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000. http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx

60 Department of State’s, Trafficking in person Report 2013, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/226847.pdf
This fostering system is a widespread cultural practice in Liberia and West Africa in general. In Grand Cape Mount County, this 16 year old girl explained: “Because my mother and father don’t have money, they sent me to my aunty few years ago, in order to send me to school but instead of sending me to school, she made me sell all day and I do all the work home.”

B. IMPACTS ON VICTIMS AND COMMUNITIES

From the conversations conducted with children and youth, we found out that child exploitation is having important impacts on children’s lives, depriving them of their basic rights, among them the right to education. It also comports many dangers for their health, and in case of trafficking, child labor is often associated to other forms of maltreatment such as withholding of food and harsh punishments which damage their health condition.

Poor performance in school

During school hours children are found sleeping in the class, not focusing on their lesson because they are too tired. The Labor force survey states that 14% of the 5-14 year old children combine school and work61. “I can’t be among the passing students because I have no time to study, I work the whole day,” confirms a 15 year old female from Grand Bassa County.

Poor health

Due to the hard work they are carrying out, often inappropriate to their age, child labor damages children’s health. This 17 year old male from Grand Bassa County relates: “The beach is cold and as a result I suffer from fresh cold while fishing or pulling canoe.”

Unable to associate with friends and lack of socialization with peers

Children often work the whole day long, missing good playing time with friends due to the hard work done at home throughout the day. The story of this 12 years old male from Grand Bassa County is illustrative: “You came and met me sitting sad is only because when I leave from here to play my mother will surely beat my dog meat”.

Drop out of school

According to our research, most child workers are put out of school because their parents do not have the means for paying their fees. In Grand Bassa County a 15 years old child explained: “My parents don’t have money to send me to school as such; they ask me to help them go on the beach to fishing”.

Deprived them of their lively childhood

Children should be in school, have time to play, and parent should be helping them to get prepared for future challenges but child work deprive the children of their childhood. An 11 years old male from Grand Bassa County explains.

Bassa County said, “Look I should be in school but I am not, do I not have my right to learning?”

It makes them vulnerable to crime, accident and violence including violence at home. According to our data collected from the field, child labor makes children more vulnerable to other forms of violence. While selling in the street they can be subjected to thievery, armed robbery, sexual violence and street violence. Moreover, when something happen to them while they are working, they usually have nobody to complain to. Parents or guardians can beat them if they do not bring enough money home. This 12 year old female from Grand Bassa County, so passionate about going to school, spoke to us with tears in her eyes. “I can go sell in the market for my aunt. I am selling cold water, when I go sell and bring the correct money my aunt can be happy but when I lose the money or make small money she can punish me and beat me.”

C. FACTORS LEADING TO CHILD EXPLOITATION

Poverty

Poverty is the pivotal point for child labor and child trafficking. Data gathered from the field clearly show that parents of these children do not have the financial strength to meet the needs of their children. They sometimes have no option but make their children work to help to provide the family with food and basic amenities. Poor families also sometimes send some of their children to their relatives in order for them to provide a better life. It appears in contrary that the fostering system can sometimes put children at risk of exploitation and maltreatment.

Living with adopted or foster parent

Children living with foster parents or step parents are very vulnerable to child exploitation. Adopted parents feel that the children are not their biological children. Therefore they beat them, do not send them to school and so not give them the right support. According to UNICEF Women and Children situation analysis, ‘children living away from home’ is a long-standing Liberian practice. However when family ties are not strong “girls and boys sent to live with surrogate families may become exploited. Tired out by punishing schedules of household chores, such children are often not able to succeed at school”.

Poor education system

Education in Liberia is free and compulsory at the primary and secondary levels from the ages of six to 16, though enforcement of attendance is lax. Liberia’s schools are severely lacking in resources, and classrooms are packed so tightly that students often have to bring their own chairs. Teachers are obliged to teach several grades at the same time and are usually poorly trained. Some public schools still fee students due to the lack of funding they face undermining free access to education to all children.

In some areas high schools are not available. Students have potential of completing high school, but schools only go until the 6th grade. It was mentioned in gold areas where children stop in 6th grade, and go to the gold mining field.

D. EXISTING INTERVENTIONS AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

With focus on child exploitation, there was no intervention mentioned by children exposed to exploitation. Children usually have no support because the parents who make them work have usually no other option.

In case of child trafficking, few children have told us that they eventually managed to warn their biological parents on their exploitative situation. In this case parents took action to bring the child back home.

Child labor is forbidden by law in Liberia mainly through the Children’s Law and the Labor Law. Liberia also ratified ILO Convention 182 on worst forms of child labor, but not the ILO C. 132 on minimum age. The National Commission on Child Labor (NACOMAL) and the Ministry of Labor are in charge of investigating child labor cases but budget is not adequate to investigate in all counties. The Women and Children Protection Section form the National Police also play a role in investigate and prosecute child labor cases. Unfortunately, few cases have been prosecuted so far according to NACOMAL principally because of lack of fund and resources.

During key informants’ interviews, several interventions concerning child exploitation came to our knowledge. First, child exploitation cases can be brought to the Women and Children Protection Section of the National Police. Usually community members or children themselves come to the police station to report the case.

Concerning child trafficking, CWOs and CWCs can monitor trafficked children situations in collaboration with NGOs particularly Save the Children, as stated by the CWO of Montserrado County: “If a child had been trafficked here in Montserrado County and that child has been identified as a trafficked child and him/her is from Grand Bassa County, as a Child Welfare Officer for Montserrado, we get in contact with the Child Welfare Officer in Grand Bassa County through Save the Children to help do the contact tracing of that child’s parents.”

The child Labor Commission depending on the Ministry of Labor is in charge of monitoring child labor in Liberia but seriously lack fund to be able to monitor situation in all the country. Moreover, children and youth met during the research do not seem to have the knowledge of the existence of these protective mechanisms. CWCs have never been mentioned during our conversations.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS

Children and youth have proposed a set of recommendations regarding child exploitation:

» Government and humanitarian NGOs should increase awareness and sensitization at community level on child exploitation;

» Government should mandate the Ministry of Education to include the basic fundamental rights of a child into the national education curriculum;

63 Minimum age is defined by labor law as 16 years old.
64 Interview with NACOMAL.
65 Interview with NACOMAL.
66 Interview with Child Welfare Officer Montserrado County.
67 Interview with Child labor commission.
» Government should make sure no children work below the age of 16;
» Government should build vocational schools, especially for dropout children;
» Government, NGOs and CBOs should raise awareness for parents about child abuse and child trafficking jeopardy in sending children to relatives. Community members should be empowered to report such cases to the police.

5.4 Violence at school

A. DEFINITION AND FORMS OF VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Violence at school was mentioned in the six counties of the research with a higher proportion in Lofa county and Grand Gedeh as illustrated in the figure n°17 below. This form of violence against children and youth was mentioned 225 times during the conversations equally by females and males. Violence is occurring in both public and private schools.

When asked about the meaning they give on violence at school, children and youth answered:

*Doing something to someone that they don’t like;*

*Teachers punishing the whole class because of one person;*

*Beating on students;*

*Taking someone’s copybook by force;*

*Teachers asking students for sex;*
experience of violence at school in Liberia. Among them, teacher beating on children is the most widespread form closely followed by teachers forcing children to work for them and “sex for grades” practices.

Our findings emphasize the report *Passing the Test* published in 2012 by a consortium of governmental and non-governmental institutions on gender-based violence in Liberian schools. According to this report almost one in five students – girls and boys – report abuse by teachers\(^{68}\).

![Diagram of Forms of Violence at School]

**TABLE 3:** Gender-based violence related to school (source: passing the test)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported any abuse by teachers, school staff or classmate</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported abuse by teachers</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported abuse by school staff</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported abuse by classmates</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Students working for grades**

Teachers are using students to work, mainly for farming work during or after school time, in exchange for good grades. A 19 year old female from Ganta Nimba County said, *“Sometimes the school owner’s wife*

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\(^{68}\) *Passing the test, the real cost of being a student*, [https://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9180536.pdf](https://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9180536.pdf)

\(^{69}\) Ibidem

\(^{70}\) This research covers 4 counties: Bong, Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh and Monsserrado.
can tell us to go on her farm and collect pig food and carry them to where the pigs are during class time.”

Teachers beating students

In the six counties covered by the research, students and pupils related that their teachers often use beating and other forms of violent discipline in their class. This 11 year old girl from Zwedru, Grand Gedeh county said, “In our school, our teacher can beat us when he asks us for money and we don’t give it to him, he gives us 4-5 lashes in our hand.”

Money for grades

According to our data, some teachers use their position to ask students to pay an amount of money in exchange for good grades. In Gbuyee (Nimba County) a 13 year old male relates, “When you fail in the subject the teacher can tell us to give him money and then when we give him the money he can give us good grade.”

Having sexual intercourse with students in exchange for grades

Girls are particularly victims of gender-based violence at school since 69% of females talk about this form of violence. As stated by this young woman (20yrs) from Clara Town, Montserrado: “My teacher approached me and when I refused to love to him, he failed me that school year”. This violence causes most of the females to fail in their school year and to makes them afraid of participating in class. According to “Passing the Test” report, this is usually carried on by male teachers, who use their position to abuse young girls. The report states “the Liberian research shows that many people think sex between teachers and girls students is quite common. Much of this will be transactional, i.e. the teachers will use their position of power to have sex with the student in return for something.”

Harsh punishment

Some of these punishments include cleaning school bathrooms, cutting bushes, lifting of chairs on the head, and kneeling down all through class hours. “I arrived late one day and my teacher caught me and he gave me a huge bush to brush for three days,” quoted a 17-year old boy from Ganta Nimba County.

Teachers failing students and taking advantage of their position

Teachers have sometimes unfair behaviors to their students, using their position to fail students or failing their student to punish them. Most youths and children feel that this is a violation of their rights as students. “I was sick and my teacher told me to wash the bath room and I refused because I never had strength, so he gave his test and failed me.”

B. IMPACTS ON VICTIMS AND COMMUNITIES

Violence at school has many impacts on pupils and long term impact on the society as a whole.
Poor academic performance

For children and youth, violence at school has negative impacts on their academic performance. The violation of their rights as students has led most of them to poorly perform in their lessons and to fail in the test. They also said that they do not always understand their lessons. Adult literacy rate is still low in Liberia and was estimated in 2010 for people ages 15 and above around 60%\(^1\).

A student from Montserrado County relates: “I refused to wash the bathroom, so my teacher didn’t allow me to sit in his class and when he gave his test I failed, all because I was not in class for his lesson presentation”.

The Assistant Minister of Education made a similar statement: “It makes the children lazy in school, they don’t study and they take school less serious. As they grow up, it becomes a problem. They won’t be able to perform in the higher grades. And if this is carried on to the university level they will end up paying money to their instructors for grades because they have started it at the primary level?”.

Dropout of school and discouragements

According to the conversations, students drop out of school because of teachers and principals violating their rights as students.

A 25 year old female from Sacleapea, Nimba County said, “During test time, they will ask us to pay money, and I don’t have money, so due to their constant habit of doing this I decided to drop out of school.”

In addition, Gender Based Violence can have a significant impact on students’ educational achievements through an inability to concentrate, absenteeism, or dropping out. For girls, abuse can lead to pregnancy which often results in expulsion from school.

Students also said that they feel discouraged when teachers violate their rights as students. A 14 year old female from Soniwein, Montserrado said: “My teacher can beat me, insult me and provoke me in class, whenever he sees me joking with my friends. When I carry complaints to the principal he can’t do anything.” Some students may not have the courage to attend school again or drop out of school, when the teacher who is supposed to improve their knowledge discourages them instead. They feel that they do not need to go back to school or they do not need to work hard to perform well at school because teachers who should represent a model for them are instead a source of exploitation and abuse.

Trauma and fear to go to school

When students are beaten, insulted, failed unnecessarily, or even asked for sex and money for grades, they feel afraid and uncomfortable to be free and open in class and even socialized with their peers. Even if they do not understand anything during the lesson presentation, students won’t ask to get clear understanding on the subject matter because they feel victimized. “I am scared of my teacher because whenever I do

\(^1\) Index Mundi, Liberia literacy rate, http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/liberia/literacy-rate
\(^2\) Interview with Assistant Minister of education
anything he can beat me and yell at me plenty,” testifies a 9 year old girl from Grand Gedeh.

Low education and low school attendance at national level

Due to the violence that is occurring in various schools in Liberia, the educational level is very low. Furthermore, violence at school contributes to the very low level of primary school enrollment, estimated in 2011 at 40% by the World Bank.

C. FACTORS LEADING TO VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Based on the conversations with children and youths these were some of the factors highlighted.

Lack of teachers in Liberian schools

Most of the interviewees complain about lack of teachers in their schools and directly linked it to the multiple forms of violence occurring in their schools. A 14 year old female from West Point, Montserrado: “When we go to school, we can make noise in class because sometimes there is no teacher to teach us.” In this light, students are not learning in a proper way because sometimes there is no teacher and sometimes teachers have many grades to teach at the same time and many students in their class.

Misuse of administrative power

In this research, most of the respondents said that teachers are misusing the power given to them as teachers. This 13 year old female from Zwedru, Grand Geddeh recounted: “My teacher can beat on me too much and he can’t allow me go for recess sometimes. Because he’s the teacher I am forced to do it.”

Lack of teaching ethics or training, and low salaries

Teachers are not well trained in Liberia. In many schools they have several grades to teach at the same time and sometimes more than 50 students in their class. “In class we can try to do our best in lessons, do all our assignments and homework and attend all the classes, the teachers can send us failing grades at the end of the period. When we ask them why, they can say ‘you didn’t see me after the test, you never gave me money’.”

Lack of financial support

Due to the high poverty rate in Liberia, most parents are unable to support their children financially in school, so students are working on the farms of teachers and schools owners in order for them to continue their education. A 14-year old female from Gbazon, Grand Gedeh County relates her own story: “When I go to school, I can leave class sometimes to work on my teacher’s farm in order for me not to be put outside of class, because my parents don’t have money to pay my school fees.”

Lack of awareness about violence at school

World Bank Data, Liberia, School attendance rate, primary: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.NENR
Most interviewees said that due to the fact that most students are not aware of the rights of students at school, teachers take advantage of them and threaten them. Furthermore as stated in the report “Passing the Test”, most students, teachers, and parents consider violence at school, especially transactional sex – if not normal, as a way to get what you need. “The child may be sleeping with the teacher, the families are not proud, but they may see this as a good connection for the child or a good source of cash”. According to the Assistant Minister of Education, most of parents in rural areas will compromise cases of sexual harassment or intercourse between their child and teachers. Moreover, for most parents bribery at school is a normal practice: “Some parents are the main factors for this (bribery), because they are in the constant habit of giving money to their children to pay teachers for grades especially for the elementary and junior high children.”

D. PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS AND EXISTING INTERVENTIONS

When asking about what mechanism can protect them from violence at school, many students felt helpless. This fact emphasizes other evidence according to which only one third of students disclose the abuse to someone, either friends, parents, or school staff. In Nimba County there was an instance stated by a 10 year old girl from Ganta who said principal does not want to know what happens to the students in the schools. They only advise teachers and students without taking any action: “Nobody can ask us about how we feel about things happening in our school; even the principal can encourage the teachers to beat us.”

However, in some schools, well-trained principals and school administration staffs can play a role in preventing violence to occur or at least to punish perpetrators. A 17 year old female relates her own experience: “One time my teacher beat and hurt me because I was making noise in class and when I carried this complaint to the principal, he was suspended for some time.”

Dean of Students

The Dean of Students in a school has the responsibility to govern students’ activities and maintain a peaceful atmosphere amongst students. Dean of Students has the responsibility to settle disputes amongst students and assign punishments when necessary to students for misbehavior. In Clara Town, Montserrado, a 13 year old boy confirmed: “These days students can’t act rude too much and Dean of Students will help to calm down the situation”. But the role of Dean of Students varies from region to region. In some cases when complaints are carried to the Dean of Students, they call both parties and settle their differences. In some schools, the Dean of Student has also helped to dismiss teachers.

There are also civil society organizations and NGOs working towards school related violence reduction and prevention. Such organizations usually have a geographical focus, such as Equip Liberia or the Junior Youths Empowerment Program in Nimba County.

Equip Liberia aims at educating children about their rights and also helps some less fortunate students go to school. Their role has been highlighted by some students in Nimba as asserted by this 13 year old girl: “I prefer Equip Liberia to work with children in Nimba.”

Awareness through Junior Youths Empowerment Program is another NGO working in Nimba County as

74 Interview with the Assistant Minister of Education
75 Passing the test, op.cit
well; they organized workshops for the children in Nimba to educate them on their rights. A 14 year old male stated, “It’s only the Junior Youths Empowerment Program that comes to our school to organize workshops for us and they can teach us on our rights and how to behave while in class.” According to this child, they are very effective in his school.

E. ROLE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN MITIGATING VIOLENCE

When asked about the role children and youth play in mitigating violence at school, most children answered that they will try to avoid problems or conflicts at school in order not to put the teacher’s attention on them. Violence makes them afraid to express themselves and hampers any role they would be willing to play to mitigate violence at school.

Moreover, children and youth said that teachers threaten the students to make them fail their tests if they take complaints to the principal. A 20 year old female from Nimba County relates a case: “A teacher in our school loves to approach his female students, and when he approaches you he will tell you not to tell anybody because if you do he will make you fail.”

F. RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are some of the recommendations that youth and children think should be done to mitigate or reduce violence at school in the Republic of Liberia:

» Government should improve our educational system by providing qualified teachers;

» Counselors should be provided by school owners or government in various schools to guide and help students emotionally and academically;

» Government should find means to stop teachers from beating on students;

» Education on children’s rights should be taught in the various schools in the republic of Liberia;

» Donors should provide talk shows on the radio and other related programs in schools to educate students about violence;

» All individuals that teach in any school in Liberia should be taught the ethics of a good teacher and tested before being declared qualified to teach.

5.5 Social violence

A. DEFINITION AND FORMS OF SOCIAL VIOLENCE

Social violence is one of the five categories gathered from our research on violence against children. Social violence is a broad category mainly identified by male youth. This form of violence refers to violence happening in social spaces such as streets and community areas. The specificity of this form of violence is that children and youth are both victims and perpetrators of violence. This form of violence was often mentioned in Lofa, Grand Gedeh, Grand Bassa and Montserrado County as represented in the chart below (number 19).
Children and youth are terribly affected from this particular form of violence. Social violence has been defined as fighting in the social sphere, stealing within the community, armed robbery, young people addressing problems in the society with force, or creating problems for others in the community (figure number 20).

Below are ways some youth and children defined violence as it relates to social violence:

- Young people aggravating problems or causing conflicts in the community;
- Older people forcefully taking something that belongs to another person because they are older than them;
- Friends beating friends in the community;
- People going against someone’s rights;
- Others using force on someone;
- Violence that takes place in social areas;
- Youth addressing issues the wrong way in public.

The high frequency in which social violence was cited during conversations shows how much children and youth are also affected by violence happening in the community whenever there are victims, witnesses or directly involved in perpetrating this violence.
FIGURE 20: Forms of social violence

Fighting in communities/street violence

This form of physical violence has been the most often mentioned form of social violence. Street violence refers to use of violence as a means to solve conflict. During recreational occasions for instance, youth and kids get in fights either because they feel cheated or because of misunderstandings among the participating teams. At times too because of insults received from other people at these gatherings, youth used fighting to resolved conflicts. A 17 year-old male from Grand Gedeh shared his experience:

“My friend and I were playing football and he insulted me so we started fighting.”

Age violence

This form of violence is based on older people taking advantage by force of younger people. When children are selling in the street, the older ones see it as a means of violating them by taking away some of the items. They use the age as an advantage to steal and be violent with them.

A fifteen (15) year old boy who sells on the streets in Lofa said, “I was selling one day and one big boy took one of my bags of chips and when I asked him why, he started beating me because he knows I’m small.”

Gang violence
This particular form of violence was found in Montserrado and Grand Gedeh Counties. Young people who are often uneducated and unemployed, who do not have any source of income, group themselves together with arms and sharp objects and go around in communities attacking people in their homes. This gang violence is responsible for armed robbery, stealing in the community, and sometimes responsible for killing. We encountered this twenty (20) year old female from Montserrado county, West Point Community who confirmed this when she said, “Youths in this particular community, because they are not doing anything to get money they go around stealing in our community.”

Ghetto violence

In Liberia, we have several ghettos where the less fortunate live. Hhettos can be slum living area, but they also become areas where youth gather to drink alcohol, use drugs, and play cards or gamble. Ghettos take place usually in urban areas such as airfield parking in Red Light, Montserrado County. In these places youth and children usually go to take drugs and alcohol and sometimes fight each other. In Montserrado County, West Point Community, a twenty-five (25) year old male said, “Young people in the community can play gamble like ludu dice, card game and eat weed all day then later disturbed the peace of our community.”

B. IMPACTS ON VICTIMS AND COMMUNITY

Injuries and vengeance

Children and youth who get involved in fights usually get injured and feel pain afterward. Those who are caught stealing can be seriously beaten by the community before police intervene. “I used to get sick from the fighting and beatings received from others and this left scars all over my body,” explains a young man, 18 years old, who experienced street fighting.

Lack of respect

As individuals from a particular family get involved in fights with other members of the community, their respect for that offender will diminish. Later, children get mixed up with their parents’ issues, which lead to conflicts in the community. A fifteen (15) year old female said: “I don’t show respect to anyone who insults my family members.”

Disgrace and shame

Those who get involved in armed robbery and stealing in communities are sometimes publicly beaten by angry mobs. If they survive, going among their peers is completely out of the question. They are ashamed and disgraced. In Nimba this seventeen (17) year-old female said: “When boys steal from us in the community, when we catch them, we beat them. It can disgrace them in the community for a long time.”

Confusions and disunity

Social violence creates confusion and disunity within communities and hinders a peaceful atmosphere. This is probably the reason why so many youth and children talk about social violence during conversations.

C. FACTORS LEADING TO SOCIAL VIOLENCE
Lack of job opportunities

A high proportion of youth we met in the six research regions do not have sustainable jobs, either because they are not qualified or because job opportunities are very low in their community. Lack of job opportunities render youth unable to sustain a decent life and therefore can lead to them becoming trouble makers in their community. Others use alcohol to escape life realities, which if abused leads to them starting conflicts or public insulting in the community. A 20 year-old male explained, “There’s no job; even the little jobs that are available are given under the influence of favoritism. They hire people they like whether they are qualified or not.”

Poverty

Some youth are abandoned by both parents; others are raised by a poor single parent. Being poor often means that they do not have the opportunity to attend academic or vocational schools. Caretakers do not have financial support to take care of their children. This contributes to uneducated youths in society and dropouts. This 20 year-old female from Grand Gedeh explains: “There is no money. It’s because of poverty people are in the streets stealing all through their life.” In harmony with that, a 22 year-old male related, “Because I used to be hungry and don’t have money, I steal.”

Using violence as a means of solving conflicts and lack of knowledge about violence

Social events and programs that are organized with the aim of bringing about harmony between youth of various communities and regions, sometimes interfere either because some feel that their rights are being overlooked or because of misunderstanding between individuals. When this occurs, people in Liberia use violence to solve their conflict instead of talking or finding a peaceful solution. The World Bank report states similar factors: “Social events are often the scene of confrontations between young people and were viewed as causes of violence. As diverse social groups interact in social gathering, distrustful group dynamics and underlying tensions can be exposed or trigger violence.”

Youth in Liberia are greater in population than older people and a lot of them are poorly educated: 75% of the Liberia’s population is under the age of 35, many of them are unemployed and unskilled. Some do not know anything about violence at all. Education on violence most times does not reach remote areas.

Tribal violence and religious conflicts:

Sometimes violence in the community can be caused by tribalism, ethnic division, or land issues. These issues have been raised mainly in Nimba and Grand Cape Mount Counties.

Age advantage

Older youth feel that they are very superior to younger youth. People use their age to violate children’s rights. They insult them or beat them for no reason, and some even force children to do things against their will. A six (6) year old child in Montserrado County said, “The big boys can beat us when we are selling in the streets and if they send us to buy something for them and we refuse.”

Lack of youth involvement in decision making:

Decisions makers (community leaders, town chiefs, and elders) do not involve young people in decisions that define their activities. When we visited Grand Cape Mount County a 20 year-old male explained, “Older people don’t include youth in decision making. Rather they make all the decisions for us.”

Youth feel that they are being left out and segregated from decisions that will affect them. Youth express this issue particularly in Nimba County. A 21 year-old male from Lofa explains: “Decision makers take advantage over the young people too much; they don’t value our opinions.” This issue was raised in the World Bank publication on Understanding Youth Violence: Cases from Liberia and Sierra Leone: “When they (elders) are making decisions they sometimes invite us (youths) but we are only there to sit, listen and take instructions. We are not there to talk before our fathers.”

D. EXISTING INTERVENTIONS AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

Police

Our data reveals that police are working on eradicating social violence. They intervened in most cases related to social violence. They usually come on to the scenes of such violence, they settle the conflicts that existed, and arrest the violators. Nevertheless, one major factor contributing to the ineffectiveness of the police is bribery. When the violators are equipped financially, they bribe their way out. In such instances there will be no case, judgment will not be passed, and the case will be dropped. In Montserrado County, individuals who are involved in stealing and armed robbery are usually released from police custody without punishment for their crimes. Youth also said during the conversations, that police can also misuse force and abuse their power (often cited in Grand Gedeh and Nimba counties).

Vigilante groups

Vigilante group were created in some communities after the end of the war to act as community police when formal police were not resent or incompetent. Vigilante groups are usually formed with youth who voluntarily offer themselves to protect their communities. These young people stay up all night to protect the community from robbers. They are organized by themselves or by community chairman and leaders. Most of the vigilante groups are around Monrovia in Montserrado County. Most people who talk about the role of vigilante groups in their communities said that it has increased the feeling of security in the communities, but it should not be a long lasting practice since it plays the role of the police. Moreover, youth are involved in vigilante groups without any training or support.

Town Chief, Communities Chairman/Chairlady:

When disputes arise, these officials intervene into the problems through advice. They also have rules with penalties attached to the rules to maintain peace amongst community members. A female from Lofa County said, “I am very happy over the way the town chief handles cases here because it helps us to be at peace with each other.”

Nevertheless, many youth also said that the involvement of the town chief in the dispute settlement was not
always seen as fair and equitable.

**E. ROLE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN MITIGATING SOCIAL VIOLENCE**

Several roles played by children and youth were underlined during the conversations. First of all, youth and children usually take complaints when involved in troubles either to family members or directly to the police. One important role shed to light was the function of youth organizations in the community. In some communities, youths are taking the initiatives to form organizations which enable them to discuss issues of burning related to children and youth. They look for ways to address problems and find solutions. This positive role was highlighted both by youth directly involved as well as others who benefit from their actions. Though relatively few communities we visited actually had youth organizations, it was always mentioned positively. Youth were also involved in vigilante groups mainly in Montserrado County.

**F. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Below are the recommendations children and youth have formulated during the field research:

- Government should provide security to protect communities from armed robbers;
- NGOs should conduct workshops to teach people about violence;
- Government should increase police salary in order to stop bribery;
- More job opportunities should be provided for youth;
- Violators who commit violence should be punished according to the Liberian laws when they are caught;
- Police stations should be built in each community to stop stealing, fighting and armed robbery especially in Montserrado.
6. CONCLUSION

Liberia has made significant advancement in terms of child protection since the end of the war. The research acknowledges the progress that constitutes the children’s law and the creation of child protection institutions such as Child Welfare Officer at the county level and Child Welfare Committees at the community level. However, this research shows that violence against children is still very high, often multiple and cumulative, and the access to child protection mechanisms is still very low especially in rural areas.

This research also shows that poverty plays as a pivotal point for violence against children and youth in Liberia. In many cases, poverty put children at risk of exploitation, abuse and maltreatments. Lack of knowledge about the rights, the needs, and the duties of children was also very often emphasized by children and youth as a major factor. Children have also expressed the wish to gain more knowledge on preventing and mitigating violence against them as well as acquiring skills on alternative ways to resolve conflicts without violence. Children who do not live with their parents are very vulnerable to violence. Sent to relatives with the aim of accessing school – which are not always available in rural areas – children are subjected in their foster family to exploitation and maltreatment.

Domestic violence is the most often mentioned form of violence according to our 667 conversations conducted in the five regions targeted by this research. Domestic violence includes violent discipline, such as beating and other harmful punishments; and child abuse, such as depriving children of their rights to education or to play and socialize with their peers. This violence is happening at home, mainly performed by parents, foster parents, or guardians. Beating and violent discipline are a very common concern for children and appear to be a traditional way to educate children in Liberia. However, it has a lot of consequences for children especially difficulties to perform at school and in some cases leads to bad health and injuries. Other forms of discipline can be used by parents, such as dialogue, and this has proved to improve relationships and children’s behaviors for both children and parents. For children sent to live elsewhere, they appear to be very vulnerable to violence and exploitation. The main problem is that parents are usually unable to monitor their children’s situation while they are away. Second, school facilities are not available everywhere in Liberia, especially in remote areas, forcing parents to send their children to relatives in order for them to access education. Free and mandatory education from 1st grade to 9th grade constitutes a right by law for every child in Liberia. Finally, lack of awareness about the risks of this traditional practice is also a significant factor. Parents usually do not question the relative to whom they entrust their children and have no contact and no knowledge about the situation of their children while they are away. Staying with biological parents until reaching an appropriate age to leave appears to remain an effective protective mechanism, but the poorest families, especially in rural areas, are sometimes not able to educate their children.

Gender-based violence represents another broad category of violence against children and youth in Liberia. This form was mentioned 300 times during the conversations by both male and female respondents. Girls and women are more often subjected to this form of violence. Rape and sexual harassment remain a critical issue in Liberia. Perpetrators are most of the time in the close entourage of the victim: uncles, neighbors, or teachers. Beating wives and forcing them into sexual intercourse is also frequent in Liberia. Even though gender-based violence is widespread and frequently raised as one of the worst forms of violence in Liberia by child protection actors, this form of violence is not always perceived as a crime to be prosecuted. Rape cases are settled within the community, either in marrying the girl to the rapist or in asking financial
compensation. Some forms of gender-based violence such as early marriage rely on traditional and cultural practices. After getting initiated in bush schools, whether they have reached the legal age or not, arrangements for marriage are made for girls, especially in rural areas. This practice hinders their right to education and leads to early pregnancies that can harm their health and put them in front of adult responsibilities while still young girls. Many interventions and policies have been put in place recently by both governmental institutions and NGOs to reduce the occurrence of gender-based violence. However, sensitization and protective mechanisms fail at reaching the whole country. Because violence against women remains normal and justified by both women and men, occurrence of gender-based violence is high despite the efforts generated. Awareness and sensitization within communities, especially for traditional leaders and local authorities, have often been mentioned as a good protective mechanism to ensure that rape is considered a crime and as such victims are protected and perpetrators punished. In equipping children and youth to recognize and report violence, it is possible to reduce the occurrence of gender-based violence especially in reducing impunity related to it. But this would be possible only if those responsible for their socialization and education – parents and teachers – do not acknowledge by their practices that gender-based violence is justified. No rape cases must be settled at the community level but rather considered as a major crime against the victims.

Child exploitation understood as both child labor and child trafficking came often across our conversations with children and youth. Child work as an appropriate work to the children’s age, which does not affect their health or interfere their schooling is a normal practice in Liberia and contributes to children’s education and development. However, boundaries between child work and child labor are sometimes blurred for parents. But mainly, child exploitation in agriculture, in gold mines, or at home relies on poverty and on the parents’ financial incapacity to respond to their children’s needs. Most of the times, parents do not have any other choice than asking their children to contribute to the family revenue. Child trafficking, taking the same forms as child labor, mainly comes out with child fostering practices, and therefore is taking place within national borders. Impacts of child labor are harmful both for children and for society. Conducting work that is inappropriate to the child’s age hampers their development and harms their health. Few child laborers have access to education and therefore contribute to an inner circle of poverty. Exploited children feel helpless: for those we met, no intervention was available to help them.

Violence at school was identified by children and youth as a major issue in Liberia. Schools are supposed to be safe places for children to learn, to develop and to prepare their future. Several forms of school-based violence were highlighted during our conversations: sex for grades, money for grades, work for grades, and beating and harmful punishments. Girls are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence at school. The Ministry of Education has taken this issue into serious consideration, notably through the establishment of the code of conduct for teachers and school administrators. However, lack of awareness of parents, students, and teachers as well as the poor conditions of many schools in Liberia perpetuate this violence. The code of conduct is a good tool, but it is useless if students are not trained to recognize and report all kinds of violence at school and if school administrations do not take the responsibility for making this code respected and effective, notably by punishing any transgressing teachers.

The large reference by children and youth to social violence expresses their need to live in peaceful society. Young people frequent use of violence as a way to solve conflict. Fighting in the street, in the football ground, harassing younger children, and verbal violence are some of the forms of social violence. This form of violence was frequently mentioned during conversations by victims, actors, or witnesses as a form of violence impacting the wellbeing of their community and the quality of their life. Youth unemployment plays as a
strong factor in making them vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse, and young females are vulnerable to prostitution and transactional sex. 75% of the Liberia’s population is under the age of 35, and many of them are unemployed and unskilled. Youth and children requested during the conversations to be equipped with peaceful ways to solve conflict as well as to be more involved in peer education through youth associations and children’s clubs.

Finally, this research shows that children and youth are not only victims of violence, but are also important stakeholders in violence prevention. The recommendations they have made during the 667 conversations highlight their capacity to identify causes of violence but also possible solutions to prevent and eradicate violence against them. The right to participation is guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it is urgent to hear what they have to say and engage children and youth in the prevention of violence.

7. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Drawing together children and youth recommendations and analyses produced by this research, the young researchers address the following recommendations to ministries, authorities and non-governmental organizations working in child protection.

**To local authorities and NGOs:**

1. **Involve children and youth in preventing violence by enabling them to recognize violence and violation of their rights, to report violence against them, and to know their rights and duties as children or youth.** The active participation of children and youth in preventing violence can be fostered through:
   - Their active participation in peer awareness and peer education in their community, through their participation in drama and radio programs to raise awareness on the Children Act and impacts of violence against children;
   - The establishment, empowerment and support of children's clubs and youth associations;
   - Children should have the right to refuse to go to Bush Schools.

2. **Create safe playing areas for children in communities where children can play under the supervision of community members.**

**To Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and NGOs and Ministry of Internal Affairs:**

3. **Community-based child protection institutions such as Child Welfare Committees (CWC) should be created and empowered throughout the country in order to:**
   - Monitor child trafficking and child labor cases. CWCs can play a leading role in identifying child labor cases in the community, in tracing trafficked children through cooperation of Child Welfare Officer at the county level, and in repatriating those children;
   - Raise awareness within families on alternative methods to violent discipline at home and schools. Parent–children dialogue should be promoted;
   - To report to the police station any crime against children such as rape and sexual offenses;
   - CWCs should be trained to recognize and report gender-based violence (no rape case should be settled at the community level);
   - Children and young people's voices should be heard and taken into account through their active participation in Child Welfare Committees.

4. **Extend and support the protection system for gender-based violence coordinated by the gender based violence unit throughout the country (WACPS/hospitals/NGOs/CWCs)**
   - More financial means should be provided to the Women and Children Protection Section of the Liberian National Police, particularly vehicles to reach remote areas;
   - Coordination between hospitals, Police and NGOs should be reinforced through training and
financial support. In cases of rape, a complete protection system should be provided to victims (case report and prosecution, medical assistance, and psycho-social support).

5. **More awareness should be made at the community level targeting traditional leaders, town chiefs & CWCs on early marriage, teenage pregnancy & prosecution of rape cases.**

   - The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection should raise funds to organize workshops on the Children’s’ Law and child protection mechanisms targeting traditional leaders, town chiefs and CWCs;
   - The Ministry of Internal Affairs should monitor through local councils the interdiction for Bush schools to take place during academic time.

**To the Ministry of Education, school administrations (including principals and deans of students) and school related NGOs:**

6. **Schools free of violence should be available for all children 6-16 as stated by the Education Law. The Ministry of Education should take measures to ensure that:**

   - Code of conduct should be displayed in visible areas in every school;
   - Teachers should be trained to respect the code of conduct;
   - Severe punishments must be applied to any teacher violating the code of conduct. In cases of sexual offense, teachers or school administrators should be prosecuted;
   - Every child should be informed at each beginning of school year about the code of conduct. They should be informed about the violence reporting procedure;
   - Councils of children should be set-up in every school in order to designate child counselors who could mediate conflicts, educate their peers on violence and represent students to school administrations;
   - Every school administration should create an avenue for students to evaluate teachers through suggestion boxes and students’ complaints should be discussed and addressed before the next school period begins;
   - Include peacebuilding education into the national curriculum.

7. **More school facilities should be available in remote areas to allow all children access to education. More school facilities will also contribute to a reduction of children’s movement within the country and therefore will contribute to reduced child trafficking and child abuses in their foster families.**

**To the Ministry of Youth and Sport, NGOs and Donors:**

8. **Youth associations should be financially and technically supported and youth involvement in community development promoted.**

   - NGOs working with youth should empower them to peacefully solve conflicts. The Ministry of Youth and Sport, NGOs and Donors should support financially and technically youth associations in order for them to play a peer education role in communities and to mediate conflicts;
NGOs, Donors and Ministry of Youth should support by training and financial support the capacity for youth to advocate for their needs and rights at the community and the national level. For example a youth forum could be created by Ministry of Youth for youth voices to be heard in national youth policy making process.

9. More vocational and technical schools should be created. Job opportunities assessment should be conducted in Liberia to create corresponding vocational training for sectors lacking skilled people.