



**Violence Against Women in Western Africa**

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“No one gets left behind” are the words often echoed as the strong voice behind the Sustainable Development Goals. However, in order to ensure this we must eliminate all forms of discrimination, one in particular being: Gender-based violence.

Violence against women is a global phenomenon. It occurs globally, and one of the main areas where it has a great impact on countries, constitutes as Western Africa. In Western Africa, women are subject to human rights abuses unparalleled elsewhere in the world. Compared to other countries globally, 67% of all women in Western Africa have faced some if not all forms of violence in the entirety of Western Africa. (Oyedokun 2008). Female inhabitants experience devastating cases of sexual discrimination and abuse varying from many different forms. Violence against women is not only a form of discrimination, but a manifestation of unequal power between men and women, and a basic violation of human rights.

To give a bit of background context of Western Africa, it is composed of eighteen countries: Specifically, this paper will focus on the violence against women in the countries of Gambia, Togo, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. This paper will describe the various forms of violence against women, any act that causes physical, sexual and/or psychological harm or suffering.

#### **Domestic Abuse**

Victims of domestic abuse in Western Africa experience not only a violation of their right to health but are emotionally and physically scarred as well. This interrelated nature of human rights is evident in the western African nation of Togo where almost 75 percent of women report having been beaten or raped by a family member (Banda 2006). Guinea shows a similar rate, with a staggering 65% of women reporting this violence (Banda 2006). Domestic violence, however, is not just a sexual aspect but a physical and psychological problem as well. If the sexual violence a woman experiences does not kill her, it does lead to the decline of fertility and the plummet of self-esteem.

Marital rape and domestic violence against African women results in widespread fear and intimidation. The fear of being shunned from society and by a woman's family, is by far, a women's greatest fear. In Western Africa, women are often blamed for having "inflicted" violence amongst themselves. For the fear of bringing shame and dishonoring society, many women in Africa refuse to tell their stories. In Western Africa there is a strong social and negative stigma associated with any woman who accuses another for sexual or domestic violence.

The fear and intimidation women experience as a result of widespread partner violence has devastating effects for them and their communities. A recent study in Nigeria found that the threat of being beaten and the experience of marital rape largely determined if women used modern contraceptive methods (Oyedokun 2008). For women in Nigeria and across Western Africa, this has devastating effects on their reproductive health and the general health of the continent. An estimated two-hundred thousand unsafe abortions take place each year in Western Africa (Ngwena 2004). Almost eighty thousand women worldwide die each year from these unsafe procedures and over thirty-

four thousand of those deaths, approximately 40 percent, occur on the African continent (Ngwena 2004).

### **Child Marriage**

42% of African girls are married before the age of eighteen (Nour 2006). Child marriage is a clear violation of a women's rights, one that includes the right to a healthy and happy life, and the right to an education. To closely examine the social context of child marriage, an early marriage not only forces girls to drop out of school at a young age, but permanently disadvantages their educational careers and earning potential (Ouattara, Sen, and Thomson 1998). A study in Ghana examined whether sexual and domestic violence was more common with early marriage. Unsurprisingly over 70% of girls aged 18-20 who were asked to participate in this experiment, said that they were forced into sexual abuse within their marriage. This same study demonstrated that married girls also had a 50% higher likelihood than unmarried girls of becoming infected with HIV. This risk was even higher (59%) in Gambia (Nour 2006). Forcing young girls to marry far older men who have already had multiple sex partners, coupled with their low socioeconomic status, and their poor access to health care, the rate of violence against women in Africa is now the highest in the world (Nour 2006).

### **Other forms of violence in Western Africa**

The violence directed towards African women is unfathomable. Perhaps most familiar to the West are the human rights atrocities such as ethnic rapes in Gambia, women's sexual enslavement in the wars of Liberia and Ivory Coast during the 1990s, and the tactic of spreading HIV/AIDS through sexual assault campaigns in Sierra Leone.

From gang rapes to attacks so brutal as to leave girls permanently disabled, African women are encountering levels of sexual violence relatively unprecedented in modernity. In Sierra Leone, it is estimated that more than 72 percent of women and girls were victims of wartime violence, 50 percent of that sexual in nature (Nowrojee 2005). The most heated issue facing African women is the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). However, much of Africa is not involved with the practice as it happens at a regional level, in smaller distinct African communities. Many rural African women, as well as doctors and educated members of African societies, are skeptical of Western FGM eradication efforts. “They do not understand why these foreigners are so obsessed with African women’s genitals, especially when African women themselves do not see this tradition as the most pressing problem they face” (Antonazzo, 2003).

### **What is being done?**

Western African states have an obligation to protect women from violence, and to hold perpetrators accountable and to provide justice and remedies to women. However, eliminating violence against women still remains as one of our biggest challenges of all times. Much more remains to be done to create an environment where women can live free from gender-based violence. Western Africa must take conclusive steps to ensure a social environment where violence against women is not tolerated.

Having said this, many measures have been taken to prevent violence against women. Western Africa is a part of CEDAW: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. about violence against women. All countries in Western Africa ratify to this Convention and the

Government's' progress and efforts in implementing it. By ratifying the Convention, the Governments has obligations to submit to the Secretary-General a report on the legislative, judicial, administrative or other measures that they have adopted to implement the Convention and report on their progress, efforts as well as indicate factors and difficulties in implementation.

The International Criminal Tribunals Act has been put in place by many specific countries in Western Africa, more specifically in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria and most recently, Sierra Leone (Antonazzo 2003). The act recognized that “sexual violence including rape as acts of torture, as crimes against humanity and an element of genocide in some circumstances.” The Special Court for Sierra Leone included forced marriage in an indictment. The Criminal Justice system has held that the sexual abuse of a women is not only a form of physical violence, but mental abuse which violated her rights to freedom from torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The High Court in Africa, has established a ban against sexual violence in all regions, with strict measures taken to improve women’s security. Western Africa is part of the Human Rights Council treaty agreeing to “*Reaffirming* the obligation of all States to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and reaffirming also that violence against women is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” (Resolution 7/24 2008). Western Africa has taken many steps forward, to ensure that violence against women will be eliminated.

### **What must be done?**

Unfortunately, violence against women still persists at a rural and regional level. This is due to a variety of factors. One being that most regional officials in Western

Africa are not trained in the law. For example, domestic abuse is banned in Burkina Faso, but the police in some areas are not trained on the law and are not implementing it; it has a prevalence rate of 46% among the rural community. I strongly believe that in promoting a more effective society, there should be a period of re-education for the men and women in Western Africa.

Secondly, the fear and intimidation a woman feels that prevents her from going to the courts must be eradicated. We must not only push an implementation on the law by training officials, but by also allowing communities to have open discussions. Speaking with the United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa, Ms. Angela Lusigi, she has echoed the previous sentiments expressed. Ms. Lusigi strongly believes in a period of re-education from the start. “There is so much silence around the issue. First we must get people to have an open conversation. Lots of countries have laws preventing gender-based violence but there are many illiterate people who do not know how to go to courts. Talking to the men is also important. In Senegal sometimes men are trapped in this cycle of violence because that is how the social norms play out. We must change how children are raised. Teach them to have open conversations from a young age.”

Violence against women happens in various parts of Western Africa, which is what makes it so difficult to tackle, “Violence against women and girls continued unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women’s lives, on their families, and on societies as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence –yet the reality is too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned” (UN SG-Ban Ki Moon 2007). This structural violence, ingrained in customary law, is a major impediment to a

woman's daily life as well. What is desperately needed is a way to educate communities about the impact of violence against women and reintegrate victims of violence into society. Women empowerment plays a key role in this. Educating communities and having them work together to listen to these victim's stories, and to learn about their repercussions of their actions is highly important. There must be action at the grassroots level: educate communities about the rights women have under modern law and offer pro bono legal advice to victims so that they can defend their cases in court. Women must take the proper action needed in order to combat against the violence.

### **Conclusion**

Though violence against women still remains a pressing issue, by following by example and working together as a community, we can learn to defeat it. Everyone regardless of sex, deserves the chance to lead a happy and equal life. By eliminating violence as another form of discrimination against women, we ensure a fuller path to the road of success, and finally fulfilling the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals: that no one, gets left behind.

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