

Liberia

UNDERAGE PROSTITUTION IS RAMPANT IN A SOCIETY REELING FROM POVERTY AND WAR

Short-time Girls

BY CLAIR MACDOUGALL

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD JATU stood under a dull October sky on the stoop of her zinc-roofed, one-room concrete shack in New Kru Town, one of the poorest communities in Monrovia. Chubby teenage schoolgirls approached, in green tunics and with neatly braided hair, their black shoes clicking against the dusty, uneven road. Jatu's tank top scooped across her breasts and heavily padded bra—what locals call an “iron-titty bra”—and her skin-tight leggings sat low across her buttocks, revealing her butt crack—her “junction,” as it is known in “colloqui,” or Liberian English. Jatu has fine cheekbones and brown eyes, framed by close-cropped hair—she wears it this way because she cannot afford to get it braided. As the girls passed, she turned away to hide the scars carved into the left side of her face, neck and shoulders, reminders of when she was mowed down by a taxi at the age of eight. The driver abandoned the car and fled, leaving Jatu for dead.

Since then, Jatu's life has been shaped by a series of injustices that are quotidian for many girls in Liberia. This small West African nation, ravaged by civil war through the 1990s and early 2000s, is one of the poorest in the world—the European Commission estimates that over half the population lives in extreme poverty, on less than \$0.50 a day. Born to a single mother with two other children, in a poor fishing community near New Kru Town called Crab Hole, Jatu told me she left home voluntarily at age eleven after sensing she was a burden on her family. Unable to pay tuition fees, she dropped out of school and moved in with an older friend, who soon took her to a club where they met a couple of “boys.” Together, they danced to pounding music, sipped beers, and then parted. Jatu's friend said she would meet her at a nearby street junction, but disappeared. As Jatu walked out onto a dark road, she was met by two of the boys, who said they had paid her friend to “have” her. Before she could argue, they dragged her behind a car and raped her.

That was Jatu's first taste of life on the street. Back then she was “forced,” but soon she started to “willingly” barter

her body—“cut *jopu*,” as the locals say—on the road, in bars and in nightclubs, for goods or a little money, sometimes less than a dollar a session. For a time, she lived with nine other girls in a tiny room, kept by an older woman who took a cut of her earnings, and sent what money she could to her ailing mother. Jatu now works independently, and pays “gronna boys”—street hustlers—for protection. She still sends money to her family.

There is no reliable count of underage prostitutes such as Jatu in Monrovia, but the police say the number of these “short-time” girls is rising. Unlike in many developing countries, where children are trafficked and forced into sex work by crime syndicates, many Liberian girls are encouraged to cut *jopu* by their families and friends, among whom their work is an open but largely unspoken secret. Most of the girls I spoke to continued to live with their families, contributing money they claimed came from an “uncle” or “friend.” This tacit acceptance of underage prostitution is driven partly by economic need, but is also rooted in certain aspects of the local culture. Liberia's patriarchal norms mean women and girls are expected to take the lead in supporting households even though they wield less social power, and many romantic and sexual relations in the country today are transactional. As Butterfly, a local hip-hop artist, raps in a popular song referring to her “apple”—“you take it you pay.”

“You carry that case to the police station that a dead case,” Naomi said. “You yourself will go in jail.”

Sitting in her small office in Congo Town, a relatively affluent part of the city, Korto Williams, the country director of ActionAid, an organisation that promotes women's rights, spoke of a pervasive “culture of the sugar daddy.” According to Williams, Liberia has a long history of fetishising and abusing young girls, who were, in the past, often married off to older men soon after they reached puberty. Before the civil war, it was common for well-off families to take on girls from remote villages as domestic workers, usually on the promise of paying for their education. Under such arrangements, these girls were often also forced to have sex with the man of the house, and sent back home if they became pregnant. During the war, many young girls became “girlfriends” of generals and soldiers in exchange for food, material goods and protection. Today, Williams said, the legacy of sexual violence during the war has become an excuse for widespread abuse of girls and women. The problem exists in homes, on the streets, and even in schools. In a recent study commissioned jointly by the government and several international NGOs, 18 percent of girls and 13 percent of boys reported having been asked for sex by their teachers in exchange for better grades. Three-quarters of boys and almost a quarter of girls agreed that “men are superior to women,” and almost half the boys and about a third of the girls agreed that “sexual violence and abuse is a normal part of man-woman relations.”



PAOLO PELLEGRIN / MAGNUM PHOTOS

Monrovia, the Liberian capital, has a growing number of nightspots notorious for hosting young girls and their customers.

In recent years the Liberian government has tried to address underage prostitution. Under President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who in 2006 became Africa's first elected female head of state and jointly won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her work on women's rights, progressive policies to improve the lives of women and girls and reduce sexual violence are high on the government's agenda. With assistance from international donors, a Women and Children's Protection Section was established within the Liberian National Police in 2005. It now has almost two hundred staff in fifty-four units across all of Liberia's fifteen counties. In 2006, the country adopted a national plan of action against sexual and gender-based violence, meant to provide healthcare to survivors of assault, speed up the legal response to rape cases, and provide safe homes and support services for abused women and girls. Two years later, a special court was established to try cases of sexual violence under some of the strongest rape laws in Africa, which punish statutory rape—defined as any instance of a person over the age of eighteen having sex with a person under that age—with life imprisonment.

But many activists question the impact of these laws and policies. The special court has completed just eighteen trials in the last four years, with only a handful of convictions. Last year it completed only five trials, and dismissed 93 percent of the cases brought before it citing administrative and investigative inefficiency. A recent World Bank report complained of mismanagement in the gender crimes unit, ineffective investigations, a limited number of prosecutors, and a slow judicial process. The scale of underage rape in Liberia remains staggering. According to figures from the Ministry of Gender and Development, in 2012, 68 percent of reported rape cases involved victims between the ages of three months and fourteen years. In 2011, three quarters of the perpetrators in reported cases were relatives, friends, neighbours or intimate partners of the survivors.

While much of the abuse goes on behind closed doors, underage prostitution is impossible to ignore. Monrovia has a high, and growing, number of corners, hotels and nightspots notorious for hosting young girls and their cus-

tomers. The police's failure to tackle the problem is as conspicuous as the prostitution itself. Occasional raids have only created fear of the police among many girls, who saw these as efforts to "chase" them away, and not to help. When she was twelve, Jatu was forced to have sex with an officer who helped retrieve some money owed to her by a customer. She offered to pay him, but "the policeman say I not pay but he must have me." Other girls complained of being robbed by the police, and chose to avoid them rather than report cases of abuse. "You carry that case to the police station that a dead case," Jatu's friend Naomi, who is also fourteen, said. "You yourself will go in jail." Despite official efforts at rape education, very few of the girls I met understood the concept of statutory rape or knew where to turn for help. For most, cutting jopu remained simply "business."

In the face of these problems, and given the lack of other employment options, helping Liberia's short-time girls is especially difficult. Sitting in her dimly lit office behind Monrovia's rundown police headquarters late last year, Vera K Manly, the head of the Women and Children's Protection Section, told me rehabilitation remained a major obstacle. "If you are taking the child from the street, the child must go through some processes ... to stop them from going further in the streets," she said. While there are plans to build a national safe home for these girls, currently the government has only three safe homes, all in Monrovia, which have, at most, the capacity to house girls for a few days at a time. Beside these factors, Manly said, solving the problem will also require a change in attitudes. "I think culture plays a major role on what perception the man has to have sex with small girls," she said.

One afternoon, I joined Jatu and Naomi (whose names have been changed for their protection) in Jatu's shack as they prepared rice and soup for lunch. "My ma born me but my ma passed away," Naomi said, and added that she didn't know where her father was. With no one to care for her, Naomi turned to "short time" when she was twelve, with the help of a thirteen-year-old friend. She said she had never been tested for HIV, and that "I don't believe that AIDS is real." Unlike other girls, who call cutting jopu "business," Naomi described the work as "rape." She also defined statutory rape: "when the person force you against your will and you too small." Staring at a blackened coal pot with dour, dark eyes, she told me she saw no other way to earn a living. Jatu and Naomi earn from 100 to 150 Liberian dollars from each customer. They make, at most, 450 Liberian dollars—roughly \$5—for a day's work. "You sit down and say, oh when you do not do this one you will not eat," Naomi said.

Jatu had little hope of help or change. One night in November, I saw her join another girl for a night of work in a club beside St Paul Bridge, which lies between New Kru Town and Crab Hole. Jatu covered her scars with a scarf and joined her friend to dance under huge, booming speakers. They kept their faces turned down as young men edged toward them, and carefully avoided eye contact. ■