

Liberia: Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Project

The Challenge

Liberia has high rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG). During the 2018-2022 project period, and as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, incidences of gender-based violence (GBV) rose in Liberia, with the lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) for married women rising from 49% in 2013 to 60% in 2020.¹ This period also saw a rise in poverty and food insecurity, which is disproportionately borne by women and girls.

To better understand the implications and adapt project activities to best serve the population, Episcopal Relief & Development, in partnership with its implementing partner—Episcopal Church of Liberia Relief & Development (ECLRD)—commissioned a qualitative research study, conducted by JAC Consultancy to assess the gendered impact and outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls in the project areas in order to strengthen programmatic responses. Findings showed that the pandemic widened the poverty gap, disrupted education, reduced access to health services, and increased incidences of GBV and IPV. As a result, the project directed targeted financial assistance and economic opportunities to the most vulnerable groups, including survivors and women with disabilities.

Social and Behavior Change Approach

Episcopal Relief & Development's SBC approach equips individuals and communities—particularly faith leaders, to drive change and support action to create gender equity and end GBV. Using a reflection, action, and learning approach that starts with self-reflection, the model equips agents of change to drive important behavior changes within the community.

The Approach

The Ending Violence Against Women & Girls (EVAWG) project in Liberia project mobilizes and equips faith leaders and youth with social and behavior change strategies and tailored tools so that they succeed as agents of change in their communities. Thousands of men and women Christian and Muslim faith leaders and youth have been spearheading processes of change in their rural Liberian communities to prevent VAWG and strengthen support and access to services for survivors. The project was first launched in 2015 by ECLRD, in partnership with Episcopal Relief & Development. It expanded over the past four years to four counties and 54 rural communities.

¹ Tsegaw, M., Mulat, B. & Shitu, K. Intimate partner violence and associated factors among reproductive age women in Liberia: a cross-sectional study using a recent Liberian demographic and health survey. *BMC Women's Health* **22**, 238 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01830-x>

The model takes a social and behavior change (SBC) approach rooted around the role of religion and culture and focusing on faith leaders' influence in both maintaining the status quo or changing social norms and individual behaviors. Leaders are first mobilized and equipped as agents of change and supported as they speak out, lead SBC dialogues and take action to prevent and respond to GBV. For many faith leaders, this involves engaging in an experiential learning process with scriptures to change their own beliefs prior to committing to EAVWG activism. To better facilitate this process, the project adopted a Facts, Association, Meaning, and Action (FAMA) process with picture cards with the front of the card illustrating positive or negative aspects of VAWG, gender equality or healthy relationships and the back containing a facilitator-guided sequence of questions for participants to discuss. The process encourages faith leaders, who later become the facilitators, and community members to reflect, share personal stories and formulate their own ideas and solutions to VAWG.

The model invests in youth leaders who are critical to transforming the mindsets of their peers to produce long-term, generational impact. Using creative arts methods, including storytelling and role playing, as well as sport events, young people deliver key project messages in partnership with Christian and Muslim youth groups at schools and via community events and radio shows. The project further aims to increase gender equality, VAWG prevention and response, and women's economic empowerment through women's Savings & Loan Groups that provide access to financial capital, training and social cohesion among group members. Additionally, the project prioritizes multilevel coordination and structural connections with the full range of service providers for survivors to ensure meaningful responses and accountability on the part of government.

2018-2022 REACH



The comprehensive evaluation of the program 2018-2022 found that it demonstrated the power of investing in faith leaders and youth in achieving sustainable community change from the inside out. Findings documented the effectiveness of the program's social and behavior change strategies, training and communication tools which mobilized and equipped agents of change:

- FAMA Dialogues with local picture cards were widely cited as a powerful process for people's reflection, learning, and action to support ending VAWG;
- 864 Faith Leaders participated in a five-day experiential learning workshop, engaging with scriptures and VAWG prevention and response issues using a Faith Leaders Toolkit. As a result, they spoke out against VAWG and took direct action to support survivors;
- Trained youth led drama and other creative activities to promote healthy, anti-violence and gender-equitable attitudes and practices in young people; they worked with school staff to form 36 school-based GBV Committees;
- Women's Savings & Loan groups strengthened their economic status, while providing safe spaces to discuss VAWG and take problem-solving action.

The evaluation identified a range of positive impacts through the program, with clear evidence of improvements in participants' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, including:

- Knowledge of VAWG services for survivors of violence increased among women and adolescent girls and boys.
- Anti-VAWG and gender-equitable attitudes increased for all congregant groups, i.e., men, women, adolescent boys and girls
- Women's experience of intimate partner violence decreased, along with men's perpetration of IPV in three out of four counties. Adolescent boys' perpetration of IPV also decreased.

The evaluation made some recommendations for program strengthening which Episcopal Relief & Development and ECLRD are working to address. In addition, a set of best practices employed by the Liberia program, including interfaith collaboration, experiential, scripture-based training of faith leaders as key influencers, the FAMA card dialogues for self-directed social and behavior change, and multi-sector engagement, are being integrated into Episcopal Relief & Development's broader GBV portfolio of projects.