



**AFTER A FEW WEEKS,
EVERYTHING GOES QUIET**

**SEXUAL ABUSE
SETTLEMENT
AND SURVIVORS IN SIERRA LEONE**


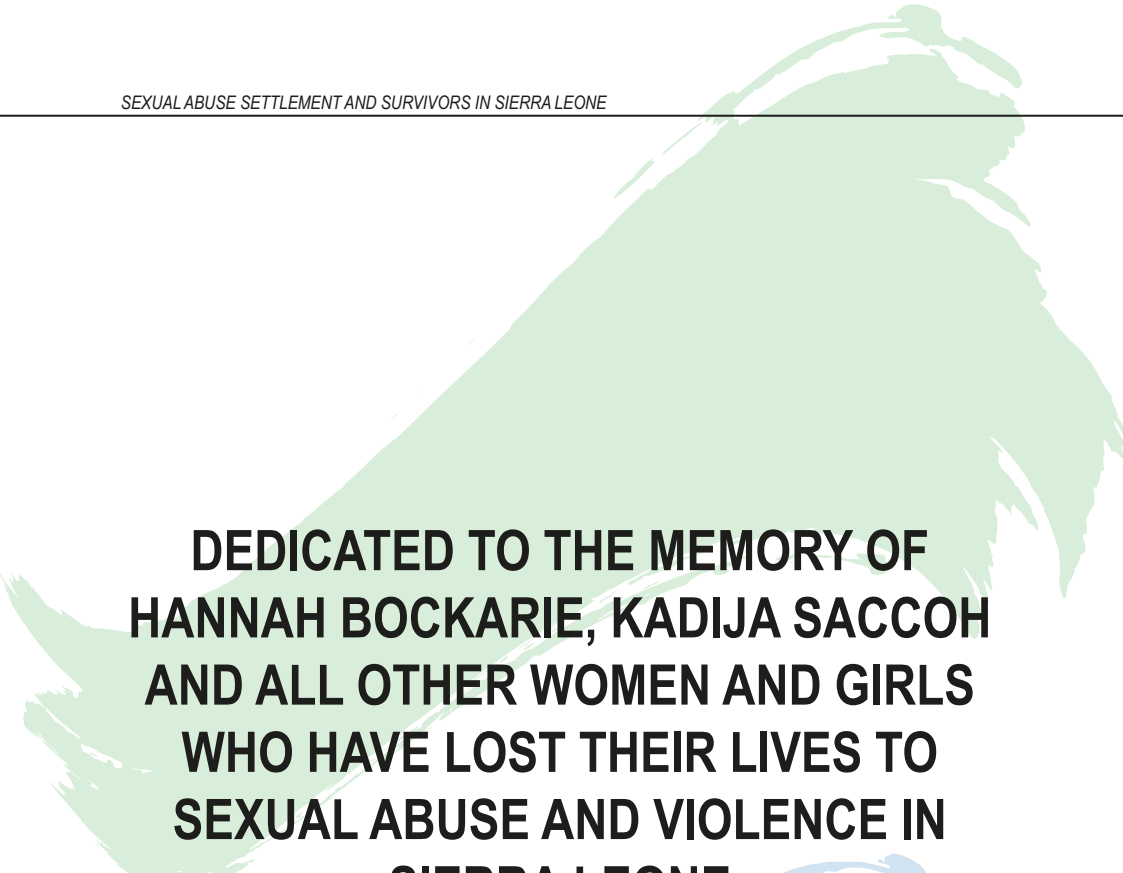
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**DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
HANNAH BOCKARIE, KADIJA SACCOH
AND ALL OTHER WOMEN AND GIRLS
WHO HAVE LOST THEIR LIVES TO
SEXUAL ABUSE AND VIOLENCE IN
SIERRA LEONE**

FOREWORD

There has been an increase in reported cases of sexual abuse in Sierra Leone this year. Between March 1 and October 14, 2020, statistics compiled by the Government of Sierra Leone reveal that 472 sexual offences were charged to court, of which there were 152 convictions. The highest number of persons charged - 444 - were for sexual penetration (of children); 19 were for rape (of adult women); four for incest and four for meeting a child for a sexual purpose.¹

What are the drivers of these increases, and what could be done to prevent their occurrence, care for victims, heal communities and bring to book those responsible?

There are numerous suggestions regarding the drivers of rape and sexual and gender-based violence and impunity for these forms of violence. They include a culture of rape, or an aftermath of the war that shattered norms in the land, or economic deprivation of families, leaving young girls very vulnerable, and for many religious persons, it is the result of moral turpitude or rise of satanic impulses.

How accurate are these assertions? What is the data behind them? In moments of moral panic, certain assertions become those in vogue, even where they may not be based on rigorous analysis or comprehensive data. Or certain extant analyses in other lands may be pushed forward without attempts at informing these analyses with contextual understandings and the voices of victims.

The Institute for Legal Research and Advocacy for Justice (ILRAJ) sees the need for a comprehensive study to understand the social and other bases of sexual abuse within the Sierra Leonean context. This understanding may then feed into recommendations and advocacy by ILRAJ on ways to tackle rape and other forms of sexual abuse, work with and care for victims/survivors, heal communities and bring perpetrators to book.

The study is done from a standpoint perspective - a way of looking at a phenomenon that centers the experiences and concerns of the vulnerable within an explanatory model. Thus, whilst not distracting from other ways of looking at it, victim's voices - which are often missed in these situations- to a greater extent, shape the hermeneutics of the study and recommendations as to ways forward.

The research was conducted from September to November 2020. Mohamed Gibril Sesay was head of the research team, and he also wrote the report. Researchers included Ibrahim Lamin, Fatmata Bundu, Haja Mariama Fofanah, and Princess Lewis. The research also

¹Compiled by the Law Officers Department, Government of Sierra Leone

benefitted from collaborating with Focus Group Discussions conducted by the Centre for Alternative Policy Research and Innovation (CAPRI), headed by Felix Marco Conteh. We also acknowledge assistance from Purposeful, who organized a Survivors Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with the researchers, and we thank the community animators, survivors, lawyers, civil society activists, government officials, and interviewees in and from communities all over the country whose names could not be mentioned. We are also grateful to to our sponsors who have asked for anonymity but who recognize the importance of this research.

Basita Michael
CEO - ILRAJ

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Summary of Major Findings

- Whilst there is renewed vigor, at the official state level, about addressing sexual abuse in the country in the last two years, the prevailing sentiment amongst victims/survivors is that everything goes quiet after a few weeks and they are left with the consequences of the exposure.
- Whilst there are cases of boys being abused by men and, in some cases older women, the overwhelming majority of victims of sexual abuse in Sierra Leone are girls and women.
- Although not talked about publicly – mainly because it is not ‘cultural’ to view sex and its good and bad as ‘jamma’ talk - it is often whispered about in the community to which the victim/survivor belongs. For victims/survivors, these whisperings are vectors of bad memories, stinging victims with shame, unsavoury name calling, and more.
- There are narratives of women who have contained the trauma. These are often women who fill their lives with a lot of other social activities; or who adopt society’s normalization of pain as woman’s own, and that a woman who loudly protests her pain at the hands of men is not woman enough.
- There is consensus that structures and institutions at both formal and informal levels of society are disposed to letting men off the hook or only lightly punished. The new Sexual Offences Act is designed to prevent this from happening.
- Sexual abuse is widespread in Sierra Leone – involving men and women of all ages but mostly with women being at the receiving end. The most vulnerable ages seem to be from eight up through all of a woman’s teenage years.
- Perpetrators are mostly persons known to the victims/survivors. They include stepfathers, neighbours and uncles – uncles include real uncles and those who victims call uncles because it is the preferred honorific for older males in a community or male friends of a family.
- Sexual perpetrators employ several strategies to incapacitate their victims. Some of these strategies are aided and abetted by entrenched practices and discourses within general Sierra Leonean society.
- At the cultural and traditional level, the most favored explanation as to why men get involved in sexual abuse is that the men or their families are cursed or do it for ritual purposes to get power or money.
- The research finds out that sexual perpetration is a result of a confluence of factors, including childhood abuse or early exposure of perpetrators to violence in homes, peer

pressure, and toxic ideas of masculinity promulgating notions of sex and multiple partners as preferred ways to deploy manhood in the society.

- There are many contested ways of looking at and talking about sexual abuse. However, the official words used are at variance with words used in general society. People hardly refer to sexual penetration, which is the favored official word for most sexual abuse cases prosecuted. 'Rape' is the word mostly used to refer to sexual abuse in the country's lingua franca, Krio.
- There are contestations as to what constitutes settlement and justice. The 2019 amendment of the Sexual Offences Act of 2019 criminalizes 'settling' sexual abuse cases outside the country's formal judicial system. The formal system has privileged drastic punitive measures against perpetrators. Communities and families have for long had other ways of 'settling' the matter. This includes perpetrators acknowledging their crimes through begging or material compensation to the family or taking care of the person abused.
- 'Settlement' at both the formal state level and informal family level tend to marginalize victims and survivors. The state is fixated on punishing perpetrators; and at the family level, they are more concerned with hiding the shame of the family where the perpetrator is a family member. When material considerations come into play, the resources seem to benefit patriarchs in the family more.
- In the long term post abuse period, families play more significant roles in the lives of the victims than the state. This puts pressure on the victim/survivor to choose the family settlement preferences over the state's, even where both may be inadequate to their post abuse needs.
- There are many ambiguities relating to what constitutes consent. Traditionally, the consent of family of a woman or girl (particularly the father or other patriarchs) has greater weight over a woman or girl's consent to marriage and the subsequent consummation of the marriage or start of sexual activities. The trend now is towards the woman being the primary agent of consent. Her consent must be sought according to law, else it is regarded as rape. It must also be noted that lots of sexual abuse are not consented to by families, and many families are angered by this violation of their 'traditional rights to give consent'. However, perpetrators often seek to calm down the anger of families through begging, or paying compensation to the family of the victim. When they succeed we may refer to this as getting the family's retroactive consent. The trend now is towards the woman being the primary agent of consent. Her consent must be sought according to law, and emerging social norms; else it is regarded as sexual abuse or rape.

- There is little concern for the victims' long term needs. This is due to the long-standing dispositions including patriarchy, concerns about social harmony (and women paying the price for it if it is so required), and also a normalization of 'pain' as woman's destiny. Women should be prepared and ready to go through the three pains of 'childbirth, Bundo, and polygamy.' Tied with the notion is that the pain of man's sexual conduct (legitimate or illicit) is a woman's destiny to carry. Women who resist this wisdom would have the society's patriarchal structures – the familial and communitarian level, come after them. Communities and families are sites of both abuse and healing.

1.2. Recommendations

- The greatest challenge is that attention to victims quietens down after the initial uproar. This must not be the case. Justice as care for victims must also be emphasized in all initiatives dealing with sexual abuse.
- The ages where most abuses tend to occur are at ages 8 – 20, often peaking between 12 and 16. Greater attention must be focused on these ages.
- Whilst sexual abuse is very traumatic, and many women never get over it, there are also women who master many of the traumatic consequences on their lives. The strategies employed by these women could be identified and inculcated in programmes to support other women gaining mastery over the trauma in their lives.
- Popularize the fact that most sexual aggressors are persons known to the victims and they are often in a position of trust with the victims. Look at the geographic, social and temporal spaces germane to abuse and focus attention on them. For instance, social spaces without adult females are prime spaces for the abuse of girls.
- Identify and discuss cultural and linguistic tropes that could serve as licenses for sexual abuse or translate into justifications for sexual abuse. These include music, sermons, proverbs, and other cultural notions that normalize anti-women sentiments and valorize sex as means of control and ways of asserting male superiority.
- Highlight the potential abuse of 'male niceness' to children. Male niceness is often a means of building trust with a child in order to incapacitate her for sexual abuse.
- Utilize cultural notions of reasons for sexual abuse to cry down abuse. These notions include references to sexual abusers as cursed or as involved in rituals. These notions could be utilized in campaigns to further delegitimize the practice amongst ordinary people.
- Mount general campaigns against interpersonal violence in homes and schools, and against violence as means of settling disputes in homes or as ways of correcting children for perceived misbehaviour.

- Identify generally known words for sexual abuse and stick to them, rather than the state's often technical and legalistic words for sexual abuse. Also, work on words that valorize sexual violence in ordinary speech and the country's music.
- Provide roles for community involvement in fighting the scourge. The law as it exists seems to downplay community involvement since most of this involvement often works towards settling the matter outside the country's formal judicial processes. Involving the community or families in recommending or choosing from among a repertoire of formal punitive measures may boost their participation in the formal processes to meet the challenge, trauma, and pain of sexual abuse.
- Make reporting and telling less stressful. This could involve setting up hotlines for anonymous telling and reporting. A national reporting center for sexual abuse could perform the role. The mechanism may focus on talking to women, hearing their story and discussing ways of ensuring accountability in ways that enhance the teller's esteem.
- Identify survivors' networks and encourage the formation of new networks for survivors/victims to tell their stories to each other, form support circles and jointly move to overcome their common challenges.
- Go very big on educating adolescent girls and boys on sexual abuse and violence and reproductive health.
- Support community animators working on sexual health and issues relating to sexual abuse. Most are volunteers and they do face threats and abuse from communities. Ensure punitive measures against persons who threatens their existence.
- Support family support units – they are the first point of contact in the escalation of sexual abuse cases into the formal system.
- Strengthen the memory of the formal system in terms of dealing with sexual abuse cases. Often, perpetrators will 'hide' when the case is 'warm', believing that the state usually loses interest or forgets about the matter after a while. The state needs to improve its capacity for 'remembering' these cases' and making people accountable for their actions.
- The general populace must be thoroughly informed as to what the law and emerging social trends say constitute consent. It must also be stressed that rape and sexual abuse are often also violations of cultural taboos relating to (family) consent.

2.0. INTRODUCTION

*‘Rape is not a legal problem, but a social problem.’
A prominent lawyer involved with issues relating to sexual abuse.*

Sexual abuse is a social fact in Sierra Leone, and it has been around for a very long time. It was often talked about in hushed terms within families and communities and hardly made it to the national agenda before the 1990s. That was the decade that it burst into the national and international agenda during the war when large-scale sexual abuse against women was integral to notions of power over, war against, revenge on, and humiliation of women and their families and communities. Sexual abuse and violations were major issues in the transitional justice mechanisms of the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, both of which spoke to its prevalence during the war years. Discussions of and action in relation to it stayed on the national agenda in subsequent decades, resulting in several legislations, policies, and newer institutions, processes and networks within state and civil society aimed at dealing with this blight on the nation and society.

However, other issues, including Ebola, the Mudslide, political divisions, elections - have tended to hold greater national attention, and sexual abuse had often been put on the back burner. The last two years have seen a renewed emphasis on this persistent social fact of sexual abuse on the national agenda. Triggering events seemed to be particularly egregious accounts of sexual abuse leading to death or grievous bodily harm, including that of a young lady at Lumley beach in the West End of Freetown in 2015, the sexual penetration of a young girl in 2018 who would be hospitalized at the Aberdeen Women’s Center with spinal injuries, and later the abuse and murder of a young girl, Kadija in 2019, also in Freetown. Women’s organizations and networks - pushed for action, organized marches, held discussions on radio and television and formed delegations to meet with and urge state officials to bring to bear the power of the state to deal with sexual abuse against women and girls.

In 2019, the government, urged on by women’s organizations and the new First Lady – who had inaugurated an initiative called ‘Hands Off Our Girls’ - responded. The President declared a controversial state of emergency on rape; parliament enacted a new Sexual Offences Act, the judiciary created a Model Court for Sexual Offences and the government and NGOs established a one-stop center for victims of sexual abuse.

However, the state’s actions tend to laud its judicial and carceral approach more than its other responses. There seemed to be a greater fixation on the perpetrator and sexual aggressor and what is done to him. There is also the belief that justice for the victim is best served through this carceral approach and by taking the response out of the hands of communities whose favoured response being ‘settlement’ and/or ‘silence’ are seen as complicit in, and are themselves the locale of the offences.

It was not like women within various communities, and the general society had not been acting on and responding to sexual abuse before it burst into the national agenda during the war and in subsequent years. Certain types of sexual abuse – particularly sexual penetration of prepubescent girls and those involving egregious force occasioning bodily harm – are considered deviant by general Sierra Leonean society, and various communities across the nation have multiple ways of preventing or dealing with sexual abuse. Women within these communities had informal registers of abusers, passing on within their circles stories and memories of sexual aggressors and warning children to keep off from them; young girls had been wearing ‘awareness’ pants – to make it harder for aggressors to strip them; and there are what we would call sisterhoods of protection within communities who watch out against the abuse of young girls, informing parents about ‘bad company’, shouting down would-be sexual aggressors and using their informal networks to generally protect young girls.

As in other lands, the data shows that most sexual abuses in Sierra Leone occur within family and community settings and are perpetrated by family members, neighbours or persons known to the victims and their families. This itself creates complexities in the ways communities deal with sexual abuse. Families and communities tend to consider issues like social harmony, shame, and livelihood disruptions, amongst others, when responding to sexual abuse. Many of these considerations occur with the society’s patriarchal structures and dispositions to bring about outcomes that leave sexual aggressors (the overwhelming majority of whom are men) off the hook or insufficiently punished, and in which the concerns of female victims are not given great importance.

This research is informed by a categorization of ways of dealing with sexual abuses into the formal and informal, the legal and the social, the judicialized and the familial/communitarian, and the punitive and the restorative. However, it must be borne in mind that these binary categories represent but opposing ends of a spectrum. In other words, we see ways of dealing with sexual abuse tending towards one or the other end of the spectrum – certain institutions are farther towards one end of the spectrum than others.

Formal ways of dealing with sexual offences tend to be the preferred method of the state. These ways emphasize the legal, judicialized, and punitive. Families are located at the informal end of the spectrum, preferring, more than other institutions, ways of dealing with sexual abuses that are social, non-legal, and restorative. Other institutions and persons like community elders, local courts, and civil society organizations are located in-between the extremely formal and informal spectrum of dealing with sexual abuse.

There are both agreement and disagreement between families, communities, civil society organizations and state institutions like the police, state prosecutors and the courts on how they perceive and deal with sexual abuses. One area of agreement, for instance, is that they

all see the sexual abuse of infants as heinous and deserving punishment. However, there are also tensions between them in relation to what is consent and how sexual abuses are labeled. There are also tensions as to what constitutes sexual maturity and nubility and on how to respond to sexual abuses, and on who has the moral jurisdiction to deal with the different types of sexual abuse - is it the family, or community elders, or civil society organizations (CSOs) or the police and courts.

Questions that nag the discussions in this work include: whose preferred way of getting closure wins out in particular instances of sexual abuse? Whose outcome? Whose objectives? There has emerged at the declarative level, references to the preferred outcomes being those that favour the victim. The state and its institutions make emphatic claims that they are working in the interest of victims. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and CSOs also assert the same. But what do victims/survivors say about this? The state punishes perpetrators but does it take care of victims? CSOs and NGOs take care of victims, but how effective, for how long or how sustainable are the efforts? Families seek to prevent family members from being shamed, but which family member's shame and hurt do they care more about?

Of course, there are outcomes, as the new jargon puts it, which could be win-wins for the persons and institutions involved. But often, win-wins over time may become less wins for victims/survivors. Sometimes, though the win-wins may provide highs for all concerned, it may feel less so the morning after, the year after, or even the decade after for the victim/survivor, by which time the state, or the civil society, or the community might have forgotten about her.

It must be noted that victims/survivors are not passive observers of their fate. Many have formed strategies to resist the aggressors, or to counter the hurt inflicted on them, or to move on and not allow the abuse to overcome other aspects of their lives, or for the traumatic experience to define who they are. But there are also an overwhelming number of victims/survivors who live with the trauma throughout their lives, unable to overcome it, and who see family, communities and the country as failing them. Other times they blame themselves, or value themselves less, or see society and their own actions through mostly amoral lenses.

The various discussions with victims/survivors reveal a whole universe of pain; or it could be better to say a black hole of intense grief, women imploding with the trauma of their experience. But many around them do not notice these implosions since they occur within silenced and silent women. This situation may be the result of a tradition of public silence over these issues, and a sort of normalization of bearing pain without haranguing the public about it as woman's own in this part of the world. There is notion - that a woman's fate is the stoicism of restraint, enforced by notions of shame, family, and livelihoods that tend to let aggressors

off the hook. A survivor, making a distinction in Krio, the country's lingua franca, notes that the choice that women make in these circumstances is between 'bad' and 'bad-off.' Bad is bad enough, but 'bad-off' is 'badder,' so women choose 'bad'. Prevention is better than punishment, another survivor states – but it seems like prevention is getting a short shrift, and it also seems like caring for victims is getting an even shorter shrift.

Many survivors want aggressors to be harshly punished, but they also want society to pay attention to the prevention of the abuse and care more for victims. Many survivors want to be at the table where decisions relating to their circumstances are made to be able to shape the responses to their situation. However, many feel alienated from the processes – the concerns of others trump their own: families tend to be more concerned about 'settlement,' and the state more concerned about the noise around punishment and the statistics of those jailed. Many survivors feel pressured to accept 'closures' from family members, or the state, or CSOs that never bring personal closure for them, and they have to live with the consequences of that for years afterwards.

2.1. Clarification Of Terms: Sexual Abuse, Penetration And Rape

In the global literature, Sierra Leonean statutes, and the general society, there are lots of tensions around which words to use to refer to the subject of our study. Words that are often interchangeably used include sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, sexual violence, sexual violation, and sexual penetration. The Sexual Offences Act 2019 makes a distinction between rape and sexual penetration. Sexual penetration is sex with children below 18, whilst rape is sex without consent with persons above 18. Child sexual abuse also relates to acts between an adult or adults and a minor (in Sierra Leone, persons below 18); or between two or more minors where one uses power, force, coercion or (as stated in Sierra Leone's Sexual Offences Act 2019) even persuasion to get one or more minors to engage in a sexual act. These sexual acts could be through contact, including touching and penetration, or non-contact, including exposing the child or minor to pornography, exhibitionism or communicating with the child or minor in a sexual manner. In Sierra Leone and most places around the world, there are more reported cases of child sexual abuse – especially sexual penetration, than the rape of adults.

There are critical divergences between the legal definitions of several sexual offences and wrongdoings in the country with social understandings of the same phenomena. Rape has emerged in the last few years as the more widely used word for a variety of sexual violence offences and wrongdoings in the country's lingua franca – Krio. During this research, lawyers and others versed in state and NGO discourses constantly point out that people are getting it wrong when they talk about 'rape of children.' They argued that rape, according to law, is sex with an adult without consent. Sexual penetration is the right phrase to use for sex with a minor or persons below 18, and consent is not taken into consideration as the law says a minor is incapable of giving consent.

However, this distinction between rape and sexual penetration has not gained much traction in popular discourse where rape seemed to be the preferred term for violent and physically harmful sexual penetration of children or adults. Other words used to refer to several sexual wrongdoings include 'ravish,' 'tamper,' 'finger' and 'arbor.' 'Ravish' is illicit sex; 'tamper' is also illicit sex but has the connotation of sex with a minor; 'finger' is digital penetration, and 'arbor' is as in the English word harbouring with its connotation of keeping a minor in a house over a long period for sexual purposes.

There is, however, an emerging consensus in the global literature that the term sexual abuse is more comprehensive and covers most of the situations that are variously referred to as rape, sexual violation, sexual aggression and violation. This is the preferred term in this work. However, we still hold that common words used to describe the phenomena in general Sierra Leonean society may be different, but they are not wrong, and we see them as authentic lived experiences of people in the country. It is advised that in seeking to understand the phenomena and in acting towards countering the practice and its effects, these words may have greater currency. This work has not shied away from using these words where it conveys a greater understanding of the phenomena.

A female Researcher's Account

Talking about rape or sexual violence can be traumatizing, especially for the survivors. Discussing their experience with other people – mostly men - can be difficult because even though these men are not the actual perpetrators of these crimes, survivors have a mistrust of men that they sub-consciously exhibit. Doing this research on rape and sexual violence has been eye-opening, hearing and trying to understand what these women went through made me realize how strong they are; that on the outside, they try to gather the remaining pieces of their lives, but on the inside, there's a part of them, a wholeness that has been snatched from them by these perpetrators.

Most of these victims/survivors feel guilt; they blame themselves for what happened. They feel guilty about how they were dressed or their silence; they feel like they were equally responsible for what happened to them. Especially women who had been sexually violated when they were much older, they feel like maybe they lured the perpetrators. And that feeling is often impressed upon by society because when these acts occur, society finds a way to blame the women instead of the perpetrators. Even in the case of Kadija Saccoh, we saw that there was public outrage, lots of people blamed the perpetrator, but also the mother was faulted because she left her child alone with someone she trusted.

That is one reason why when women are victims of sexual abuse, they choose to keep quiet. The guilt slowly eats them up, gnawing at their self-esteem or self-worth, their sexual life and their interaction with the opposite sex. Some become depressed and this goes a long way to show how women would instead choose to live with this guilt than naming and shaming these perpetrators. Sometimes we see victims who have been abused and are still abused to the point where they don't know that they are being abused; they now consider it as something normal.

The fear of being shamed, the fear of being looked down on, the fear of being called a liar and a whore - these make survivors choose not to tell their stories or to just allude to them, often speaking as if it happened to someone else, distancing themselves from their narrations. It's so unfortunate our society is moving at a snail's pace when it comes to delivering the justice that these women deserve. When these perpetrators commit these acts, the first thing that our society does is question the validity of the story of this traumatic experience. It makes the women feel small, unimportant and depressed. Society must deal with these issues

delicately because there is not only one life involved, so when such stories come forward, we must try to know what happened, whether the account is valid or not. But even when there is proof that the woman was violated, people will continue to poke holes in her story to the point where she feels threatened; and some family members and friends will turn against her. These are all factors that these survivors consider before admitting that they had been abused.

Victims feel disrespected and abused by the trends that sexual abuse cases take. People jump on the 'latest rape wagon.' They parade the victims' stories, but when it comes to punishing these perpetrators, the victims see that there is little or no justice. After a few weeks, everything goes quiet, most people forget about it, and the victims feel traumatized. Often justice institutions take a long time to bring perpetrators to justice, to the point where the victims' families would choose to settle. And when there is another rape case, people will jump on it but not follow it to the end. It's no wonder so many families choose to keep these abuses secret. Sometimes the evidence is manipulated, especially if the family is not that connected. The case is dismissed; a system that is designed to protect and uphold the rights of its citizens is failing them. With most of the survivors that we've met, there's this air of uncertainty around them when it comes to how the law and general society deal with perpetrators.

2.2. Patterns in the Telling by Four Adult Survivors

- They were violated when young – and poor
- They were sexually abused by an uncle, father's friend and teacher – it is usually the case that 'an uncle' may not be the biological brother of the child's mother or father or the husband of an aunt. It could be a friend of the family, as it is customary for children to call older persons they know uncles.
- Though they are currently successful and married, the experience still impacts their lives –intimacy frightens them; one is overprotective of her daughter, asking every day, did someone touch you; another does not value her body, she hardly looks at things from the normal moral or moralizing perspective.
- Their parents were not together when the incidents happened.
- Some of the violators were the breadwinners whilst they were below 18 years.
- They could not speak to their parents; one had an aunt who condoned it; they were usually shouted down when they started to talk about it, and they lived in fear that what

happened could happen again. Even as adults, they think they would be judged; they are ashamed of being victims, and they feel guilty. They tend to find excuses for the perpetrators- one thought that since they were poor, her violation was the payment of fees the teacher extracted from her.

- The perpetrators got away with their crimes
- The survivors feel let down by their parents, their communities, and the system. There would be initial outrage when the event is known, and then nothing. Short-term public outrage, long-term victim's rage, and pressure by society for the victim's rage to become invisible, for it to be exchanged for something else – peace in the community, family honour, etc.
- They want the men castrated or given long prison sentences
- The victims have formed a sisterhood; they count on each other and are comfortable with each other. They open up to themselves, but not to others

A Community Activator's Account

I slowly came into this work, first through attending workshops organized by several NGOs working on domestic violence and sexual abuse. I later developed relationships with the police, particularly the Family Support Unit, with whom I'm now also a Community Volunteer. I work as a Community Health Aide for the Ministry of Health.

I have lived in this community for a long time. Sexual Abuse is a big problem here, though most of them are unreported. I have heard lots of accounts from victims and community people about such forms of sexual abuse as girls being drugged before being raped; about a father raping his daughter; about a girl being gang raped; about a girl trader from another community raped when she came into the community to sell; about neighbours raping the daughters of their co-tenants. Mostly the abusers are relatives and neighbours, persons the victims know. Whilst there are many victims below 8, most of the victims are between 8 and 16 years. People like to settle matters out of court, mostly when it involves family members or persons with deep roots in the community – who were born or have been in the community for long. Women are, however, less likely than men to want a settlement. They want perpetrators to be punished because they know the pain of being abused and can relate to it more. That is why most times, those who want settlement go through the husband or other male relatives to talk to the woman. Women especially find it very difficult to resist their husbands or male relative's entreaties in these matters.

There have been some cases where perpetrators end up in jail. I'm often blamed for the role I play in these by the community with comments like 'is the victim your relative?' 'Why do you want to give trouble to a community member that you know?' So in many instances, I try to play my roles quietly. However, I'm unavoidably at the center of some of these.

Many victims do tell me their story. Sexual abuse is common. However, the community tends to want to keep it below the radar. It could be known in the community through community gossip and the like, but they think it is not acceptable to get the police or outside agencies involved. Many people frown on sexual abuse, but they like to settle it in the community, especially when it involves community members. Non-community members are more likely to be taken to the police and other agencies. However, there is a practice of 'begging' to settle the matter. Often the begging involves offers to pay for 'loses' the victim's family undergoes in treating the victim, or if the case has already been reported to the police, it also involves whatever costs they might have incurred in relation to that.

3. VICTIMS/SURVIVORS

'Most of the victims are between 10- 16; some from rich homes, but over 70% are poor. They were mostly raped when mothers or aunts were not at home. Perpetrators are mostly neighbour and uncle' – A safe home worker

3.1. Vulnerability to Child Sexual Abuse, and the Physical and Social Environments

As already noted, there are far more reported cases of sexual abuse of children than of adults. Discussions with key informants and documented literature reveal the victims of child sexual abuse are in the following circumstances:

- Children living without either parent;
- Children living with a parent who lives with or is married to a person who is not the child's biological father;
- Children in poor homes are more likely to be abused;
- The reported cases show girls between the ages of 8 and 16 as more vulnerable than other children;
- The reported cases show high levels of co-occurring abuse, including low family support, low caregiver warmth, absent or single parenting;
- More 'men pikin' (children who are under the care of persons who are not their parents) are sexually abused than those with parents;
- Out of home or street children are also very vulnerable to abuse
- There are very few cases of abuse of children living with both biological parents

"No," the survivor replied. "On the outside, that person may seem harmless, but on the inside, he is an evil person. My cousin abused me; someone who was intelligent enough to know that what he was doing was wrong, but he still abused me. My uncle was someone who I looked up to and trusted, and he also abused me."

4. PERPETRATION OF SEXUAL ABUSE

This chapter looks at the factors that drive sexual abuse perpetration and discusses the profiles of sexual abuse perpetrators

4.1. DRIVERS OF THE ACTIONS OF SEXUAL AGGRESSORS

The reasons given as to what drives the actions of perpetrators could be categorized into the following:

- Cultural Explanations,
- Popular Explanations and
- Social Science Explanations

4.1.1 Cultural Explanations

Cultural explanations as to what drives sexual aggressors are heavily infused with the supernatural; they include the following:

The Persons or Families are Cursed: In focus group discussions, most participants hold this view about sexual aggressors as cursed. The curse could have stemmed from some heinous crime they had committed before and for which they are cursed as persons who would always commit disgraceful acts.

Rituals: There is also a strong belief that sexual aggressors may be having sex, especially sex with infants, to complete certain rituals they see as necessary for them to get wealth, prestige or power.

4.1.2 Popular Explanations

'Young Cucumber is Sweet in a Salad'

Several popular explanations have emerged as to why minors are sexually abused, and a lot of this relates to a general preference for adolescent girls by men. A well-known saying in the society is that 'young cucumber is sweet in a salad.' This points to the belief that adolescent girls are 'sexually sweeter.' There is a general distinction of women into 'pekito' and 'mamito.' 'Pekito' from the Krio word 'pikin' meaning a child or person who is physiologically young. Pekito connotes a 'sexualized young person, often seen as between the ages of 16 and 25.' However, the age could go below 15, based on the physiological features of the girl. Mamito, from the Krio Mammi, refers to older women. Men believe that 'pekito dem' are easier to convince or lure, easier to provide for, and more sexually adventurous than 'mamito dem.' Therefore, men prefer sexual relations with 'pekito dem' since the younger they are, the less they spend, the less time they spend convincing them, and the more adventures they could

have with them.

Way u see the small wan, u member the big wan – When you see the little one, you think about the big one

This is about prepubescent children who dress scantily or sit in ways that expose private parts. They are told to cover up – because when men see little organs, they think about those in adult women. This logic introduces or socializes women into seeing themselves as somehow responsible for the actions of men towards them. This discourse is also deployed when generally society link rape and sexual abuse to the way women dress scantily.

Porsin nor cook soup e nor taste am

This logic is used by perpetrators who are fathers, step-fathers or guardians of victims. It objectifies the girl into a soup that is normal for a cook – the father – to taste.

4.1.3 Social Science/Sociological/ Political Economy Explanations

Social science explanations stress the economic and ‘power ‘ drivers of sexual aggression. The social science literature on sexual perpetration also points at childhood abuse of perpetrators, drug abuse by perpetrators, peer pressure, and toxic masculinities, amongst others. In the last few decades, there have also emerged powerful feminist discourses of sexual aggression against women. The main concepts used in this discourse include patriarchy and intersectionality. Patriarchy relates to male dominance, oppression and exploitation of women, and the feminist perspective sees sexual aggression against women as integral to the maintenance of male power in society. Intersectionality refers to the confluence of forces that strengthen as they coalesce to knock down women. It is like women being at an intersection or junction where vehicles from all the lanes of society hit them to crush them. Sexual aggression is one of those vehicles picking up speed as it races to hit women. Religious beliefs lead to sexually aggressive outcomes for women; proverbs and linguistic tradition lead to the same, as are the cases with such economic issues as land distribution, access to finance, and the lower economic value ascribed to women’s work.

4.1.4 Triangulation of Discourses and The Confluence of Factor Explanatory Model

The explanatory models categorized above are not intrinsically mutually exclusive – rather, they help us shed light on a complex lived experience for men (mostly the sexual aggressors) and women (overwhelmingly the victims and survivors). A confluence of factors converging on individuals or groups of sexual may provide a more insightful explanatory model. The

confluence of factors model is emerging as the dominant explanatory framework for understanding what drives sexual aggressors. This model tells of many factors converging to push people to become sexual aggressors. It categorizes these factors into three – the historical or developmental, the personal, and the contextual or current happenings around the sexual aggressor. Contextualizing the above factors in respect of a particular society is essential, as factors may confluence differently in different societies. Which of the factors do we witness in Sierra Leone, and how do they play out?

Developmental factors relate to growing up in an environment that incubates tendencies that push a person into sexual aggression. These include broken families and childhood abuse. Childhood abuse involves violence in the homes, heaped on children or as was often the case on women in the homes, including mothers, which are witnessed by children. Families in Sierra Leone are evolving, and the evolution involves many dysfunctional aspects. Extended family structures are breaking up, many children are not with their biological parents, or they grow up with single mothers who may be married to or co-habiting with a partner other than their child or children's father. Intimate partner violence – including wife battering is widespread in Sierra Leone, and children often witness these scenes. The research finds numerous narrations of perpetrators (and also victims) being in or from dysfunctional families and often being witnesses to intimate sexual violence. A corollary to this may be households where many persons are not related by blood, where they share many intimate places, including toilets, parlours, or even rooms. This is often the case in urban settlements like Freetown, creating numerous opportunities for sexual aggressors to carry out their acts. Many sexual aggressors are neighbors sharing these intimate spaces with their victims or non-consanguine relations, including stepfathers, older in-laws and fictive uncles, that the younger persons call uncle though they are not related.

The personal is about individual character factors. These include poor attachment styles and low empathy for the suffering of others. There was a general cheapening of suffering during the war, and subsequent national catastrophic events, including Ebola. A typical Sierra Leonean response to suffering and a means of coping with it has often been teasing comedy out of tragedy. This is exemplified in the numerous tales of the ridiculous that could be found in a general recounting of the horrors of the war and other tragic moments in the country. This is often translated at the individual level. Many individuals spend little time empathizing with the suffering of others. Individuals move on too quickly when suffering strikes others. Are sexual aggressors only aggravating this attitude when they fail to empathize with their victims? Is this what is shown in a study where a group of boys, on being asked why they are often involved in violent sexual activities against girls, replied that it was because of the new focus by NGOs on girls and they don't like that. Another personal factor relates to deficits in interpersonal skills. This often leads to misreading female friendliness as an invitation to sex. When sex is refused, the male behaves violently, interpreting the refusal as the usual way

women behave, or they take the refusal as illegitimate, given that the woman, in their view, had lured them into it.

The contextual factors are current influences on sexual aggressors or the populations from which they are drawn. Amongst these influences are peer pressure and a climate of toxic masculinity that is tolerant of male sexual adventures as a way of dominating women or of being a man. Peer influences loom large in male sexual behaviour in Sierra Leone. This includes ridiculing male virgins as 'children,' newer social activities amongst adolescents that extol the sexual, including pool parties and social club initiation rituals amongst tertiary students, peer pressure amongst bike riders to buy sex or exchange mobility for sex with female passengers, the phenomena of strength for sex where males used physical labour in exchange for sex with girls and women who require those services, and talks of sex as 'sweets of office' by teachers in schools and superior officers in other places. A climate of toxic masculinity also exists, where sex is seen as a means for dominating women. The evidence for this exists even in the way men refer to sexual activities with women, a prime phrase being 'ar done nak am' or 'ar done pata am' or 'ar done wap am' with the words 'nak,' 'pata,' and 'wap' being synonyms for forcefully bringing down a woman and dominating her. The climate of toxic masculinity often leads to tolerance for rape myths – including that women ask for it by the ways they dress or by remaining silent after sexual assaults or through repeated abuse. The literature on sexual abuse perpetration suggests that persons engaged in multiple impersonal sexual engagements are prone to sexual aggression than others. Impersonal sexual relations refers to persons who engage in sex without personal attachments to those they are having sex with, and this is often associated with multiple sexual partners. Notions of masculinity as having multiple sexual partners with whom a man has impersonal sex are widespread in the country. In discourses relating to sex amongst male peers, one hears such proverbs as 'man nor for lek wan grain plasas, tiday cassada lif, tumara pehtehteh lif en orda plasas them the orda day dem' – a man should not be contented with a single vegetable sauce, if he gets cassava leaves sauce today, tomorrow he goes for potato leaves, and other sauces on subsequent days.

None of these factors are themselves sufficient to push a person towards sexual aggression, but a person subjected to all of them shows a greater likelihood of being a sexual aggressor. Some of the more prominent reported cases of sexual abuse in Sierra Leone were perpetuated through factors converging on the individual. Families were becoming dysfunctional during the war, or as a result of widespread poverty, leading to child abuse. Early exposure to sex or sexual violence either by or on them or witnessed by them – as was the case during the war; the general perception of peer acceptance of behaviour, acceptance of rape myths as could be witnessed in religious sermons about women dressing scantily asking for it or pushing men into 'satanic thoughts,' early age at which people of both gender experience sex, and the general acknowledgment of multiple sexual partners and the images

of sex as a form of violence as could be gleaned by such popular songs as 'you day make,' tutu party' na the tabule' and others comparing phalluses to iron rods that could be thrust into women.

4.2. The Perpetrators: Familial and Familiar Faces

Most perpetrators and sexual aggressors are not strangers; they are family; they are neighbours or at least acquaintances – they are familial and familiar faces. Below are narrations of sexual abuse by mostly familial and familiar faces.

a) Uncle Rape

Rape by uncles is widespread, and it involves three categories of uncle –biological uncles, uncles by affinity –those who married a person's paternal or maternal aunt; and older persons in the community who children often refer to as uncle. Of the three types of uncle rape, the second and third types are more common.

A middle-aged woman was a victim of sexual abuse by her uncle when she was living with him and his wives after her mother died. They lived in a town in the Northern Province.

The uncle was rich and ensured that his family, including his teenage niece, lived well. However, he paid special attention to the niece, who was beautiful and looked mature beyond her years. When he started sexually abusing her, he threatened her not to tell anyone under pain of death. He also continued showering the niece with gifts and often took her on trips to Freetown, where he continued sexually abusing her. The girl became pregnant, and her aunts, on investigating found out that it was her uncle. They blamed her for not speaking earlier and drove her out of the house.

The uncle also shunned her. The uncle was shielded from paying for his actions by wealth and fear of family members that should he get into trouble, their comfortable lives would be upended. The young niece gave birth to a boy, and she went on to become a nurse. However, she has been unable to form stable relationships and lives in shame because her ordeal, though spoken about in hushed tones, is well known in the community. The son is her only child, but she cannot show love to him because of what she went through.

A child was sexually penetrated by her uncle - her aunt's husband – in a coastal slum in Freetown. The aunt went out for her normal business but returned home because she forgot something, only for her to see her husband sexually penetrating her 12-year-old niece. The perpetrator ran away, and the aunt was persuaded that she should not let her husband go to jail.

An interviewee explained a “rape” incident involving a 13-year old school girl and her uncle in a village in the provinces. The interviewee could not recall the year the incident occurred but narrated that the girl had dressed up one morning to go to school. The school was located in another village, and the main motor road to that village was very far. So the children would use the “bush road,” which was shorter.

The uncle used to give money to the girl on her way to school as “lunch.” One day, he told the girl to come to his house after school to collect something he had kept for her. When the girl went to the house, he tampered with her and deflowered her.

After the incident, the victim returned home from the uncle's house. Her mother suspected something wrong and asked her, but the girl just said she was ill. The thought of sexual penetration did not initially occur to the mother, but when her daughter's illness continued for some time, she took her to an older woman to know what was happening with her. It was discovered that she had been sexually penetrated. When asked who did it, she named her uncle, the mother's step-brother. The victim's mother became angry and decided to report the matter to the police, but people pleaded with her not to do so. She could not believe that her brother could do this to her daughter. The mother also blamed her child (the victim) and wanted to disown her, but people also pleaded, telling her that the man might have manipulated the girl.

In Mende, such an act is called simongamy and is abominable. Tradition requires that those who commit it are taken to a stream and ceremoniously washed to purify them. The process involves beating them on their backs severely with canes from the herbal tree. Both the perpetrator and victim were seriously beaten on their backs at the stream. The perpetrator was not reported to the police but his step-sister, the victim's mother, avoided him for life. She decided that she would never have anything to do with him, even upon her death.

The rape did not result in pregnancy. The victim was treated with traditional medications.

Teachers

Teacher sexual abuse of children is widespread, and it occurs more in the provinces than in Freetown. Teacher rape and other sexual violations are also a significant category of sexual abuse. Several cases reveal that teachers who abuse their pupils use several strategies. It includes deliberately giving the girls low marks and sending signals that this could be remedied through sex. It could also involve subtle forms of assistance to the girls or asking for girls to meet certain known obligations to teachers (like, for instance, carrying books for them to their homes). The assistance or obligations are often aimed at getting the girls to be with the teacher-perpetrator alone, either in their homes or isolated spots.

Sometime around 2015/2016, a primary school girl was sexually penetrated by one of her teachers in the Western Rural District. When the victim's parents got to know about this, they did not report it because of their background as traditional people. They settled the matter internally. The perpetrator took up the responsibility of the victim: her schooling and welfare. They both built a relationship and started living as a couple since then.

The family no longer talks about it. It's as if nothing like that ever happened.

Neighbour rape

She is 16 years old now and in JSS3. She was eleven when she was raped. She was living with her 45 year-old dad, a fisherman. Her mother was dead. They were poor and struggled to eat. The rape happened at night. Her father would leave her alone in the house when he went to work at night. Their home was a 'panbody' and they used a 'fence-stick' to close the door. She was sleeping when two neighbours came into her room and sexually violated her. They left after they had abused her. In pain, she struggled to go to a neighbouring house. She was taken to the hospital because she was bleeding. Her father did not have the resources to move on with the case. Her father told her 'to leave it with God.' She left the community, and she is currently living with a child protection officer. She wants the rapists to be locked behind bars for the rest of their lives. She still 'feels bad' about the incident. She finds solace in the fact that she is going to school and that she would not be a dropout. She learnt that it is never safe to leave kids all by themselves. She has learnt to always be around people.

A seven-year-old girl was sexually penetrated by a man she called uncle (though he is a neighbour). The victim lived in the slums with her aunt. The girl went out of their room to go to the toilet. The perpetrator followed her, and after the victim was done using the toilet, he called her to him and touched her inappropriately. The victim wanted to shout, but he stopped her from shouting. He assured her that he was her uncle and that he used to give her candy. He then sexually penetrated her. She screamed, but he placed his shirt over her mouth and continued. When he was done, he let her go. She was bleeding. A man who saw her crying asked her what was wrong. She explained and she was then taken to the police station. Her aunt was called. They took her to a hospital and later Rainbo Center. The perpetrator was arrested. He is currently serving time at the Pademba Road Prison.

Girl Traders, Rape and Sexual Violations

Girls who sell from house to house are very vulnerable to sexual abuse. The girls usually sell seasonal fruits, like mangoes and oranges and other petty goods.

A girl aged 15 and living in a hillside community in Freetown, was raped by a 30-year-old man when she was sent by her mother to sell fish-cake. The young man called the girl to buy some of the cakes. After taking many of the cakes, he asked her to follow him home to collect the money. When they arrived at the man's house, he called her inside his room for the money, but she refused to enter the room. The man came out and forced her into his room, where she was sexually penetrated. The girl screamed for help, but nobody could hear her because the man had closed the door and put on loud music. The perpetrator threatened to kill the victim if she reported the incident.

Some months later, the victim's mother realized that her daughter was pregnant. It was then the victim explained to her mother. The perpetrator was arrested, locked up for some weeks and later bailed.

A 16-year old girl was gang-raped by four men at an unfinished building in the far east of Freetown in 2020. The girl had gone to the site to sell foodstuffs when one of the site workers held her from the back, tied her face and took her to the building where she was gang-raped.

The victim was later taken to the Rainbo Centre for treatment while the police were investigating the matter. Two of the four reported perpetrators were arrested. The others are still at large.

In 2019, a girl was drugged and gang-raped by five persons in a seashore community in Freetown. The girl lived in another community and had gone to the seashore community to sell. She was lured on the promise of buying her goods, but she was drugged and gang-raped. Three of the perpetrators were underage, and that worked in favour of them when their families went to beg the victims' families to settle the matter and take it out of the hands of the police. They were released. However, the two adults were jailed.

Boyfriends And Peers

Older children or physically stronger children commit a significant number of sexual violations. The narratives show many date rapes and violations, often happening when girls visit boyfriends or are with them. It is usually taken that the visitation is some 'implied' consent to sex. Boyfriends are often excused in these situations, and girls often bear the blame for visiting in the first place, or as already noted, for giving that 'implied consent' by visiting.

Father/Stepfather rape

Families and general society are very uncomfortable in discussing rape by fathers. Families don't reveal it because of the shame it brings not only on the perpetrator but also on the victim and the family at large. Communities are loath to discuss a phenomenon they consider shameful and that turns the cosmological order upside down. A religious leader notes that not talking about this most heinous of actions limits the cosmological disruption and allows for normal father-to-daughter relationships where such behaviours are not within the range of possible ways of acting.

I know about a girl child who was raped by her father. They lived in the same house, and this thing kept happening, and the girl got pregnant. The father was even the one that deflowered that girl and got the girl pregnant. The victim said that because the mother was not at home all the time, the father took advantage of the situation. The victim said her father used to shower her with love and concern, which is undoubtedly the father's duty. The father would buy gifts for her like sweets, chocolate, clothes, shoes, pads, take her to places and much more. But the girl and mother never thought about a situation in which the father could rape her child. The victim said one night, the mother was not in the house. A prison officer, she was on night duty. The dad entered the girl's room. She thought it was alright as her dad usually checked on her to see if she was okay or sleeping, and he would check the windows and return to his room. But that night was different. Her father forced himself on her and deflowered her. She cried and was so scared. Her father told her to tell no one, or he would kill her, cut her into pieces and feed her to dogs. The

young girl never said a word to anybody. After that first attempt, she fell ill and lost weight. Her mother asked her what was wrong, but her father looked at her threateningly, and she replied she was fine, maybe she only had malaria. Her mother gave her some medicines. After recovering from the illness, her father continued to sexually violate her at every opportunity, morning, afternoon, or night. She was not on contraceptives, and she became pregnant. When her mother found out about the pregnancy, she asked about who was responsible. She did not say a word because her father was around. However, as soon as the dad stepped out, her mother threatened to kill her if she did not reveal the name of the person responsible. The girl told her mother everything. Distraught, the mother put her hands on her head, crying and blaming herself that she had not been a good mother. She also thought about what the community and society at large would think and say of her family. She sought to hide the information, and the girl gave birth. However, the news leaked, and some neighbours spread the news. The father was never arrested because it was a family issue, and family issues should not be settled outside; they should be settled in the home. The girl was stigmatized, and the dad would eventually go mad. This incident happened in a hilly community in Western Freetown.

A man was sexually abusing his daughter in a provincial town one year ago. The man had had an issue with his wife, the girl's mother, and he sent her away. He then started sexually penetrating the daughter and got her pregnant. The victim could not voice it out until people discovered that she was pregnant and asked her questions.

Rape and Sexual Penetration of 'Men Pekin' by Male Relatives of the Guardian

Guardianship, or 'men pikin' as it is known in the country, is a widespread social practice in the nation. They include both relative care and non-relative care. Relative or kinship care is the more common form, though there is also a long tradition of non-relative care. These guardianship categories have been very informal in the country. However, a more formal non-relative care is emerging in the form of a cluster of care homes and safe houses run by civil society organizations. These formal care homes house street children or children that had been sexually abused.

Whilst guardianship provides lots of benefits for children, young persons in 'men pikin' situations are more vulnerable to sexual abuse than those taken care of by their parents. Also,

sexual abuses are often committed by relatives (sons or husbands) of the guardian. Many of the sexually abused are also those who run errands or sell petty goods for guardians in vulnerable environments.

Two Sisters and the Son of Their Guardian

Two sisters were brought to Freetown and placed as 'men pikin' with a woman so that they could continue their schooling. The girls called the woman aunty, who though not their real aunt, came from the same town in the provinces as their mother. The woman had a son in his twenties who started sexually penetrating one of the sisters. Later, he got the other sister and started doing threesomes with them. The girls did not like what was happening. One of the girls told her mother about the incident, but her mother told her to 'bear' as she did not have a place for her in the village. The abuser always threatened the girls that they would be kicked out of the house should they disclose what was going on between them. Though the girls suspected that their guardian knew about the abuse, they could not tell her because they had observed that she liked her son very much and that she would only push them out of the house. Neighbours knew about the abuse but discussed it in hushed tones.

Sexual Penetration in a Safe Home by the son of the Guardian

The incident took place six years ago. A girl, aged about 15 years, living in a safe home because her father could not take care of her, and she had lost her mother, who was a victim of child marriage. The mother had died at about the age of 20 while giving birth to another child.

In the safe home, the Home Matron's son was sexually abusing the girls, and at a point, this particular girl became a victim. The other girls were afraid to voice it out or confront the perpetrator because they thought they would be thrown out of the home.

When she was raped, she raised the alarm and complained about it. She first told her dad. The victim explained that the guy was making advances towards her, and whenever she was taking her bath, he would go to the bathroom. So they started having confrontation until one day, when the matron was not around, he sexually penetrated her. The girl kept the pant she had at the time of the rape.

As a result of that sexual penetration, the victim got pregnant, and the matter was reported to the matron. The matron told her she was lying, that her son could do no such thing. However, she took the victim to a hospital and had the pregnancy aborted without the girl's consent. After the abortion, the victim had problems with her womb and started feeling severe pain in her stomach. That was the time the office of this narrator came to know about the matter.

The matron had just wanted to settle the matter with the victim's dad by giving him money/compensation because he was poor. But this narrator's office took up the matter. It insisted on taking it to court. So the victim was sent to the Rainbo Centre and the perpetrator taken to court, but the victim's family was not helping the situation because they preferred the compensation.

While the matter was being pursued in court, it was learnt from the other girls at the safe home that sexually penetrating them was a norm for the guy.

The perpetrator was imprisoned, but after a few years, he was released. And one day, he met with the victim and said, "I told you I would not be there for long."

The victim continued her schooling. She sat her WASCE and got an outstanding result. She later gained admission at a university.

To date, the victim has been feeling terrible about the incident, which has affected her relationships. Whenever one mentions a rape case, she gets irritated. She does not like to talk about it. She still cries and feels ashamed about it.

Elderly Men Raping Girls and Infants

A grandfather raped his granddaughter in a provincial village. The girl, who was not living in the same house with the grandparents, was typically sent to take food to them, but on one of the occasions, the grandmother was not at home when she took the food to them. The grandfather, who was sitting in the veranda, opened the door for the girl to take the food to the room. As soon as the girl entered the room, the grandfather followed and sexually penetrated the girl. The perpetrator was summoned before a chief, where he acknowledged raping the girl.

The Rape of Boys

Severally a 32-year-old guy sexually penetrated two boys, one aged 9 years and the other about 10 years. The perpetrator threatened to kill them if they reported the matter to anyone.

After some time, one of the victims was often noticed having stains on his trousers, around the anus area. They asked him why, but he was initially afraid of disclosing what was happening. He finally explained that a certain guy had been having anal sex with him and another boy. The other boy (victim) was then checked, and similar stains are seen on his trousers.

The perpetrator was arrested and taken to the police. The police sent the victims to the hospital for medical examination.

5. FROM TRUST TO TRAUMA: STAGES IN THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN VICTIM/SURVIVOR AND PERPETRATOR OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Perpetrators use three main approaches or strategies. We categorize these strategies into the blitz, opportunistic and trust approaches.

Blitz approaches are sudden attacks on women, but these often involve strangers, and they are not common. The opportunistic approach relates to men/boys taking advantage of situations. These opportunities abound in many settlements in urban areas where multiple families are inhabiting a compound and sharing facilities like toilets, taps, wash-yards, kitchens and often even parlors. The trust approach, however, is the most common one used by perpetrators. It involves people in relations of trust using it to sexually abuse girls and women. We discuss below what happens before, during and after sexual perpetration

5.1. Before the violation

Trust is a favoured strategy of sexual aggressors to get girls/women, masking their initial intentions and getting women and girls to lower their guard. Sexual aggressors are often in a trusted relationship with the victim or the victim's family before the incident. In several instances, it involves 'grooming the victim' where the offender slowly draws the victim into a secret sexual relationship through special attention or filling such roles within a victim's family as providing extra food, buying clothes, or generally being helpful. Often the violator is well known to the victim, either sharing the same house or neighbourhood as the victim/survivor. Often, the perpetrator might have done something considered good for the victim/survivor – providing shelter or food in case of close relatives; or extra-teacher services or kindness in case of student-victim; or some material support in case of neighbours, or buying their wares in the case of girl-traders, or providing free rides or rides at reduced costs in the case of Okada riders.

I am a victim of rape by my teacher. When I was in JSS 3, approaching the BECE, my mother decided to enrol me in private lessons because I was attending a public school where teaching was ineffective. The classes were organized in the teacher's house in our neighbourhood, and just a few of my peer neighbours and I were attending. My mother was usually returning home late at night, sometimes around 11 pm. So she told me to wait in the teacher's house after lessons until she returned home and picked me up... (Extract of an account by a school girl victim/survivor of sexual penetration).

... The girl and her younger sister often went to fetch water in the compound where a rich guy resided. The guy started showing kindness to them by offering them money and other gifts. One day, the rich man sent one of his house helps to invite the girl over to his house. Thinking that she was going to get more gifts, she went to the house and was taken directly to his room.... (Extract of an interviewee account of a 14-year-old schoolgirl who was sexually penetrated by a rich man in 2018)

5.2. During The Violation

The first violation often occurs through brute physical force, with the sexual aggressor forcing himself on the victim. Where there are repeat violations, these are usually done through threats of more violence should the victim resist; or should the victim tell any other person.

... He then started persuading her for sex, but since she had never had sex and was not expecting the guy to request such from her, she got irritated and tried to walk out of the room. The guy rushed at her, closed the door and forcefully threw her on the bed. She fought back, but he overpowered her and eventually succeeded in untying her "lappa" and forcefully penetrated her. Her virginity was taken, and she screamed out of pain, but the guy continuously squeezed her mouth until he was satisfied... (Extract of an account of a 14-year old school girl victim/survivor of sexual penetration).

... When all the others had gone to bed, the guy called her to bring him water to drink. As soon as she entered his room to give him the water, the guy locked the door, choked her with a cloth and undressed her. He then sexually penetrated her... (Extract of an account of a 13-year old school girl victim/survivor of sexual penetration in a provincial town).

... The rich guy switched off the light, grabbed the girl and forcefully threw her on the bed. The girl resisted and, in the struggle, severely bit the guy's chest, but she was overpowered and sexually penetrated... (Extract of an interviewee account of a 14-year old schoolgirl who was sexually penetrated by a rich man in Freetown in 2018).

... The perpetrator penetrated the boys via their anus on many occasions and always threatened to kill them if they reported the matter to anyone... (Extract of an interviewee account on two boys, aged 9 and 10 years, sexually penetrated by a 32-year old man).

5.3. Disclosure of Violation

Violations are often exposed through the following:

Physical Changes

Often, exposure is triggered by physical changes in the victim – in the case of children by relatives or others observing trauma on their loins or seeing marked ways in the way they walk, leading to further examination. It may also involve noticing signs of pregnancy in the minor. In the case of older children or young women, physical changes may include the victim becoming thinner, withdrawn, or getting pregnant.

... The victim became inactive and could not walk normally. Her father noticed the abnormalities and interrogated her. She explained everything that had happened between her and the rich man (Extract of an interviewee account of a 14-year old schoolgirl who was sexually penetrated by a rich man in 2018).

... Some months later, the victim's mother realized that her daughter was pregnant. It was then that the victim explained to her mother... (Extract of an interviewee account of a 15-year old girl who was sexually penetrated by a 30-year old man in a hilly community in Freetown).

Neighbours Alerting Relatives

A lot of the exposure involves observant neighbours alerting relatives of the victim about what is going on with their daughter/sister/ ward

The survivor was ten years old and was in class three. She was living with her aunt, who was also paying her school fees. Her mother had died. The aunt was poor and lived in a 'pan body.' The violation took place at night, and the survivor wore a skirt and blouse. She was going to the toilet located outside the house.

The perpetrator was a friend of the girl's stepfather. The victim was going to the toilet when the perpetrator called her to collect sweets. She followed him to the dark, and he penetrated her. A neighbour caught them in the act and raised the alarm. She was taken to the hospital because she was bleeding and the report was made to the police. The perpetrator was arrested. The survivor wants him to be in jail, and she feels girls should be protected at night. She feels awful about the incident, and she does not want to tell people about it. She wants to be safe and protected, and she wants to be educated.

Victims Reporting the Violation

This seems to be the least means of exposure. Victims are often too ashamed or too afraid of the perpetrator, or they are often shut down when they begin to talk about their violation, especially where it involves close family members.

... Unfortunately, one day the uncle forcefully sexually penetrated and threatened her that if she told anyone about it, something wrong would happen to her. The victim, therefore, kept it to herself and never told anybody all these years... (Extract of an interviewee account of a schoolgirl who was sexually penetrated by her uncle in 2014).

...one of the victims was often noticed having stains on his trousers around the anus area. They asked him why, but he was afraid of disclosing the cause to anyone because of the threat of being killed by the perpetrator. After several persuasions, he finally explained that a certain guy had been having anal sex with him and another boy... (Extract of an interviewee account of two boys, aged 9 and 10 years, sexually penetrated by a 32-year old man).

5.4. After the Exposure Of the Violation: Settlement, Prosecution, and Escape

After exposure of the abuse, a number of outcomes could be discerned. Three consequences stand out:

- Settlement,
- Prosecution and
- Escape of Sexual Aggressor.

Settlement: Settlement usually involves the matter being prevented from reaching formal processes. Where the matter is outside of these formal processes, especially the police and the courts, the settlement is also initiated to keep the case from getting there. Settlement often involves getting the sexual aggressor off the hook in exchange for material compensation or other agreeable measures to the girl's family. This tends to be the most common path after exposure.

Women tend to be more opposed to settlement than men. Several women note that 'women know what it means, they feel the pain more as women.' Therefore, the approach of those who want settlement is often to talk to the men in a family to get them to prevail over the women –mother, or aunt or guardian of the victim – to accept to a settlement. The woman thinking about the other repercussions if she refuses to listen to the entreaties of her male relatives, would agree to the settlement.

Also, there are greater tendencies for settlement where the perpetrator is a member of the community than where he is a stranger. This is among the factors responsible for settlement being the most common path after exposure, as most sexual aggressors are members of the same family or community as the victim or survivor. It is easier to appeal to other values as social harmony or friendships with family members of the aggressor in efforts to convince victims or their aggrieved family to let perpetrators off the hook.

... During the trial, the family and church members of the perpetrator were coming to plead with my dad to forgive and withdraw the case, but dad initially refused. In the week that the verdict was to be made on the matter, some imams came to my dad and succeeded in getting him to withdraw the case from court. We forgot about it... (Extract of an account given by a school girl made victim/survivor of sexual penetration).

... The victim's mother became angry and decided to report the matter to the police, but people pleaded with her not to do so... The perpetrator was not reported to the police... (Extract of an interviewee account of sexual penetration of a 13-year old schoolgirl by her uncle in a provincial town).

... The police charged the matter to court, but while the trial was going on, the victim's parents stopped appearing in court. It was gathered that they had been prevailed upon with bribes and were no longer interested in pursuing the case... (Extract of an interviewee account of a 14-year old schoolgirl who was sexually penetrated by a rich man in 2018).

... When the victim's parents got to know about this, they did not make any report because of their background as traditional people. They settled the matter internally. The perpetrator took up the responsibility of the victim: her schooling and welfare. They both built a relationship and started living as a couple since then... (Extract of an interviewee account of a primary school girl who was sexually penetrated by her teacher in Eastern Freetown)

Running Away: Also, perpetrators can just run away, out of the reach of families, or communities or the police. In these instances, they neither settle the matter with the family nor at the police station. Instead, they simply evade accountability for their actions at all levels. In some instances, these are strategies to let things cool off, hoping that when they return, the family or general society would have lost interest in pursuing the matter.

... The perpetrator is still on the run and has not been seen since. His family later came to apologize and seek a family settlement, but the matter had already gone to the police and is still there... (Extract of an account of a 14-year old school girl made victim/survivor of sexual penetration. Incident on 31st January 2020).

... The victim's family went to the local police station and reported the matter. The police told them they would refer the case to Bo, and they have done so, but the perpetrator is on the run... (Extract of an account by a 13-year old school girl made victim/survivor of sexual penetration in a provincial town).

Prosecution: There has been an increase in the prosecution of sexual aggressors since the declaration of the state of emergency on sexual abuses and the enactment of the 2019 Sexual Offences Act. The Act specifically makes settlement an offence.

5.5. Life After Violation

A growing number of organizations provide services to victims/survivors – these include the provision of safe houses for victims who had been ostracized or cast out by their families or who are afraid of continuing violations by perpetrators. Victims say they are usually blamed and feel blame for the assault – that may - be they led the perpetrators on by the way they dress or other behaviour.

I hate teachers; I see no difference in educated and non-educated persons behaviour towards women and girls. I am now 31 years old. I was raped by my teacher in Junior Secondary School in the Provinces. I was fourteen at the time. I had gone to the teacher for evening classes when the incident happened.

My teacher was a nice man. I saw him as a father to me due to the lovely pleasantries he showered me with. I was not expecting that from him, of all people. After raping me, an attempt was made by the school authorities to cover it up, but the incident had been exposed, and the matter was reported to the police station, and my teacher was arrested.

I was expecting him to be sentenced, but instead, he was just detained, and months later, he was granted bail. He left the village because people no longer respected him there after the incident. But he is now a driver whose life is comfortable, whilst mine is a nightmare. Since that time, I hated schooling and swore never to go to school anymore. My parents tried countless times to force me to go to school, but I refused, as school reminded me of the incident. I hate teachers so much. I hate school, and I hate to be educated because I see no difference in educated and non-educated persons' behaviour towards women and girls.

He is living a normal happy life while I am living with regret

My abuser was never punished because I never said a word. I didn't know what was happening to me. I didn't realize that what he was doing was wrong, and even if I say something now, who would believe me? My first abuser, an older cousin, is currently a graduate. Perhaps, because of my silence, he is doing a lot worse to other children. When we have weddings or naming ceremonies in our family, I see him smiling at me, and all I want to do is just stab him, it's like he does not even remember what he did. He is living a normal happy life while I am living with regret. I know that saying anything would not ease my pain, and he would not get punished for it. My second abuser ran away, and to this day, I have no idea where he is. The issue was discussed with the family, a report was made at the police station, but nothing was done because he disappeared.

6. REPORTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

There is consensus amongst prosecutors and child protection officers that most child sexual abuses are not reported to the formal and informal systems. However, cases that are not reported to the 'formal system' are more than those reported to the formal system. Also, a large number of cases reported to the formal system, especially its justice mechanisms, are withdrawn. Factors that inhibit disclosure include family pressure, shame, fear, low capacity of formal agencies, families trusting other channels for resolving the issues more, and concerns about social harmony.

The woman, 27 years old now, was sexually penetrated by her uncle when she was 12 at the village in the provinces. Her uncle had been taking care of her since her father died. The uncle continued abusing her until she was 15 years old, when she eventually ran away from the house.

"When I was staying with him, I attempted to expose the affair to his wife, but I was flogged for lying against him. Since that time, I couldn't say a thing. After running away from the house, I complained to some elders, who warned me to remain silent about the issue since I have no evidence. I currently do not want to even think about my past experience and what I went through in that village." She said, crying. No action was ever taken against the abuser, who is now dead.

6.1. Shame

Shame is a powerful emotion in Sierra Leone. And shame is seen as both personal and familial, with individual shame rubbing off on families and family shame rubbing off on individuals. So there are strong impulses to make shameful things invisible. One such shameful thing is rape and sexual violation. This is where a more modern way of dealing with violations and a traditional impulse to hide a shameful act collide. The shame is at two levels. First, there is shame at the level of the individual - mostly the victim or survivor. Should the act be exposed, she is seen as defiled, and she is often ostracized. Victims know this, and they often chose the path of silence, of hiding the shame- because the more exposed an act is, the greater their ostracism. The other level is that of the family. Individuals within families seek to hide the shame- especially if it involves patriarchs or persons with authority in the family. The pressures not to let the shame out are strong, and victims, in many instances, can hardly withstand this.

This is not to say that victims don't want the persons punished. Many do. But how could the punishment be carried out in ways that do not lead to exposure of the abuse, or threaten the

victim's livelihood, or generally disrupt the tight web of relations in close-knit communities, especially where, as the data shows, the majority of sexual aggressors are familial and familiar faces?

Among the Limba, a man is not expected to force himself on any woman except his wife. It is a taboo to rape or sexually harass women. A man who rapes brings "dankah" (curse) and "kulahu" (shame) on his head. Any man found guilty of this act is banished from the village. This brings "kulahu" to the man, his family, and often also the woman since she is a member of the family. A woman or girl who has been sexually penetrated or raped is often stigmatized and sometimes could not be married in that settlement due to the stigma.

6.2. Disclosure, knowledge and Healing

There is consensus that disclosing sexual violations leads to, amongst others, two major positive developments. Firstly, it increases general knowledge about the phenomena that is good for designing strategies to combat it, including punishing sexual aggressors. Secondly, the disclosure itself heals victims, helps them to get counseling, and starts a process of pulling out the pain lurking within them.

However, there is also evidence that disclosure often hurts and that forgetting or submerging the sexual violation memories under other aspects of their lives has been one way of dealing with the issue.

A prominent view of experts on the issue is that this may be due to how the disclosure or telling is secured and not necessarily with the disclosure itself. Some practitioners have devised several ways of having more empathic disclosure that considers the psychological and other states of the victim/survivor.

Whilst it is indeed true that how victims/survivors are made to tell their stories may further traumatize them, it is also the case that many victims/survivors go on to live their lives. They have pushed the abuse to the back of their existence, and other affairs of living now take up most of their time. This may fly in the face of extant 'formal' ways of dealing with the issue. This is because victims/survivors moving on without telling their stories promote impunity, inhibit knowledge on the scale of the scourge and greatly complicates meeting its challenges, including healing victims and punishing perpetrators.

However, while many people may not want to disclose, the abuse still influences, in lots of ways, how they live their lives, and the pain often comes up and manifests itself in several ways.

7. CATEGORIES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

We could categorize child sexual abuse in different ways. One useful way is to make a distinction between sexual contact where all those involved are minors; and instances where a victim is a minor, and the other person is above 18 or an adult.

Though the law does not recognize consent in sex involving a minor, we could make a useful distinction between sex with a minor that involves 'consent' of the girl or boy, and those without the consent of the boy or girl or the consent of the customarily appropriate consent agent – mainly the family.

7.1. Sex Involving Minors with 'Consent'

Sex amongst minors is widespread, mainly between boyfriends and girlfriends. Often the persons – that is, the minors - involved do not consider it a violation, though the law and customs of the land see it as violations. When these acts are disclosed to formal justice institutions, the new ideal, according to a lawyer interviewed, and in accordance with the 2019 amendments to the Sexual Offences Act, is for it to be prosecuted and punitive action taken against the male involved. The female involved is seen as the victim.

When these acts are brought to the attention of those steeped in traditional lore, both the girl and boy are blamed. However, it is often demanded that the boy's family owns up to the act, and this owning up to the act may depend on several factors. Where the girl is pregnant, owning up to the act means 'ansa the belleh' literally 'answering to the pregnancy' and being responsible for expenses incurred. But again, these are process issues, and the outcomes may include how it is socially negotiated rather than a one-size fits all solution. Other repertoires of actions include a benign removal of the girl by her family from the environment to a more suitable place, or it could involve the girl being driven away in a very hostile manner.

7.2. Sex Involving Minors without 'consent'

This is the situation where consent is not given by the girl. Often it involves physical force. A large number of cases reported to formal and informal institutions involve this type of child sexual abuse.

7.3. Sex involving minors with an adult with 'consent'

There are also cases of sex between an adult or person above 18 with a person below 18, though with the consent of the minor and/or her family. Often the adult provides certain

resources to the minor. A study coordinated by a leading feminist organization in Sierra Leone talks about four such transactions for sex: sex for school fees, sex for mobility, sex for strength and sex to support the family.³ Sex for school fees, school charges or teacher services is about girls who could not afford these costs offering sex to teachers in return. Sex for mobility is about girls offering sex to commercial bike riders (okada) in lieu of transport costs. However, it must also be borne in mind that Okada men or boys have greater access to money than girls or their rivals and they use it as to entice girls to be involved in sexual relationships with them. Sex for strength relates to men or boys who help women with hard chores that girls or women could not do, having sexual favours as payment. Sex to support a family is prevalent. When it involves pre-marital sex –which traditional norms condemn - the family looks the other way. Where the matter gets to the attention of formal authorities, the family may not cooperate in the investigations. There is wide tolerance of this type of sex by general society, or often society and family look the other way. A civil society activist calls it 'sexing up the social ladder' –sex as a means of hooking up a family to the resources provided by a man's financial and other standings.

There is also sex as a sign of maturity and being with the times. Peers often boast of being mature because they have had sex and taunt peers who have not yet had sex as not mature. Maturity is not seen as a function of age or mental state but as conferred by engagement in sexual activities.

A thirteen-year-old girl mocked a classmate of hers as not being mature because she was not sexually active. The classmate reported the matter to teachers, which led to another discovery. The thirteen-year-old had been luring other classmates to sleep with men as a sign of being with the times. The mocked classmate and two other classmates had been lured to sleep with some male friends of the thirteen-year-old. The mocked classmate had refused; she was taunted as being immature. Following the revelations, the thirteen-year-old and the two other classmates who engaged in the sexual acts were expelled from the school. The reason given was that they would influence their peers into sexual acts.

7.4. Sex Involving minors with an adult 'without consent' and with force and physical harm

This type of sexual violence is widely condemned in the country. A majority of the cases in the nation that drew lots of national attention belong to this category of sexual abuse. There are convergences of condemnation by formal institutions and persons in general society – sex with infants and violent sexual penetration and rape.

8. COUNTERVAILING SEXUAL ABUSE

There are significant numbers of countervails against sexual abuse at the informal and formal levels, or the traditional, the gendered personal level, and the formal non-state and state levels:

8.1. Cultural Countervails:

All ethnic groups have countervails against sexual aggression. These countervails are as varied as norms against sexual abuse, institutions countering sexual abuse and traditional punitive measures against sexual perpetrators and aggressors. All ethnic groups have norms against incest. Those involved in incestuous acts are detested and subjected to punitive measures, including banishment from the communities. Institutions, including the Bundo, often act against sexual aggressors or persons publicly insult 'society members.' There are certain words, for instance, that men should not say about women publicly, and such denigration invites action by the women concerned. All ethnic groups traditionally frown at pre-marital and extra-marital sex and have measures in place to punish those involved. There have been mutations of some of these measures. For instance, the redress for pre-marital sex has often been the girl being married off to the male person or for the male or his family to pay damages to the female's family. Where it is done without consent by the female, the damages could be higher, as families have stronger cases should it be moved to chiefs or local courts, magistrate courts or other courts. Presently, consent is no defence for the offence of sexual penetration according to the Sexual Offences Act as amended in 2019. This has increased leverage of families who may exact greater rewards, knowing that the alternative – reporting to the state authorities – may bring about greater punitive measures on the perpetrator with little or no defence that the perpetrator could mount.

8.2. Female Agency and Countervails at the Gender-Specific Level

Women have always been very aware of vulnerabilities to sexual abuse and have taken steps to protect themselves. These steps include the following

Sisterhoods of Protection: In most communities, there are informal registers, amongst women, of sexual violators. When women see young girls or women friendly with those on their informal lists, they will take several steps to protect them. This includes direct warnings to the women, or warning the would-be perpetrator/sexual aggressor, or speaking with the parents of the woman/girl to be watchful of their daughters' relationship with the would-be sexual violator. Some female interviewees recall these sisterhoods of protection.

I was a frisky innocent girl. A particular man in our neighbourhood took an interest in me. He started being so kind to me, showering me with gifts, always smiling at me, and generally being very friendly. Several women called me aside and said they did not want me to go near the man and that anytime they saw me with him, they would tell my mother that I liked being in 'bad company.' I did not understand what they were saying or alluding to, but years later, as an adult woman, I found out that man was going after vulnerable young women/girls.'

Awareness Undergarments

'Awareness' clothing entered popular culture in the 1990s during the war to refer to tight-fitting shorts worn as an undergarment by women who are 'aware' of the risks of sexual violation and thus put them on to make it difficult for perpetrators to rape or otherwise sexually violate them. These clothes are still a regular feature for many women traversing terrains and events where they may feel vulnerable.

Bouncers and 'Besties'

Commercial sex workers (CSWs) recruit bouncers to prevent male customers and others from taking undue advantage of their vulnerabilities. Bouncers are regular features of commercial sex work. A CSW states that 'we have them to prevent harassments from area boys who, knowing the type of trade we are in, usually seek to waylay us, take our money or rape us.

'Besties' are young women's best male friends, who are not their boyfriends. Young women usually go out with them at night for protection or call them to accompany them through dangerous zones.

Support circles

Survivors are forming a number of groups to support themselves go through the after effects of violations and psycho-social traumas, social stigma and ostracism by some family members.

I work with survivors and facilitate a support circle where children meet to share their experiences. Knowing that they belong to a group of people with similar experiences helps them navigate the challenges they go through. Many in the community don't know about this support circle, but the children do meet regularly – Extract from an interview with a community animator

Online Communities

Young women are also forming online groups dedicated to issues affecting women. The online communities – many of which are formed on the Whatsapp messaging app - discuss sexual abuse, exchanging information on the latest cases and discussing ways to protect themselves, seek justice or help victims. Many of the groups prefer anonymity since that offers them free space to discuss sensitive and personal issues and matters that general society sees as taboo.

I belong to several Whatsapp forums dedicated to discussing issues relating to rape and other sexual violations. Presently we even organize zoom meetings to strategize on ways to support advocacies, victims, and persons serving as witnesses in court cases. I belong to the community of practice forum, a mainly online forum that synergizes efforts of persons working issues relating to sexual abuse issues – Extract from an interview with a field worker on women's empowerment

8.3. Countervails at the Formal Non-State Level: Civil Society Organizations/ Non-Governmental Organizations

Several civil society organizations dealing with sexual abuse can be categorized. The prominent categories include the paralegal networks, the advocacy networks, and the victim care networks. The victim care networks include those that primarily provide medical services to victims of sexual violence, and those involved in psycho-social care, and victim/survivor safe houses. Civil society groups are a notch up in the escalation of incident towards the formal and taking away the issue from the hands of the family, and the community

Don Bosco Fambul

Don Bosco Fambul Therapy Center at Russel Village, Tombo, is run by the Catholic Salesians of Don Bosco. They have four shelters – two for boys and two for girls. One of the centers for girls takes care of rape victims, and the other seeks to rehabilitate mostly teenage commercial sex workers. The organization also runs an interim care center at Fort Street. A significant role of the centers for girls is to help them heal from their traumatic experiences. The center's social workers are required to act as mother figures to the girls and to approach their roles with a caring rehabilitative disposition –they sign forms on being recruited to the center either as staff or volunteers not to shout at the girls or beat them, but always to listen, be gentle and counsel.

Don Bosco runs a school in their therapy center and is run as a safe school that takes into account the girls' traumatic experiences and needs for healing. Before girls are sent to schools outside the center, they are evaluated to ensure they are ready for it.

Their services for rape victims include full-time home care, food three times a day; if with a child, they take care of you for one year, after which you are assessed for school or skills training, or they try to find placement for them. They also run a hospital in the center and partner with Marie Stopes and Rainbow Center.

The Rainbo Initiative

The Rainbo Initiative in Sierra Leone provides advocacy and training on sexual violence, but it is mainly known in the country for its psychosocial support and medical services to victims of sexual abuse at its Rainbo Centers in Freetown, Kenema, Makeni, Kono and Bo. The Rainbo Centers are located in the main government hospitals in those cities and in Freetown at the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital. It started as a project of the International Rescue Committee in 2002 but has since evolved into an independent organization and the leading provider of medical services to victims/survivors of sexual violence. The Rainbo Initiative partners include Sierra Leonean Government Agencies such as the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police, international organizations including the EU, OSIWA, the International Rescue Committee, and local civil society organizations to the Community of Practice to end sexual abuse and gender-based violence. The organization is amongst the most victims centered institutions in the country, providing medical services to thousands of victims/survivor of sexual abuse. It also provides evidence-based advocacy and supports the prosecution of sexual aggressors with data from its credible databases on rape and other forms of sexual abuse.

8.4. On the Initiatives to Combat Sexual Abuse

Black Tuesday

Black Tuesday was a reaction by a radio station manager, Asmaa James, to accounts of sexual abuse on her widely listened to programme, Good Morning Salone. Following an account of a particularly gruesome sexual penetration of a five-year old girl who was treated at the Aberdeen Women's Center, a network of women, with Asmaa James as a leading voice, organized marches through the streets of Freetown to protest the sexual abuse and murder

and call for action. The march built on marches women organized in 2015 following the rape and murder of commercial sex worker Hannah Bockarie at the Lumley Beach in Western Freetown. A network of women's organizations led by the 232 Power Women held candlelight sessions in the country to focus attention on endemic sexual abuse and other violent wrongdoings against women and girls in the country. These marches' main themes were a call for justice to be done and for the state to find and prosecute the offenders. That was the central call point - the issue of sexual offenders often getting off the hook in the country. The women advocated a change to this and emphasized a strict carceral approach to dealing with sexual abuse. The Black Tuesday Movement, led by the Asmaa James Foundation, also raised funds for the five-year old victim of sexual violence to be flown out of the country for treatment.

We Are All Hannah Bockarie

The We Are All Hannah Bockarie Candlelight Vigil, held on August 20, 2015, was a pivotal initiative in raising voices against sexual abuse in the national public arena. It was coordinated by several women's organizations, including Power Women 232 and Legal Access through Women Yearning for Equality Rights & Social Justice (LAWYERS), a civil society organization comprising female lawyers. A spokesperson for organizers described the candlelight procession thus: 'This candlelight vigil and procession is to shed light on the issue of sexual violence in Sierra Leone, remember Hannah and all unnamed victims of sexual violence...' Women, clad in black, marched along the main streets in Freetown protesting the death of seventeen-year-old Hannah Bockarie, whose body was found along the Lumley Beach in Western Freetown. They demanded action on finding and bringing the culprits to justice and on a slew of actions to eradicate sexual abuse in the country. The procession also included some senior government ministers, UN officials, supportive Sierra Leonean men, and such organizations as the 50/50, Women Of Wonders Illuminating ladies, Past members of the Fourah Bay College club, Deflosacs, Jewels for Jesus, Women's Forum, Women in the Media (WIMSAL), and the Human Rights Commission.

The Hands Off Our Girls Campaign

The Hands Off Our Girls campaign is an initiative of Sierra Leone's First Lady officially launched on December 14, 2018. Its primary objective is to eradicate child rape, early marriage and gender-based violence. It is now regarded as a government flagship programme and had a series of mini-launches in districts in the provinces. The campaign gave greater visibility to the issues relating to child rape, and its advocacy has been credited with being integral to the enactment of the Amendments to the Sexual Offences Act in 2019, the establishment of the Sexual Offences Model Court, and the urgency with which institutions within the criminal justice system, from the police to the government prosecutors to the courts act in relation to alleged sexual offences. Young girls below 18 are now called 'Fatima Bio Pekin' that should not be touched if men want to avoid 'government trouble.'

Whilst giving greater visibility and helping sustain the fight against child sexual abuse on the national agenda, the campaign has also been seen as elbowing out other worthy but less politically oriented organizations working on child sexual abuse.

8.5. Countervails at the State Level

The Family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police

The establishment, growth, and challenges the Family Support Unit faces mirror the evolution of the official state response to increasing sexual violence from a couple of years before the end of the civil war in 2002 and the subsequent two decades. The Family Support Unit grew out of a Domestic Violence Unit established at the Kissy Police Station to deal with domestic violence. The unit became the Family Support Unit located within the Criminal Investigation Department with a broadened mandate to include dealing with sexual offences. It became an independent unit in 2007, with its mandate extended due to the passing into law of the Domestic Violence Act and the Child Rights Act, amongst others. The FSU's mandate also obliges it to partner with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs. The FSU also partners with CSOs and international agencies working on sexual abuse and has received support, including training of its officials, designing manuals on how to deal with Gender-Based Violence matters, and gathering evidence for the prosecution of sexual aggressors and violators.

Whilst the FSU performs other roles –including raising awareness on sexual abuse, it has also majorly served as a conduit for the formalization and judicialization of the response to sexual abuse. It sits at the junction where informal ways of dealing with sexual responses meet formal ways of dealing with the phenomena. State and general society's ways of dealing with the issue come into sharp relief at that junction where the FSU sits.

Laws and the Courts

Since 2007, there has been increasing specificity of the laws concerning sexual violence and greater severity of punitive measures. Before 2007, when a slew of acts relating to women were enacted, violence against women and sexual offences against women and children had to draw from other general laws relating to offences against persons. These laws included the Offences Against the Persons Act of 1863 and the Prevention of Cruelty to Children 1960 as amended. They had many loopholes and other laws - including from the country's constitution to customary laws - clawed from their efficacy. 2007 saw lots of changes in the country's laws that were progressive and moving towards greater protection for women and children. The laws are collectively referred to as the Gender Acts. The Domestic Violence Act 2007, for instance, made marital rape an offence. There is also the Child Rights Act of 2007, which bans marriages and sex with persons under 18. These are significant milestones, but they contained loopholes that a new Sexual Offences Act in 2012 sought to overcome.

However, despite these laws, sexual offences, reported sexual offences continued to increase. Several factors were blamed for this – including high costs for women seeking justice, distant location of institutions charged with prosecuting these offences, lack of knowledge about the laws, delays, and women withdrawing cases due to settlement. Another salient factor is that although CSOs and others continue to point to the widespread occurrence of sexual offences, there is the perennial problem of the powerful and the nation in general moving on to other issues and the inability of state institutions to continue investigating or prosecuting non –sensational rape and sexual penetration matters. Several victims, CSOs and others discuss this phenomenon – the sooner the hue and cry die down, forces look for ‘settlement’ or getting the perpetrator out of the courts by any other means set in.

In 2018 a confluence of events and human agency led to a more sustained effort – including a declaration of a state of emergency on sexual violence, the enactment of amendments to the Sexual Offences Act and the establishment of the Model Court for Sexual Offences. The number of prosecutions shot up. The notable features of the 2019 Amendments to the Sexual Offences Act include the increase in the mandatory sentences for several sexual offences; distributing mandatory minimum sentences according to the age of the offenders; stipulating that all children below the age of 18 (with no exception) could be arraigned, found guilty and sentenced for sexual offences, and greater punitive measures for people seeking to settle sexual abuse cases.

The Sexual Offences Model Court has eight judges, all of the sexual offence crimes are forwarded to the Chief Justice, who assigns the cases to the judges. All the files collected from various police stations all over the country are now decided in the Model Court. Generally, for all cases to be referred to the high court, preliminary investigations must be done, but in sexual violence cases preliminary investigations are not done when the evidence is crystal clear, it is referred directly to the High Court as soon as the Attorney General approves the case to be prosecuted.

9. ON THE WEAKNESS OF COUNTERVAILS AGAINST SEXUAL ABUSE - Between Familialization and Judicialization – A Pattern of Ignoring Victims

Whilst there are countervailing processes and institutions against sexual abuse, there are numerous currents in general society and within the countervailing processes themselves that compromise their effectiveness. We analyze below some of these compromising currents.

9.1. Families, Shame, Livelihoods and Cover Up

Families play more prominent roles in settling/pursuing rape and sexual violation cases than other institutions. Most sexual abuses take place in family or community settings. Where the perpetrator and the victim are members of the same family, there are strong dispositions to cover up the act since disclosure might humiliate the family. The tendency not to disclose the act becomes stronger where the sexual aggressor is the breadwinner and 'giving him trouble' may negatively impact the family's livelihood.

Families of sexual aggressors may also be involved in initiating begging missions to victims or their families where the victim is a member of another family. They are also involved as guarantors of agreements for material and other compensations to the victim and her family.

9.2. Begging Missions and Priests

Begging victims of wrongdoing is a big part of Sierra Leonean social life and the concept of justice. Priests and elders are the masters of the art. Often a wrongdoer or his family approaches a respected elder or priest (often an Imam, as Muslims are the majority in the country) to lead delegations to beg victims or their families. The weight of offending these elders or imams often leads victims and their families to agree to forgive or consent to suggested compromises or other mostly restorative measures.

9.3. Chiefs to Settle

Chiefs play significant roles in the country's informal dispute settlement mechanisms. Though they lack formal powers to adjudicate cases, people, especially in the provinces, see them as arbitrators in disputes. In many towns and villages, chiefs are the first port of call in disputes and offences that move out of family circles, including those that involve sexual abuse. Often chiefs seek to 'settle' these cases, utilizing a repertoire of customary actions available in the chiefdom, town, village, or settlement. Ways in which the cases mediated by chiefs are settled tend towards the restorative and compensatory. This includes the sexual aggressor or family giving material resources to the victim and her family, taking care of the victim's needs for a specified time, or doing rites of legitimization, including marrying the victim, or 'ansa belleh' - the new halfway measure between marriage and outright illegality.

10. NUMBERS AND BREASTS: TRADITIONAL NUBILITY AND FORMAL NOTIONS OF SEXUALITY

There are three distinct views relating to the Sexual Offences Act, rape, marriages and sexual violations in Sierra Leone: the extreme anti-customs position, the extreme custom position and the nuanced position, that amongst others, highlights the conflicts in law and practice relating to the issue. The extreme anti-custom position points to customs and traditions being largely responsible for sexual abuse in the culture –they point to the culture condoning it or creating a favourable environment for it to thrive. ‘There is a culture of rape,’ the saying goes.

The extreme customs position seeks to defend culture at all costs. They point to sexual perversion as a function of the loss of cultural values rather than as intrinsic to the culture. It is more about the rape of culture, about perverts subverting culture to do such grave harm to women and other vulnerable persons.

The more nuanced position looks at contradictions at the level of the law, culture and a society in flux. How are these contradictions resolved in practice when an actual case of rape or sexual violation occurs? Are the practical resolutions helpful to women, to general society, to justice? Who loses out?

How the issues relating to rape are practically resolved has a lot to do with the status of the perpetrator or victim, with family background, concerns about livelihood, family shame, and more.

Integral to understanding the issues and contradictions may also lie in laying out differing conceptions of maturity and nubility between traditional Africa and the emerging ascendant concept that shapes, for instance, the Sexual Offences Act. For eons, humanity has defined female ‘readiness for sex’ physiologically - the female has started menstruating or has grown breasts. The last forty to fifty years has seen a subtle shift towards a more ‘numeric’ definition. Maturity is about getting to a particular number of years; this is all part of the fusing of the quantitative mindset with the social, the ascendancy of numbers and precision in human affairs.

This has created lots of contradiction between the ‘physiological conceptions’ (on which customary marriage and traditional conceptions of many things sexual are based) and the ‘numeric one,’ which is ascendant in our parliamentary statutes relating to sex. The question keeps popping up, how are these things practically resolved, on the ground, when there are alleged violations?

There are points at which custom and the new laws converge- a condemnation, for instance, of incest, of sexual penetration of infants and people who are not physiologically ready – have

not started menstruating or are not besotted. And tradition has numerous sanctions against these behaviours. So tradition has a lot to offer here. Customs and tradition also frown on premarital and extramarital sex, though sanctions relating to these are weakening.

The narrations in this report show a whole universe of pain and suffering for women, and pressures on women to be mute, and how many women are tight-lipped about it because there are lots of social sanctions against women victims who speak out their pain - economic deprivation, social ostracism, psychological trauma with little support from society. So many women have elected to carry their cross in silence. The perpetrators are often family members - fathers, stepfathers, brothers, sons of guardians of the girls or women.

A 'judicialized' and carceral approach to stopping the violation is emerging as the 'officially dominant' one, and a dismissal of other approaches is apparent, including those suggested by customs and tradition. However, customs also frown at most of these violations - and enormous benefits could be gained by looking at how customs deal with these issues, how to overcome the shortcomings, how to tackle the rape of culture and concerns for the family name by perpetrators to get off the hook; and importantly how to care for victims- which according to the narrations captured in this study are a most neglected part of the emerging ways of dealing with this issue.

There is some huge perception in our cultural settings, and often repeated by women, that womanhood is painful here. It surely is, especially when it comes to these sexual matters- and often, the woman is pressured to 'bear' for the sake of her livelihood, her family honour and more.

11. TIREDNESS, VICTIMS AND JUSTICE CHAINS

11.1 On the Tiredness of Formal Institutions

'loss fos tay the tin col.' –Get lost until the matter cools off.'

A favoured piece of advice to sexual aggressors and other offenders is for them to go into hiding until the matter cools off. There is a widespread belief that state institutions lack the resources or will to follow up over a long period. Thus sexual aggressors just vanish in the short term. Many of the narrations about sexual violation tell of perpetrators escaping and state institutions losing interest in the matter over time.

11.2 On the Tiredness of Victims/Survivors and Their Families

Following up on cases for many victims and their families eats a lot into family time and resources that could be used to take care of some other needs necessary for survival. Families talk about having to go to police stations and other institutions frequently to pursue the issues, which often moves at a very slow pace. Where those following up the cases are breadwinners for the family or main contributors to its welfare, that may leave little time for them to attend to breadwinning and other basic survival needs of their often low-income families. Therefore, families of victims may decide to cut their losses or cut out the additional pain of following up and reliving the trauma of their experience.

11.3 Institutions, Justice Chains, Processes, and Negotiations

Understanding responses to sexual abuse may involve looking at the nexus between justice chains, processes and how people negotiate deeply felt social concerns relating to shame, social harmony, justice and healing. It will also be helpful to interrogate these concerns in terms of whose shame, social harmony, justice and healing? Who do these concerns benefit or privilege? And who do the concerns not benefit? We may also want to understand the gendered dimensions of these concerns, and how women in many instances live within patriarchal dimensions of these concerns. Often these actions and reactions inhabit realms that we often label as subordination or resistance. But they may also be more ambiguous, entailing a complex mix of actions that may be contradictory or otherwise, depending on the context and the persons involved.

Though institutions along different points of the formal/informal spectrum tend to respond to sexual abuse in line with ways highlighted for their type of organization, it is also the case that processes, negotiations and forum shopping buffet these institutions to deliver outcomes that are normally not associated with those institutions. The overwhelming majority of narrations show that families tend to favour informal settlement of cases involving close family members. However, families could also favour, or they could be forced or convinced to go for formal,

judicialized and punitive outcomes. Seeking redress is a process, and it involves people who make choices, and whose choices may turn out in ways that they did not originally intend. In many instances, families are aware of many redress options –settle it within the family, go to chieftom elders or chiefs, go to local courts or the police. The redress option they choose is influenced by the outcomes they want, or the nearness of those options to where they reside, or the severity of the case. They are also aware that threatening to go up the chain of redress could influence their preferred redress mechanism to deliver on outcomes they desire. For instance, a family that threatens to go to the police may make perpetrators or their families agree to terms favoured by the victim's family since the police may impose more severe penalties.

Also, families may act out the threat and begin the process of activating the next level in the redress or justice chain. They may not go the whole hog - when the sexual aggressor or their families seek to settle, the victims and/or their families may de-activate their actions in those other redress chains. Often, they use individuals in those other redress chains – the individual police officer, for instance, who would threaten the weight of his institution on the matter should the perpetrator fail to come to terms with the financial and other compensations that victims or their families want.

With many impoverished families, whilst the financial or other payments from the aggressor may be little and could not get victims out of their material poverty, it may provide additional resources to prevent the girls, at least in the short term, from sliding into greater material strain than what they may have been experiencing before they were abused. The choice that low-income families and poorer women and victims make in the face of material compensation from sexual aggressors and perpetrators is, as noted by an interviewee, between being poor or being 'popolipo' –very poor. Families and victims do make this calculus, especially where pursuing the matter may eat into their time and other resources and with uncertain outcomes.

It is also worth noting that people are aware of the problems involved in more formal justice chains –the fact that there are tendencies in those chains for control over the process to move out of the hands of the victim and/or her family, or that justice could be slow and this adds to real and opportunity costs of pursuing the matter, or that somebody could 'mass the case' – unjustly suppress the case or prevent it from moving forward.

Forum shopping by victims/survivors and their families, or actions by individuals within formal redress chains or influence of persons who could 'mass the case' could make courts or prosecutors surrender to out of court settlements, or they could be frustrated enough to settle for less punitive and more informal outcomes than their institutional dispositions would prefer.

In many instances, process, negotiations, agency and mood of the times could trump known

tendencies of institutions. In early 2020, a confluence of agency or will of certain persons within the state and outside it pushed sexual abuse to the fore of the national agenda, resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency relating to sexual abuse, the passage of a new Sexual Offences Act, the establishment of a model court on sexual abuses, and appointment of a coordinator to oversee prosecution relating to sexual offences.

Whilst the instance above relates to a shift in formal national actions relating to sexual abuse, there are also instances where individual agency pushed complacent institutions to act at the micro-level. For instance, an activist director of a care center who follows cases has had high returns on perpetrators being punished. Also, cases in which some national NGOs are involved get more attention from state institutions like the police and the courts. Agency does move institutions to act, both at the macro and micro-level. And the agency does raise awareness on the matter. Actions by the First Lady have led people to call girls under 18, 'Fatima Bio e pikin dem' –children of Fatima Bio, that men should not touch –in line with the goals of the First Lady's flagship programme 'Hands Off Our Girls'

The needle has generally moved towards greater recourse to state institutions as 'panacea for rape' or injustice. Justice, however, is seen here as punitive, as punishing the perpetrator or sexual aggressor. The state's declarations point to this, from statements from the President to the First Lady to concurrence by the Chief Justice and other officials of the state. Justice that emphasizes punitive measures against perpetrators against all else is also the disposition of most NGOs and civil society groups.

Questions that need asking include: do these emphases block out other ways developed overtime to handle these issues? Are we seeing push back from society? There are fears that the emphasis on punishment may lead to communities – concerned about social harmony, material redress to victims and families and about being in control of their redress mechanisms – not fully cooperating or frustrating the state's strict legal construction and emphasis on the carceral. Other questions relate to how efficient, effective, and resourced are formal institutions of the state to do what they are tasked with doing? Is increasing formalization itself threatening to women?

There seem to be differing approaches to the new emphases amongst women and men and between persons in traditional authority and those in more formal positions. The more educated and financially independent women are, the greater their tendency to prefer the carceral approach. A more punitive approach is also favoured by victims and women generally, but the less educated and independent they are, the more they succumb to pressures from their communities and families to settle for the other options. Less educated women are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of defying the greater sheer presence of 'the infrastructures of settlement' within their communities. But do they fair better by doing what these informal structures of settlement want them to do?

“Even seeing them die would not be satisfying,” the survivor said. She stated in vivid detail how she wants her abusers punished - she wants their private parts and fingers to be dipped in boiling water and put on fire.

11.4 When Victims Meet the Formal System

There have been some progressive moves in the formal system to tackle sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women in the country since the passage of the gender Acts in 2007. Family Support Units are all over the country, there are laws against domestic violence and child marriage (which invariably leads to its consummation) or sex with persons under 18; there are also a raft of policies that shows the state's general direction as moving towards greater attention to issues like sexual abuse and violence; and there is the Sexual Offences Act of 2012, which was amended in 2019 to impose more severe penalties on sexual offenders, include more people amongst those who could be arraigned for sexual abuse, and much more. The country has also seen the creation of the Sexual Offences Model Court and greater involvement of government lawyers in prosecuting sexual offences.

However, there are still significant concerns relating to the points where victims/survivors first come into contact with the formal state – the FSU. These concerns relate to the lack of adequate resources, limited capacity, and often the attitudes of persons dealing with victims. Victims are often women, most of whom are poor or see the police as a foreboding institution – a fact that is not helped by the sometimes intrusive questioning, lack of confidentiality when statements are taken (often the result of interviews relating to sexual abuse taking place where other interviews are conducted); and the generally limited resources that inhibit the police from conducting thorough and speedier investigations. These increase burdens on victims and families in terms of the increased psychological trauma they go through when being interviewed, or when the cases are delayed, or the costs they incur when ‘finding their living’ is left unattended to, in going to the police stations over and over again in the course of investigations.

There has been streamlining and investments in the layers above the FSU – the law officers department has more lawyers working on the sexual offences, matters could now be taken straight to the high court rather than further slowed down by often long winding processes during preliminary investigations in magistrate courts; and the Sexual Offences Court has facilities for the handling of confidential sexual abuse trials. However, these progressive moves are at the higher level, which, as a survivor working on the issue puts it, ‘are easily boasted about.’ At the place where victims and survivors first contact the formal state, there is limited capacity, and the burdens of the limited capacity ultimately rest on victims.

Victims/survivors, looking at the balance of options choose to stop pursuing justice and would rather seek solutions at the informal level, where despite its shortcomings, there is some form of accountability for perpetrators and reparations for victims. Perpetrators and sexual offenders may be made to acknowledge their wrongdoing, apologize to victims and family, are shamed, made to transfer resources to victims or undertake to support victims. These informal accountability measures and reparations derived through settlement at the family, chief, priest/imam or community level are definitely inadequate, and they tend towards outcomes that are very patriarchal. But they are often chosen as “less worse” than going to or continuing with the formal institutions of first contact.

The State sees the informal sector as bastions of bad practices, and the more powerful institutions and agents within the state, including prosecutors, the higher judiciary, and others, see the lower rungs of the formal criminal justice system –the police and magistrate courts – as condoning bad practices of the informal sector. Concerning the informal sector, the strategy of powerful state agents and their institutions is to limit their roles to reporting matters and providing witnesses and proscribe their mediating and settlement roles. In relation to the FSU, it is to get them to quickly send cases for advice to the Office of the Attorney General and Minister of Justice; and magistrates no longer have roles to play. This approach has increased the number of prosecutions, trials, and imprisonment of sexual offenders and aggressors. It has not however tackled the forebodingness of formal processes to victims, the burden and costs placed on victims, or payed greater attention to what an interviewee notes ‘are the needs of victims the morning after the noise about trials and prosecution and other formal checklists have been ticked.’

12. ON CONSENT

A civil society activist states the following:

There are several fundamentals one must understand in relation to sexual violation: First fundamental: Every form of sexual abuse is, by that very fact, a criminal act. This is what the Sexual Offences Act says. There are parameters of behaviour a person must not cross – for instance - don't take advantage of your strength or authority to engage in sexual acts against a person's will.

This brings us to the second fundamental: there has to be consent; a person must freely agree to the sexual act.

12.1 The Indicators of Consent

A lawyer says: there are categories of individuals who the law says are incapable of giving consent. In Sierra Leone, they include persons below the age of 18. Sex with persons below that age, even where they agree to the sexual act, is considered an offence – sexual penetration. Persons under that age are legally incapable of giving consent.

A literate traditional chief contends: The Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009 affirms that a person below the age of 18 could be given out in marriage with the consent of her parents or guardians. Elders of the Bundo society 'certify' readiness for marriage with the initiation and graduation of the girl/woman from the society. Sex with a person so ascertained and certified is no offence, for one of the purposes of marriage is sex.

A prosecution witness, a minor under 16, became a hostile witness refusing to cooperate with the prosecution of an alleged sexual offender and saying: 'he is my boyfriend, I agreed to have sex with him.'

In a focus group discussion, it was noted, a woman who visits her boyfriend and stays with him alone in his room is ready for sex with him; she does not need to say it.

A lawyer notes: rape is a continuous act. Even where the woman has given consent, and you have started, you must stop as soon as she says stop.'

The narrations above lay out two parameters or indicators of consent in sexual encounters. They are the legal indicators of consent and the social indicators of consent.

The legal parameters of consent emphasize the numeric and the explicit –the person must be above 18, and she must give her explicit consent. The social indicators of consent emphasize the physiological and the implied. It draws its strength from traditional norms and conceptions,

where readiness for marriage and sex is determined physiologically by Bundo women: the person has started her menses, and 'done pull bobby' (buxom); and legitimate sex must have the consent of the woman's family.

Understanding social indicators of consent may also warrant making the distinction between explicit verbal consent and non-verbal implicit consent. Explicit verbal consent is where the person agrees verbally, without force, to the sexual activity. There is a great movement towards this form of consent as the only legitimate form of consent. It is the basis for the very trite statement 'no means no.' At every stage of a presumed sexual activity, a no from one of the persons involved terminates that person's consent, and engaging in any further sexual activity with that person is a sexual violation. We may refer to this as the strict construction of consent.

However, there is another view about consent, one that has been the prevailing one in general, Sierra Leonean society – consent can be 'behaviorally implied' even without explicit verbal consent. Marriage is traditionally seen as a running consent by a woman to have sex with her husband. An ethnic group in Sierra Leone encapsulates this position in their very traditional rites relating to a marriage where it must be explicitly stated that the man wants to marry the woman for sex. Most leaders of the majority religion in the country –Islam - also emphasize the man's right to have sex with his wife whenever he chooses and considers a woman's refusal as a sin. A lot of women believe this and would oblige to sex with their husbands even when sick.

Extra or pre-marital sex is ordinarily perceived as a violation of traditional norms. However, it is now widely tolerated, especially in urban settings. There have emerged opinions relating to social indicators of consent in extra or pre-marital sex. Paramount amongst this is following a man – boyfriend or friend - into a room implies consent to sexual activity. In a society that is non-explicit about its sexual activities, or where open sex talk is frowned upon, many persons have been socialized into seeing this (going alone with a male to a room or enclosure) as implying consent to sex.

Whilst going into a room alone with a man may be seen as implying consent to having sex with that particular man, there is also the general thinking that the way a woman dresses is akin to implying consent to sex or sexual encounter with men in general. A woman who dresses in ways perceived as very revealing is seen as inviting men for sexual encounters. Traces of this perception could be seen in sermons of religious preachers who ask women to dress modestly to prevent lewdness in society. It may also be linked to deep-seated notions that men's sexual arousal and lack of inhibition are a function of women's aesthetics. Controlling illicit sexual arousals and encounters in society hinges more on women's behaviour than men, and it is thus easier to blame women than men for sexual waywardness in society. Men's sexual behaviour belongs more to the licit end of the licit/illicit spectrum, whilst women's

behaviour tends to be interpreted as sexually-implicit and belonging to the illicit end of the licit/illicit spectrum.

There is also a belief that a woman who accepts money and gifts from a man is implying consent to have sex with her.

12.2 Family and Individual Consent

Consent in issues relating to marriage and sex is traditionally socialized in families. Individual consent is marginalized. However, in a society that is patriarchal and gerontocratic, the voices and interests of elderly males have greater weight in family decisions and giving of consent to marriage and issues relating to how families respond to sex. Generally the consent of females is marginalized, and the voices and consent of girls – doubly disempowered because of their sex and young age – have the least weight.

There have, however, been significant disruptions to the ideal ways of transitioning from unpartnered life to a partnered life. The use of unpartnered rather than unmarried and married is deliberate. Several halfway states have emerged between unmarried and married that are better captured by the 'unpartnered/partnered' spectrum. These newer social arrangements include 'people who are watching themselves; 'boyfriends and girlfriends'; 'persons in 'ansa belleh' relationships' and 'tap to mi unions.' These relationships are ripples in the ideal transition from an unpartnered or, in the traditional cultural sense, unmarried life to the partnered or married life. In the halfway relationships mentioned above, there has been an undermining of the prior consent of families and fathers before the commencement of sexual activities by girls and women in the legitimacy of marriages.

However, society and families have sought to confer some sort of legitimacy on these unions without their prior consent in a variety of ways. These, amongst others, include the rise of the 'ansa belleh' ceremony in cases where pre-marital sex leads to the girl or woman getting pregnant, and in other cases, it involves families extracting material and other resources from the male caught in culturally illicit sexual relationships, including violent sexual encounters defined as rape by general society or categorized by formal legal appellations as rape, sexual penetration, or harbouring.

12.3 The Move Towards Individuation of Consent

As noted above, the values and norms of the society prefer socialized consent to sexual engagements, and we have seen some of the twistings of norms to re-affirm or give a veneer of family consent to emerging partnering or sexual encounters that did not get prior family consent. Two transformations could be noticed here: first, the disruptions of the cultural processes of partnering people for sexual and other intimate encounters, and second: some move away from socialized consent towards the individuation of consent.

Individual consent is rising, though culture and families are seeking to claw back. This individuation of consent is seeing persons commencing sexual activities outside marriage, outside the confines of traditional norms, and lauding their individual consent as a major determinant of their actions. We have seen how adolescents and young women engage in sexual activities in exchange for mobility, strength, for school fees, to support families and in line with emerging notions that sex makes one matured and cool with the times.

The increasing individuation of consent may point to the disintegration, due to many other factors, of families – and of the values and norms, for good or bad –that underpin them. It does not mean that the individuation of consent is without its peril. It has many, some of which may lead to questioning the whole notion of individual consent and choice in the face of the constraining forces of poverty and the mutations of patriarchal practices and discourses into actions that sexualize female bodies in demeaning and objectified ways.

However, the individuation of consent is on the rise, and it is one of the forces that drive, albeit sometimes contradictorily, notions of acceptable sexual practices and non-acceptable ones. This could be seen playing out during prosecution of cases of sexual penetration of minors when girls would become hostile witnesses because they say the males involved are their boyfriends and they had ‘agreed to have sex with them.’ The law does not allow prosecutors to accept that ‘consent,’ but then the prosecutors have their cases weakened by the girls refusing cooperation.

In the state and its lawyers’ zeal for emphasizing their definition of consent, one sees a move towards the ‘statization’ of consent and the removal of capabilities for giving consent from families and communities and adolescents. General society ambivalence to this statization could be seen in non-cooperation with prosecutions and other state processes that could end in punitive measures for sexual aggressors. The state has doubled down on its statization by criminalizing attempts by families and communities to ‘settle’ these matters out of court. The state’s arguments are strong that often the settlement is about letting the sexual aggressors off the punitive hook. Definitely, the state’s objectives in these matters are about making sex offenders pay for their crimes, and it marks its successes by statistics on aggressors prosecuted and incarcerated. The state, its lawyers and persons in formal institutions both within the state and civil society point to the fact that the numbers reported are minimal, the number prosecuted even smaller, and the numbers jailed smaller still. A prosecuting lawyer says, ‘sexual abuse is a social problem, not a legal one, and... there may be the need for the state to integrate this understanding into the actions that it privileges for dealing with the phenomena.’

The individuation of consent points to the fact that the cultural drivers of consent, though still important, are weakening, and other drivers of consent are strengthening. It may not be the case that these other drivers are leading to less sexual violence against women, but it represents a marked shift.

13. ABUSE AND CLOSURE

How does a sexual violation case end, what is it that is seen as closure? Is it closure, or that it just fades away from the lists of priorities or concerns of the families, the communities, child protection services and law enforcement agencies?

We discern three broad forms of closure or ways in which sexual violations fade away from the concerns of families, communities and other institutions. Each focuses on different elements. We categorize these closures as modern closure, traditional closure and individual closure.

13.1 Modern closure is more formalistic. It is about how a case is finally decided in the judicial or formal law enforcement system, be it at the police, local court, magistrate or other court levels. There is increasing emphasis in this form of closure on punitive measures against perpetrators. Once a perpetrator is punished, that is it. There is not much emphasis on caring for the victim/survivor or healing communities. The Sexual Offences Act very much emphasizes this type of closure.

13.2 Traditional closure relates to how violations are concluded at the non-judicialized familial or community levels. The closure may take several forms, but compensation is central to it. This includes the violators or their families taking care of the victims by either marrying them, taking care of their material needs or undertaking some other compensatory obligations. There is a disposition to take care of the victim to repair. However, the reparation is often socialized rather than individualized; it is made to the family rather than the individual victim, and often the victim's concerns are neglected.

13.3 Personal Closure

This is closure at the individual level. For many, closure is not achieved, and the violation continues to impact their lives for years, decades or the rest of their lives. There is a widespread belief in society that womanhood is painful, and it is a woman's lot to 'bear this burden.' Also, sexual acts are not seen as integral to open communal discourse, when talked about, they are spoken of in hushed tones. This below the radar discussion of sexual activities in society affects how the highs, the normalized, and the lows of sex are discussed. Violations are part of the lows of sexual activity, and as with its highs, one is expected not to dwell too much on it. Thus silence on it is seen as offering a path to closure, and many women choose this path. But this closure is fragile, as it faces the ever-present threat of being re-exposed, whispered about within family and communal circles.

In the state and its lawyers' zeal for emphasizing their definition of consent, one sees a move towards the 'statization' of consent and the removal of capabilities for giving consent from

families and communities and adolescents. General society ambivalence to this statization could be seen in non-cooperation with prosecutions and other state processes that could end in punitive measures for sexual aggressors. The state has doubled down on its statization by criminalizing attempts by families and communities to 'settle' these matters out of court. The state's arguments are strong that often the settlement is about letting the sexual aggressors off the punitive hook. Definitely, the state's objectives in these matters are about making sex offenders pay for their crimes, and it marks its successes by statistics on aggressors prosecuted and incarcerated. But both the state, its lawyers and persons in formal institutions both within the state and civil society point to the fact that the numbers reported are minimal, the number prosecuted even smaller, and the numbers jailed the smallest of statistics. A prosecuting lawyer says, 'sexual abuse is a social problem, not a legal one, and that there may be the need for the state to integrate this understanding into the actions that it privileges for dealing with the phenomena.'

The individuation of consent points to the fact that the cultural drivers of consent, though still important, are weakening, and other drivers of consent are strengthening. It may not be the case that these other drivers are leading to less sexual violence against women, but it represents a marked shift.

After the incident happened, she became extremely quiet at home and school; sometimes, she would just blackout in school, which greatly affected her school work. Because of what her uncle did, they never looked at her the same way again; there was always this tension whenever she was around. She would skip school, come home late and at some point, she just didn't care because her family decided that she was not important enough to pursue the case against her uncle. The charge against her uncle was dropped and her family did that, she knows that he is around somewhere just waiting for his next victim, and that is her fault. She ran away from home and stayed at Don Bosco for some time, her family went there and took her home, and she ran away again, she hardly visits her parents or even talks to them. Her family would usually say, "na you wan dem begin rape?" Instead of addressing what happened to her, her family took her to different churches as her pastor told her she has a demon inside her (debul). She explained to her ex-boyfriend about her rape, and he freaked out. They had a nasty argument one day, and he told her, "damage goods lek you naim u dae make so." The abuse also affected her sexual relationship with her fiancé, sometimes she would find it difficult to sleep with him, but he understood what she went through. She is also going to a support group, and that is helping her a lot.

13.4 Traditional Closure versus modern closure – The Informal/Formal and the Long Term/Short Term Spectrum

Whilst it may not preclude punitive measures against sexual aggressors, traditional closure emphasizes social harmony and reparation and restorative processes. Modern closure puts greater emphasis on the punitive and less so on social harmony and restorative processes. There is a middle path, one that emphasizes both punitive measures against perpetrators and care for the victims. Judicial processes are the most formal, and families the most informal. These are the two ends of the spectrum, and one notices trends or movements along with it. Recently, in relation to how officials of the state talk about it, there is a movement towards the formalization of the discourses, and its greater judicialization, where the punishment of the alleged sexual aggressor is emphasized.

Organizations that sit in the middle of the spectrum –NGOs and CSOs - emphasize restorative and punitive measures. The challenge for both the state and NGOs is that their approaches tend to be more short term, though the state's approach tends to be more longer. However, both the state's and CSO's approaches are more short term than that of families, where the effects play out over a longer period.

13.5 Options and Outcomes

The interviews, discussions and narrations show several possible outcomes in relation to sexual abuse: a) punishment of abusers with little or no concern for victims' needs either in the short term or long term; b) punishment of offenders with concern for the victims' needs; and c) concern for the victims' needs with little emphasis on punitive measures for the offender. The more powerful state structure – the courts – put greater emphasis on 'a' above; a lot of national NGOs and CSOs, victims and women generally tend to emphasize 'b'; and informal structures within communities – families, chiefs, elders – tend to emphasize 'c.' It must, however, be noted that the victims' needs are often conflated with those of the family, and especially those within those families who are seen as responsible for the victim. Option 'a' is on the rise, there is increasing recognition of the need for option 'b,' but option 'c' still reigns supreme in the land.

Option 'c' reigns because it shoots up from more long-standing dispositions within the country and because it has a denser presence in the country than the institutions that promote the other options. The long-standing dispositions include patriarchy, concerns about social harmony (and women paying the price for it if it is so required), and also a normalization of 'pain' as woman's destiny, seeing in such 'received wisdom' all should be prepared and ready to go through the three pains of 'childbirth, Bundo, and polygamy.' Tied with the notion is that the pain of man's sexual conduct (legitimate or illicit) is a woman's destiny to carry. Women

who resist this wisdom would have the society's patriarchal structures – the familial and communitarian level, come after them.

It is also the case that women are more embedded in families and communities, with fewer options for moving away to other places than men. Formal institutions may temporarily remove victims from their communities - to testify in court or to safe houses. But women know they will return to these communities and face consequences of not favouring the 'settlement' options of those who control the material and normative resources of those communities. The options between formal outcomes and informal settlements are a hard one for victims.

It must be borne in mind that communities and families are sites of both abuse and healing. There are accounts of girls who miss their mothers, friends and peers after being extracted from the community to temporary safe places. Whilst the actions are often necessary, and safe houses, civil society groups and other institutions at the center of it do enhance protection and other humane possibilities for girls and women, it is also the case that these institutions do alienate the victims/survivors from their familial and familiar social contexts that could provide healing and resolution over the long term. When organizations seek to re-unify victims with their families and communities, it shows that they are aware of this possibility. However, there also exist possibilities of abuse in these returns to the communities – for rape also alienates the victim from the community's sense of harmony, the victim is a constant reminder of what ought not to have happened.

14. CONCLUSION

Sierra Leone has witnessed grand declarations and actions on sexual abuse at the official state level in the last two years. However, at the subjective level amongst survivors, the prevailing sentiment is that everything goes quiet after a few weeks and they are left with the consequences of the exposure –be it an exposure brought about by the state, NGOs, the victim's community or families or the victim herself. The use of the pronoun 'herself' is deliberate, for most victims of sexual abuse in Sierra Leone are girls and women. There are cases of boys being 'abused' by older women, but the boys often interpret these as 'conquests,' in line with prevailing notions of sexual contacts between males and females as 'male trophy' events rather than abuse.

For women and girls who are subject to sexual abuse, the situation is as if society pays some homage of noisy outrage at the event, and after some spirit has gobbled the noise, the state, or society or family feels it has done its duty. The victim is left to bear the consequences of exposure –shame, trauma, pain, and suffering - in silence.

But though not talked about publicly – mainly because it is not 'cultural' to view sex and its good and bad as 'jamma' talk - it is often whispered about in the community to which the victim/survivor belongs. And these whisperings are vectors of bad memories, stinging victims with shame, unsavoury name-calling and more. The victim hopes that silence would bring her relief, or lighten the pain, or that it would make people genuinely forget. But it is often there, just below the surface.

There are narratives of women who have overcome the trauma. These are often women who fill their lives with a lot of other social activities; or who adopt society's normalization of pain as woman's own, and that a woman who loudly protests her pain at the hands of men is not woman enough. But whichever way the outcome, the structures seem disposed to let men off the hook, or only lightly punished.

In the last two years, the state's action to combat sexual abuse looks intent on not letting men off the hook –the maximum sentence now is life imprisonment and the mandatory minimum sentence is 10 years for males below 18, but much more for youths and adults.

Whilst this move is lauded, the neglect of victims the morning after the act or after the conviction or sentencing tells a story of women still marginalized in the process. Many women do want justice in the form of punitive measures against violators, but they also want justice as care for survivors/victims. Justice as punitive measures against offenders is very state-centric and easily fits into the notion of the state as capable of punishing, as masculine,

as patriarchal, as men punishing men; rather than caring for what victims yearn for

Sexual abuse is very real, a social fact, persisting over time and extensive –involving men and women at all ages but with women being mostly at the receiving end. The most vulnerable ages seem to be from eight and all through a woman's teenage years.

Perpetrators are mostly persons known to the victims/survivors. They include stepfathers, neighbours and uncles – uncles include real uncles and those who victims call uncles because it is the preferred honorific for older males in a community or male friends of a family.

Sexual perpetrators employ several strategies to incapacitate their victims. Some of these strategies are aided and abetted entrenched practices and discourses within general Sierra Leonean society. Based on the narrations garnered during the research, we categorize these strategies of incapacitation into cultural violence, verbal violence, physical violence, and incapacitation with trust. Cultural violence is the use of certain cultural tropes as licenses for sexual violence. Cultural and religious ideas and practices about the superiority of men often get translated as women exist for the pleasure of men. Though there are cultural prohibitions on many forms of sexual abuse and violence, the lines usually get crossed, and individuals self-justify their violence by riding on stronger waves of cultural and male peer-group's low regards for women.

Perpetrators also utilize verbal violence, including threats on women's lives, and women remain silent after abuse out of fear of hurtful discourses that shame sexual abuse victims. Incapacitation through trust-building is a favoured strategy by sexual aggressors. They either build on trust that naturally exists in certain relationships –for example, between uncles and nieces, or stepfathers and stepdaughters – to lure girls and women into sexually abusive relationships; or the sexual abuser establishes a new relationship of trust, buying gifts, being very friendly or generally helping them out. Once the trust has been built, they move on to sexually abuse them.

What is it that turns people into perpetrators of sexual abuse? Sierra Leonean society has attempted to answer this, using language and modes of thoughts influenced by factors as varied as tradition, western education, and religious dispensation. Utilizing traditional lenses, perpetrators are seen as driven by a curse in/on their families or as possibly done as part of some rituals to get money or power; the religious look at it as symptoms of a sinful society, and recently several more educated Sierra Leoneans within the NGO/civil society community talk about a culture of rape and other forms of sexual abuse in the country. The global literature on sexual perpetration points at childhood abuse of perpetrators, drug abuse, peer pressure, and toxic masculinities, amongst others.

This research unearths a confluence of drivers of sexual perpetrators. This draws strength from a dominant explanation of sexual perpetration – the confluence model of sexual aggression. This model tells of many factors converging to push people to become sexual aggressors. However, it categorizes them into three – the historical or developmental, the personal, and the contextual. The developmental relate to growing up in an environment that incubates factors that push a person into sexual aggression. Amongst these factors are broken families and childhood abuse. Childhood abuse includes violence in the home, heaped on children, or, as is often the case, violence on women in the homes, including mothers. The personal is about individual character factors, including deficits in interpersonal skills that often lead to misreading female friendliness as an invitation to sex, poor attachment styles, and low empathy for the suffering of others. The contextual factors include current influences, including peer pressure, a climate of toxic masculinity that is tolerant of male sexual adventures as a way of dominating women or being a man. This latter situation often leads to tolerance for rape myths – including that women ask for it by the ways they dress or by remaining silent after sexual assaults or through repeated abuse.

None of these factors are themselves sufficient to push a person towards sexual aggression, but a person subjected to all of them shows a greater likelihood of being a sexual aggressor. Some of the more prominent reported cases of sexual abuse in Sierra Leone were perpetuated through this confluence of factors converging on perpetrators and inflicted on victims: families becoming dysfunctional during the war, leading to child abuse; early exposure to sex, or sexual violence either by or on them or witnessed by them – as was the case during the war; the general perception of peer acceptance of behaviour, acceptance of rape myths as could be witnessed in religious sermons about women dressing scantily asking for it or pushing men into ‘satanic thoughts;’ early age at which people of both gender experience sex; and the general acknowledgment of multiple sexual partners and imageries of sex as a form of violence as could be gleaned by such popular songs as ‘you day make,’ ‘tutu party,’ ‘na the tabule’ and others comparing phalluses to iron rods that could be thrust into women.

There are many contested ways of looking at, and talking about, sexual abuse. These include even the words that are used. Rape seems to be the word most used to refer to sexual abuse in the country’s lingua franca, Krio. But officialdom prefers other words, and the most common of its words is sexual penetration. A person below 18 cannot be raped. This is because rape is sex without one of the partners giving their consent. A person below 18 is seen as incapable of giving or not giving consent, so she cannot be raped. What happens to her is sexual penetration or other forms of abuse. This difference has practical implications, especially in cases where the persons involved –like lovers who are minors – see themselves as having consented to the sexual act. The girl is often uncooperative in the state’s attempt to rope in the

boy because the girl sees herself as capable of giving consent and has done so in the case of her boyfriend. The same scenes play out in cases involving an adult and a girl below 18. Where the girl sees herself as having given her consent, though the state sees her as incapable of giving that, the girl is often uncooperative with the state's actions against the perpetrator.

Also contested are the meanings and/or issues relating to settlement, justice, victim/survivor, perpetrator, amongst others. The 2019 amendment of the Sexual Offences Act of 2019 criminalizes 'settling' sexual abuse cases outside the country's formal judicial system. The formal system has privileged drastic punitive measures against perpetrators. Communities and families have for long had other ways of 'settling' the matter. Communities' non-cooperation with the state's actions may also stem from this conflict. Where communities have 'settled' the matter, they are often uncooperative with official state means of bringing closure to the matter.

But do these closures or settlements bring about the same for victims/survivors?

Perhaps a discussion of the controversies relating to whether those subjected to sexual abuse are victims or survivors would be insightful. Survivor, rather than a victim, is the privileged word in current discourses. Survivor points at the agency of taking charge of her life rather than succumbing to what comes her way, which seems like what the appellant victim points at. But is that the case? The situation may be somewhere between the meanings these two words convey – a person in charge of some aspect of her post-sexual abuse life, but also a victim of male-centered justice as punitive measures against the perpetrator that she must accept; **and also a victim of the often 'get-out-of jail settlement of the matter by non-state actors in the community or family.** The settlement at the non-state level often gives something back to the victim's family. But is it to the victim or survivor, given how the distribution of family resources are so skewed towards the males of the family? However, families tend to be more significant in the lives of victims/survivors than the state; victims/survivors often have to live with families after the state has long moved on. Therefore, the victim/survivor often has to choose between (or rather accept) an absent state closure or an ever-present family's settlement of the matter. Victims/survivors often choose, accept or resign themselves to the latter. Between the two inadequate closures or settlement, the family or community is like a long-distance runner, being with the victim/survivor along her life's journey, whilst the state is like a sprinter, a great burst of energy, but only for a few meters to get the perpetrator punished, after which the victim/survivor must continue without it for the rest of her life's journey.

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APPENDIX

Methodology

This research topic is very sensitive - and two principles guide it. First, no further harm, and second, tell it from a standpoint perspective - make the victims' views and those who are not usually heard from, central to the telling.

In terms of doing no harm, this means taking necessary precaution not to traumatize victims by insensitive postures, interviewing and report; and secondly, being cognizant of the global pandemic and shaping research methodology with that in mind - respecting protocols that enhance the safety of researchers and interviewees and other participants in the research exercise. The research also anonymizes names and obscures specific geographical locations to protect the identity of victims/survivors and interviewees who prefer anonymity to discuss sensitive information and prevent repercussions in their revelation.

Research Activities

Secondary Research

Desk review of general and specific literature on rape in Sierra Leone- including government policy, legislation, CSO/NGO reports. This is done concurrently with the primary research and the two feed off each other in terms of shaping lines of enquiries.

Primary Research

The primary research is divided into two: in-depth/ key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

Female interviewers conducted in-depth interviews with victims/survivors of sexual abuse. Female researchers also moderated a focus group discussion with survivors. Furthermore, focus group discussions with community participants were held around the country in Port Loko, Magburaka, and Kenema

The key informant interviews target persons working with rape victims, community leaders, Family Support Unit Personnel, policymakers, and CSO actors.