

Women **WON'T** wait

End HIV & Violence Against Women. **NOW.**

Position Statement
by
the 'Women Won't Wait' Coalition
Monday, December 22, 2008

We are writing in reference to a statement made by Liberia's Information Minister, Lawrence Bropleh on the rape of a 9 year old girl and associated insinuations that men who want to rape should seek older women and sex workers for such 'services'. As women of Liberia, we are grateful and recognize the high level of political will and robust women's rights agenda of President Sirleaf. We also appreciate the collective approach that has been employed by diverse stakeholders to address Violence against Women. It is within our authority as a stakeholder working against VAW and contributing to the protection and improvement of women's condition and position in the Liberian society that we address the underlying implications of the Minister's statement. The Minister's statement undermines the gravity of rape of women and its bi-directional links with HIV; and the national context of prostitution and survival sex and their link to poverty.

We the members of the WWW Coalition, comprising several women's organizations involved in rights-based advocacy have elected to react to the Minister's statement which in our view seems to put women at high risk in a country where rape is now the single most reported crime. The coalition's primary priority is to address the national mindset by raising societal awareness about the criminality of violence against women and girls, especially sexual violence and its multiple impacts. We see Min. Bropleh's statement as one that threatens the rights of women, including sex workers, as the option given to alleged rapists to seek sexual services in other places especially among adult women reinforces sexual objectification of Liberian women, and undermines the campaign to end violence against women. In the discourse on rape, it is essential to introduce the reality of unequal power relations which translates to domestic violence, rape and other forms of violence against women, molded in a deeply patriarchal context. Therefore, there is need to recognize this and ensure that the rights of women are protected, not only by lip-service but also in a practical ways that helps women contribute to Liberia's development. There is an increasingly impelling need for greater women's participation in the nation's post-war reconstruction drive, as it lends credibility to the process.

We, the members of the WWW Coalition, agree with the Information Minister on a zero tolerance stance on rape, however the recent statement is counterproductive to the ongoing anti-GBV campaign. In our analysis, it is suggestive of an emerging trend in Liberia which adds more weight to rape of children as opposed to women who have sexual experience. The rape law protects everyone and does not grant extra favors based on age. The severity and brutality of this violation on women is diminished especially in rural settings, serving as a barrier to the implementation of the rape law. The statement by the Information Minister undermines our efforts and the Government of Liberia acknowledgement of women's rights through its ratification of the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the AU Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

Our position is not limited to a critical press release. We would like for GOL spokespersons, including Min. Bropleh, to review opportunities in the future to understand the multi-dimensional impact of VAW and the need to contextualize this struggle from a right-based perspective. If there is a need to share learnings on our experiences and knowledge based on work around the country, we are willing to do so. We stand ready to do so by providing requisite technical trainings and sharing research outcomes. This step will strengthen the GOL engagement with civil society and avert the possibility of women becoming potential targets of rape perpetrators, thereby infringing on the basic human rights of women, posing security threat and removing their rights of choice and bodily integrity.

Finally, the statement made by the Minister of Information, Culture & Tourism reinforces the ill-conceived notion that a woman is sexual object, available for people seeking sexual services. It supports an emerging and disturbing trend which suggests an accommodation of rape against adult and sexually experienced women. The statement does not incorporate rights-based learnings, national frameworks and responses in its analysis of the rape of the 9 year old girls and the options identified. The options given are insensitive to the extreme poverty conditions that Liberians, especially women, find themselves in. The struggle to end VAW is comprehensive. The GOL role is commendable and we support President Johnson Sirleaf and the Ministry of Gender and Development in the agenda to end all forms of violence against women. We welcome the quality participation of other GOL officials including the Minister of Information and will support his interest in a holistic understanding of patriarchy and its link to VAW and HIV. We would hope that GOL officials, with high positional authority will be sensitive in their public statements on VAW so as not to undermine the gains of the struggle to end violence against women.

END

ActionAid Liberia (AAL), Aiding Disadvantaged Women & Girls (ADWANGA), Bassa Women Development Association (BAWODA), Women of Liberia Peace Network, Women AID Inc. (WAI), Women and Children Development Association of Liberia (WOCDAL), Liberian Women Empowerment Network (LIWEN), Liberia Women Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC)

For contact or any inquiry: 077-748-078