



PREVENTING SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

in Liberian Schools

CASE STUDY 2024

Title page: A little boy smiles despite his village being struck by a deadly disease, Liberia, 2010.
Photo credit: Carielle Doe, IFRC.

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The Liberian Red Cross is urging continued vigilance and good hygiene practices to prevent a resurgence of the Ebola epidemic, Buchanan, Liberia, 2015. Photo credit: Victor Lacken, IFRC.

Background

Liberia, a West African nation with a predominantly youthful population (over 60% below age 35), grapples with significant challenges in its education system compounded by high rates of violence against children and adolescents, especially girls.¹ Ranked 19th among the top 100 countries with the highest risks to education, according to Save the Children's 2022 "Build Forward Better" report, Liberia faces a pressing need to address this issue.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), declared a national emergency in 2020, pervades school environments, with alarming rates reported among students, particularly girls.²

One in five learners – both girls and boys – report experiencing SGBV and gender-based violence (GBV) from teachers or staff, often associated with 'sex for grades' practices.³

Cultural norms and a lack of accountability contribute to underreporting, perpetuating the cycle of violence and undermining children's education, health, and well-being.

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the Liberia National Red Cross Society (LNRC) initiated an intervention leveraging its expertise in community-based initiatives and humanitarian action to tackle the root causes of SGBV in schools, foster safer learning environments, and promote holistic development among Liberian children.

Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Local Red Cross volunteers served as catalysts for change, mobilising over 1'000 participants, including students aged 12-23 and various community stakeholders, across 13 schools in rural areas.

1 UNICEF Liberia, *Child Protection*.

2 UNESCO IIEP Dakar, Africa Office, Global Partnership for Education, World Bank, *Education sector analysis: Republic of Liberia, (2022)*.

3 Ministry of Education Republic of Liberia, *Getting to Best Education Sector Plan 2017-2021*.

Through two days sessions on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and zero tolerance, students engaged in awareness-raising activities and dialogues on the deep-rooted cultural beliefs and societal attitudes that enable perpetrators to commit SGBV and reinforce gender inequality.

Insights gained from examining prevalent practices such as 'sex for grades' and 'sex for school fees' were enlightening, leading to increased awareness and a shift in perceptions among students.

A 17-year-old girl in the ninth grade pointed out:

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Until now, I really did not consider having sex with a male teacher as a case of sexual exploitation or abuse. I have always felt that it was an advantage to be a female - something which could make it easier to have better grades because you can use your “natural power” to have sex with the teacher for grades. Now after understanding the negative consequences that this has for me and for my future, and in fact realizing that this is an abuse of my rights, and that I have a space to report, this has given me a new way to look at this.

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Students were also equipped with information and resources to prevent such occurrences, recognize, and report instances of abuse, and cultivate a nurturing environment for survivors.



Young community members join a Red Cross community engagement and social mobilization session near Monrovia, Liberia, 2014.
Photo credit: Stephen Ryan, IFRC.



Rain or shine, volunteers engage with their local communities to change minds and attitudes about Ebola. Liberia. 2010. Photo credit: Carielle Doe, IFRC

Empowering Children to Advocate for Their Rights and Contributing to Safe Learning Environments

Since 2010, the LNRC's engagement with school clubs has been pivotal for its Youth and Volunteer Department in fostering youth engagement aimed at driving social and behavioral change within communities. With established Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Child Protection policies, the organization now collaborates with 20 school clubs across 8 high schools spanning 7 counties. Through comprehensive training, sensitization, and life skills mentorship, the LNRC empowers students to proactively safeguard children's rights and cultivate a culture of zero tolerance for violence within their communities.

During the implementation of this project, nine school clubs within three chapters actively participated through awareness campaigns and training sessions. These engagements encouraged students to take proactive measures in safeguarding children's rights and promoting a culture of zero tolerance for violence within their communities. Students were involved in identifying protection issues, expressing their concerns, and devising strategies to establish safer learning environments.

Leveraging local community radios, mass awareness campaigns (particularly during local market days), and peer-to-peer interactions, the students and their mentor teachers disseminated their messages to peers, parents, local authorities, and the wider public. In Rivergee County, advocacy campaigns led by school clubs targeted adolescents' substance use, 'sex for grades,' and teenage pregnancies leading to school dropouts.

Critical messages concerning the causes and consequences of these issues were effectively conveyed through organized parades and indoor programs, engaging a diverse array of stakeholders including the student body, school administrators, local parent-teacher associations, members of the Motorcyclist Union, the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Liberian National Police, and other community representatives. These initiatives fostered community engagement and facilitated concerted efforts to address the challenges at hand. Additionally, representatives from various institutions convened to discuss their roles in addressing these challenges, further enhancing collaboration and coordination among stakeholders.

Strengthening Reporting and Response Mechanisms

As observed during the initial discussions with the girls and boys, the ability to report incidents and seek assistance was previously impeded by a lack of trusted individuals within the learning environment and limited understanding of available referral pathways.

Facilitators from the LNRCS worked to ensure that community members had access to hotline numbers for reporting safeguarding incidents, thus empowering survivors and witnesses to seek assistance confidentially.

While there has been no reports submitted to the system thus far, students expressed awareness of its existence and felt empowered to voice their concerns regarding issues affecting them. However, widespread distrust in State services and institutions, coupled with limited success in prosecuting perpetrators or providing reparations to survivors, may pose challenges in fostering tangible behavioural changes.

Recommendations:

- Engage in discussions about harmful gender norms and practices to address safeguarding concerns and promote equal access to education.
- Establish safe school committees and clubs to raise awareness of children's rights and facilitate safe reporting.
- Incorporate SGBV prevention and response training into educational efforts.
- Advocate for improved legal and institutional frameworks to safeguard children's rights and hold perpetrators accountable.



A Red Cross volunteer educates communities on drug abuse and calls on the government to support the fight against it, Liberia, 2023. Photo credit: Liberia Red Cross.