

Liberia: Experts Call for Sustained Advocacy, Coordinated Effort in Curbing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence at Cummings Africa Foundation's sponsored Anti-Rape, SGBV Forum



By Gerald C. Koinyeneh

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Speaking on the theme “Understanding Liberia’s Rape Crisis- How Do We overcome it Together,” the panelists, in separate remarks, called for concrete reforms to shape cultural attitudes and robust sets of preventative measures to tackle the problems of rape and other forms of SGBV against women and children.

Monrovia – A group of experts comprising of human rights activists and law enforcement officer have called for sustained advocacy and coordinated fight against rape and Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) against women and children.

The experts include Madam Faith Akovi Cooper, Country Director of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Ms. Oneta Roberts, Director of SGBV/Domestic Violence Unit Program at the Ministry of Justice and and Cllr. Joyce Reeves Woods of the Association of Female lawyers of Liberia (AFELL).

Other panelists include Lena Cummings, Project Coordinator, Women NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL), Eric Nagbe, National Coordinator, Servants of all Prayer (SOAP) Men's Ministry and officer Joseph K. Kowel, a Supervisor, at the Liberia National Police.

They spoke during a panel discussion at the ongoing 'Capacity Development Training in SGBV Trauma' sponsored by the Cummings Africa Foundation (CAF).

Speaking on the theme "Understanding Liberia's Rape Crisis- How Do We overcome it Together," the panelists, in separate remarks, called for concrete reforms to shape cultural attitudes and robust sets of preventative measures to tackle the problem of rape and other forms of SGBV against women and children.

Some of these measures, as outlined by Madam Faith Akovi Cooper, include male engagement, incorporating gender education in school's curriculum at an early age sustained awareness.

"We need sustained advocacy. Not just one time, when someone gets rape, we jump in to the streets... But what are we doing individually as citizens of this country to get involved in sustained advocacy?" Madam Cooper asked.

She continued: "Political will is a must. Let me remind you, the responsibility of any nation is its ability to protect its people. As a nation we must prioritize the needs of our people by ensuring services are budgeted for in our national budget; by advocating for us to prioritize the needs of survivors.

The construction of a rehabilitation took center stage as the panelists called for the construction of the Cheesemanburg Rehabilitation Center to reduce the overcrowded South Beach Prison and to launch a proper rehabilitation program for inmates, including juveniles.

"Our psychiatrist can tell you, you cannot rehabilitate in a space that the rapists and criminals are in right now," said Ms. Roberts of the Ministry of Justice.

“We hope that we can build this facility in Cheesmanburg that is going to house 6,000 inmates, specifically with a wing for juveniles. The juveniles must be separate from 18 [years old] and above because if a child is incarcerated with a serial rapist, that rapist is going to rape him and when he gets out of that prison, he is going to continue.”

For her part, Cllr. Woods noted that a proper rehabilitation center would be pivotal in curbing crimes including rape.

“If we start to prosecute people more and we have places to put them there, and we start to do rehabilitation, which is what we don’t have in this country... because when somebody goes to prison and there is rehabilitation, it is highly likely that when that person comes out, they will not go back to be menace.”

“We have to work with the government to see how we can open Cheesemanburg and move the people from this Center Street. Because we are creating more problems when we continue to have people in Center Street.”



For his part Officer Joseph K. Kowel called for more support to the police to address logistical problems encountered during the arrest and prosecution of perpetrators, as well as more support to survivors of rape and other forms of SGBV.

Ms. Cummings of also reiterated the need for sustained advocacy, safe home and support for survivors, while Mr. Nagbe of SOAP called for the involvement of men in anti-SGBV and rape activities.

Meanwhile, CAF said its anti-rape/SGBV initiative is in response to the national clarion call by the Government of Liberia to address the country's rape crisis.

It is also in addition to CAF's ongoing support including the provision of grants to organizations serving SGBV survivors.

Phase one of the workshop kicked off in Monrovia on Wednesday, January 6 and is expected to end this Saturday, January 9; while phase two runs from January 11 to the 14 2021, the CAF said.

It is being facilitated by renowned Psychologist and Professor, Dr. Francien Chenoweth Richardson of the Immaculata University based in the United States of America. It is also being attended by several Liberians from diverse backgrounds.

Despite the legislation of a law making rape a non-bailable criminal offence, and the establishment of a special court- Criminal Court E to fast track rape cases, rape and sexual and gender-based violence against women and children keep rising.

Following mass protest against the menace by advocacy groups including CSO and local and international non-governmental organizations, the Government of Liberia declared rape a national emergency.

CAF, in a statement said it welcomes the steps taken by the Government, and as part of effort toward combating the menace, it has embarked on rendering assistance, advocacy and creating awareness.

Assistance

In a statement on its Website, the Foundation said it will facilitate assistance to survivors of rape and SGBV by supporting safe homes and temporary emergency shelters; adding it has already identified organizations to work directly with in this regard.

“The foundation will retain the services of a specialist in mental health and counseling to provide training to other counselors in assisting and impacting survivors across Liberia. The mental anguish, long term effect and devastation of rape and SGBV trauma should never be underestimated!” the statement said.

Advocacy

CAF furthered revealed that it will identify legal professionals and organizations to assist in providing legal guidance to survivors to minimize the fear and intimidation in dealing with the legal process that many survivors experience under such traumatic situations.

In addition, the Foundation mentioned that it supports the establishment of a sex offender registry for public access and for the expansion of Criminal Court E, otherwise called “The Rape Court” to all counties. It also expressed willingness to partner with others and participate in the ongoing national dialogue and engagements with the Liberian Government through relevant agencies, and various stakeholders in addressing the rape crisis.

Awareness

For its awareness component, CAF says it is embarking on a public information campaign to include Public Service Announcements (PSAs) on multiple media platforms including print, broadcast and online.

It will also support youth organizations including those in high schools and college campuses to promote anti-rape and SGBV awareness and work with local artists, entertainers and cultural performing groups on developing messages that will resonate across Liberia’s rural and traditional populations.

CAF outreach will also include support to men’s organizations as “Agents of Change” in countering the rape crisis, the foundation said in the statement.

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