Citizen Engagement with Government
to Combat Child Sexual Abuse and Rape in Liberia

The TGCI Liberian Citizen-Government Engagement Project (CGEP) seeks to engage citizens and government in interventions to combat child sexual abuse and gender based violence in Liberia. Through engaging citizens with publicity through radio, posters, and community meetings, and providing an SMS and hotline system to citizens and Government, the project addresses sexual abuse and rape by increasing knowledge of the issue, rates of reporting, response by government offices, and persecution of perpetrators. The current stage of the project is a scaling up to four counties from an initial pilot that covered just two counties.

Latest Feedback Loop and Consultations

As explained in our last blog, TGEC approaches monitoring and evaluation for ongoing learning and adaptation, by using feedback loops to regularly gather data and engage citizens, government officials and project staff through collaborative reviews of the project activities and outcomes. This blog shares the results of the latest feedback loop, consultations and actions.

In late May and early June, a third wave of data collection occurred in each of the four counties where the project is piloted (Montserrado, Margibi, Cape Mount, and Bomi). There was a government officials focus group within each county. Then, five communities were selected within each county in which to conduct one focus group with community members, one with boys (ranging between ages 12-17), and one with girls (in the same age range). In one community, there was not an adult focus group conducted. This led to 63 total focus groups involving a total of 819 stakeholders across these four counties in Liberia.

Focus Group with Youth in Bentol City

All focus groups took place in peri-urban communities except for four communities within Margibi that are rural. There was not a noticeable difference between the rural and peri-urban communities. The results below highlight information summarized from the focus groups.

Youth's Limited Access to the Hotline and SMS for Reporting Abuse

- The Focus groups revealed a clear difference in access to phones between adults and children (boys and girls under the age of 18). The majority of children did not have access to a phone. In contrast, most adults had their own telephone. Only three adult focus groups across the nineteen communities shared that more than 20% of participants did not have a phone.

- The TGCI system provides individuals with the option to either text(SMS) or call (hotline) to report cases of gender based violence. There was no clear pattern to preferences across different groups, but rather a sense that both formats were equally valued and the two options allowed participants to choose the best method for their needs. The rationale for either method included:
  - SMS was thought to be more secretive, allowing participants to report crimes even while *standing with the very perpetrator.* However, the ability to utilize SMS was hindered by technical knowledge of phones, the SMS process, literacy, and spelling. There was also a perception that if individuals sent a text, they would not know if it was truly received and being acted upon.

    The ability to call was more accessible to individuals regardless of education level and guaranteed an immediate response. A girls' focus group in Cape Mount county explained, *If you text the hotline, it is possible that you may not get a response. But if you call directly and there is no response, you are aware of that and you will keep on trying.* As a negative feature, calling the hotline was linked to less confidentiality for reporters.

- Recent TGCI measures targeted women and children to increase their reporting of gender based violence. While these efforts seem to spur an increase in reporting amongst some women, youth typically sought out trusted adults such as the community chairman, police, school staff, or officials from the Ministry of Gender or Ministry of Health. For both groups, additional intervention is still needed as there was a widespread impression that for many communities, ***the women and the youth are not reporting these cases to the hotline but they are reporting the cases to their husbands or the community leaders***

Youth Speak Out: Continued Prevalence of Violence and Abuse

- For the 18 year and under focus groups, most youth expressed that they were not safe in their communities. Domestic, physical, and sexual violence were common alongside drug use, neglect, and even witchcraft. Children were routinely sent to work in the market or fishing. In rare exceptions, communities where youth

Please Don't Hide It
Report All Cases of Sexual Abuse

Right: The good neighbor is now immediately and secretly sending an SMS of WHAT happened, WHERE it took place and WHEN it occurred to the Local Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection SMS base platform, for the situation to be arrested....

Above: A 47 years old man just sexually abuse the 14 years old girl, who was tricked into the his house for the purpose of buying the milk candy she was hawking. He used that opportunity to sexually abuse the little girl.

Everybody can take part in this fight against sexual abuse. This means all women, men, and children above 9 years old can report any case or incident of sexual abuse. Please don't hide it, just report it and be free.

You can report any case of sexual abuse to your county hotline simply by texting the following: 1. What happened 2. The location, and 3. The time, to the below numbers.

If you dont have a phone, you can still help to stop or prevent sexual abuse. You can either contact any nearby police station or social welfare officers in your community to report the case.

You can also call the number to give report of what happened if you can't text.

Think about what you can do to improve your community. Think about what you can do to help women and girls in your community. Think about your family. Sexual abuse is not only dangerous, it can destroy your community. Please help stop sexual abuse!

Bomi County: 0775.607.493, Grand Cape Mount County: 0777.948.725, Margibi County: 0776.628.745, Monsterrado: 0775.893.512

did express feeling safe often identified a vigilance from community leaders or multiple stakeholders (e.g., parents, community leaders, police, government officials).

- For girls, sexual violence and harassment were rampant. Girls were often trapped in an exploitive cycle where they were abused by relatives, strangers, or adults with power over the money. The victims were then blamed for instigating the gender based violence*, on grounds that the victims were indecent in their dressing that resulted to them being abused.* If a girl fell pregnant from rape, she was castigated and isolated from society, often forced to drop out of school and leave her parents' house. As a result, government officials shared cases in which they suspected that a sexual assault occurred because of a teenage pregnancy, but the victim/survivors weas unwilling to come forward.

- Compromise, whereby an adult in power seeks to suppress the information about the case of abuse and negotiate with the perpetrator, continues to be rampant across Liberia. Community leaders, policemen, and family members all contributed to compromising in the community, a theme recurring from the second wave of analysis.

Response and referral of reports of child sexual abuse

- Rurality limited police ability to get to crime scenes and respond to cases; in some cases, evidence was destroyed and perpetrators escaped. Lack of transport was pervasive to all aspects of the response process and prevented victims from getting prompt medical care, officials from reaching crime scenes, and all parties from accessing court facilities during the trial phase.

- There was a sense that at any point these cases could be 'compromised'. The word compromised was used by participants to refer to cases where deals were made or complaints were dropped rather than reaching adjudication. The pressure to not pursue cases was widespread. One focus group shared that "*community people's view of rape is different, therefore they do everything possible traditionally to compromise the case. They don't see it has a crime but an opportunity to marry girls under age.*" Community officials could be complacent in the compromising of cases by demanding bribes, refusing to act, or destroying evidence.

Youth Help Youth, Lack of Public Resourses
- For youth, the theme of friendship was particularly salient. Participants could proactively address rape by sharing the hotline number or knowledge with friends. When rape did occur, youth could draw upon their peers for support. A group of girls shared one such example: *A girl from [school] had a friend who was raped by an elderly man in the community, when we went for the health discussion she told the white lady all that happened to her friend and the people informed the police and the perpetrator was arrested but later was freed due to lack of evidence.*

Students Engaged in the CGE Campaign

- Youth also identified the need to challenge the stigma associated with survivors of sexual violence. Multiple groups of youth spoke about the need to *bring [survivors] closer to ourselves*, *make them our best friends*, *encourage them that all is not lost, and love them very well*.
- Across focus groups, participants agreed that there are not sufficient services for survivors of sexual assault. This was consistent data acquired during the second round of focus groups that noted the lack of resources to support the investigation, adjudication, and healing processes. Participants identified a need for resources such as safe houses, continuous support, counseling, medication, and food.

Adjusting our practice and next steps

As a result of the stakeholder group recommendations, the TGCI team intensified its awareness campaign approach, and strengthened its targeting of women and children. For example, more of the awareness messages on radio stations were directed towards the women and children who the consultative groups suggested lacked confidence in sending reports of sexual abuse to the system. The team printed smaller pocket versions of our awareness posters and targeted these towards market places, churches, mosques - as well as at gatherings of youth and women's organisations.

A third feedback loop cycle began in May 2017. This field work will inform consultations with citizen, government officials and project staff consultations in each county, seeking to use that information to improve strategies, messages, access to the hotline and SMS system, and the presentation of results from the government database systems.

About TGCI and the CGE Project

TGCI is an international NGO that brings together people and organisations to address global issues within and across countries. TGCI, with funding support from Making All Voices Count, is coordinating the implementation of the Liberian Citizen-Government Engagement Project. For more about the project see www.endingsexualabuse.org; for more about TGCI see www.theglobalcitizensinitiative.org