

Two decades of support to human rights work in Liberia

January 2017



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Acknowledgements

After two decades of support and the end of earmarked funding, it is with a heavy heart that the NHRF has decided to gradually scale down its current support in Liberia. The NHRF would like to extend warm words of greetings and a big thank you to all former and current grantee organisations in Liberia and to our local consultant through more than ten years, Aloysius Toe. We are proud of the work we have supported and the strong men and women involved in the many projects.



The NHRF in Liberia 1996–2016

- Two decades of support to local human rights organisations (1996–2016)
- Support to over 100 projects across over 40 organisations from 1998 to 2016, with a total of USD 1 716 645 distributed
- Thematic priorities included: wrongful arrests, police brutality and torture; prison conditions and the rights of accused and convicts; juvenile justice and court monitoring in rural areas; human rights education in schools and local communities; judicial and security reform; and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)
- NHRF activities in 2013–2015 covered by an earmarked grant from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) of 3 million NOK (1 million NOK per year)
- In 2013–2015, the NHRF supported work that contributes to increased respect for and observance of women and children's rights in Liberia, especially outside the capital Monrovia where government presence is limited.

Changes in local communities in Liberia

Interview with consultant Aloysius Toe

The NHRF has supported local human rights work in Liberia for two decades. In the spring of 2016, the NHRF's local consultant Aloysius Toe made field visits to seven current grantee organisations in Rivercess, Bong, Nimba, Lofa, Bassa, Margibi and Montserrado counties to learn more about the project results from the last four years. The interactions focused on changes experienced by women engaged in the projects and the impact the work has had in the local communities. Aloysius spoke with 77 individual key informants, such as project staffs and those benefiting from the projects. Community members, including law enforcement officials, local leaders, women and youth groups, were also interviewed, and five focused group discussions were organised.

What were the overall impressions from your interactions in the field?

Most grantees reported positive and notable changes in the communities as a result of interventions between 2013 and 2016. Overall, the work has led to increased awareness amongst women about their rights and provided them with a voice. The interventions have given courage to many women who are no longer passive but are asserting themselves to claim protection of and respect for their rights.

Can you give some examples of how the projects have contributed to change for women in the target communities?

Many organisations reported a reduction in cases of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in the target communities, as there has been a reduction in number of reported cases. In the past, an average of eight complaints were made daily on SGBV issues, but now an average of two complaints per day is made. A Town Chief in Rivercess County reported, «I no longer receive too many complaints about domestic violence.» The reduction is further supported by the courage of many women to file complaints against male transgressors. This has created fear in men who are unwilling to face interrogation by human rights groups and possible investigation by the police. Men being afraid to violate women's rights, is positively impacting communities.

Can you describe some of the working methods used by the grantees in their interventions?

Many grantees have established beneficiary-led clubs and networks. These networks and clubs are combating SGBV and harmful traditional practices (FGM) in schools and communities. As a result of this, parental resentment to discuss early marriage and FGM has reduced considerably, and frank and open discussions are now held. Before, parents never used to attend meetings, and if they did, they never talked as a sign of protest. But now, they are talking, and those in authority, the commissioners and town chiefs, are now accepting discussion. Getting them involved makes them feel a part of it. Diversity has taken roots in these discussions. Local groups, traditional elders and school children, young and old freely come together to discuss sensitive issues, an exercise once considered a taboo.

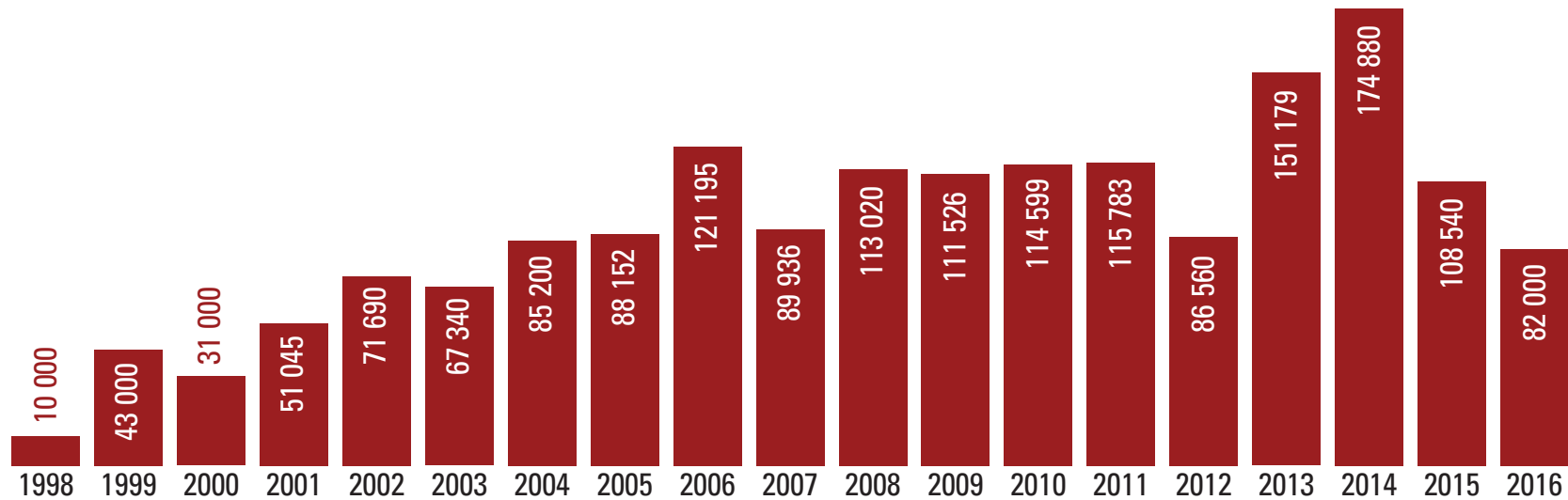


Aloysius Toe

Do you see any possibilities of lasting change in the target communities?

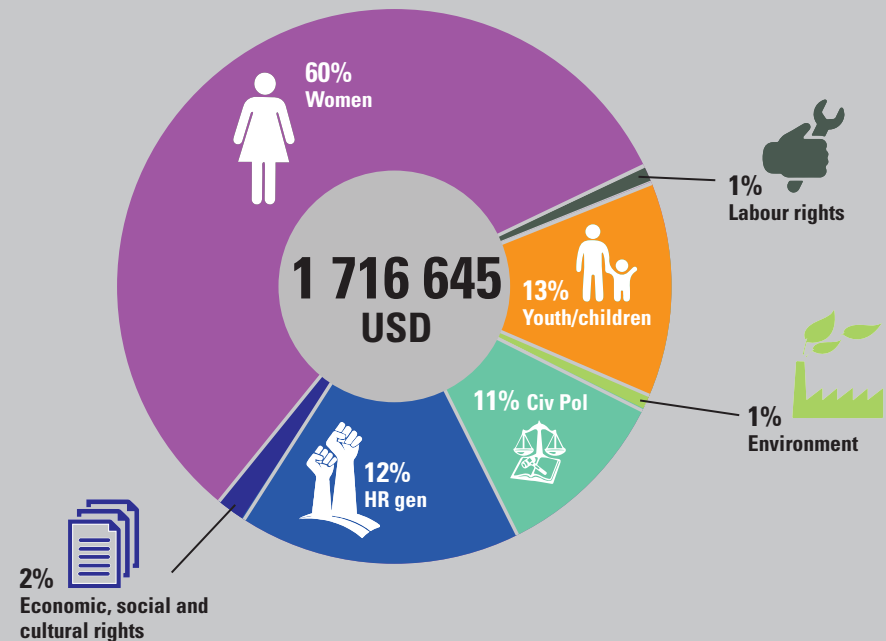
Yes. Previously, many women were weakened by their status within the household and community. Their ability to assert themselves and be active participants in decision making has now been strengthened. Some of the women I interviewed reported that awareness about their rights has opened their eyes and empowered them to defend, claim and use their rights to land and other natural resource tenure rights. This shows how the interventions have helped rural women to challenge oppressive gender relations that are justified under the name of culture. Women who benefited from the trainings have been able to claim power from men who rule in their name. Many women are now also taking leadership in rural communities, including being named paramount chiefs which is rare. Women are now contesting for traditional leadership seats and are active in decision-making. The beneficiaries I interviewed attribute these developments to the interventions by NHRF grantees. ■

Total distribution of grants in USD per year



Distribution of grants per topic

- 60% Women's rights
- 2% Economic, social and cultural rights
- 12% General human rights : (capacity building/advocacy)
- 11% Civil and political rights
- 1% Environmental rights
- 13% Youth and children's rights
- 1% Labour rights



Context and background

Liberia was made a priority while the country was subject to two brutal civil wars (1989–1996 and 1999–2003), during which more than 250 000 people were killed and even more fled the country. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 72% of women in Liberia were raped during the war years. The civil wars destroyed the country's infrastructure and left a country in economic ruins with large amounts of weapons in circulation and a shattered education system.

■ *Read about the human rights situation and other stories from Liberia [here](#)*

■ *Read about NHRF's work in Liberia by year in the NHRF annual reports [here](#)*

Liberia has since stabilised politically, but the peace remains fragile. The United Missions in Liberia (UNMIL) is currently in the process of reducing their military presence. On 23 December 2016 the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution

extending the mandate of UNMIL, for the final time, until 30 March 2018 and adjusted its mandate to comprise protection of civilians, reform of justice and security institutions, protection and promotion of human rights, public information activities, and protection of UN personnel and installations.¹

In 2014, Liberia was hit by the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which started in March. The country was finally declared Ebola-free by the WHO on 9 June 2016.² All in all, Liberia suffered more than 10 600 cases of Ebola and more than 4 800 deaths. The humanitarian crisis has had severe consequences for a population and a country already struggling with poverty, high unemployment, poor infrastructure and inadequate educational and health care delivery systems.

Liberia still faces several human rights challenges. Progressive laws often lack implementation, and human rights abuses such as sexual violence against women and violence against and sexual exploitation of children in schools are widespread. Former and current NHRF grantees are all working in highly relevant human rights contexts and are making important contributions in their local communities. However, widespread police corruption and weaknesses in the judiciary compromise equal and impartial justice, the establishment of the rule of law, and undermine access to justice and due process. As such, a lot of work remains to be done in Liberia and affective ways of combating impunity and ensuring accountability for human rights abuses need to be strengthened.

The international community continues to provide large amounts of support and funding to Liberia across many sectors, including governance, democracy and human rights. Based on the NHRF's long engagement in Liberia it is our experience that capacity building and more long-term commitment in particular, should accompany financial support to smaller organisations. Donors providing funding to Liberian community based organisations (CSOs) especially outside Monrovia, need to have the necessary skills and capacity for providing proper follow up, guidance and assistance in order to ensure the sustainability of the organisations and their work. As such, there seems to be a continued need for international organisations engaging particularly in this type of partnership with local human rights organisations across the country.

1. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55872#.WliGnFXhCUk>
2. <http://who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2016/ebola-liberia/en>



Overview of NHRF funding 2013–2015

This report draws in particular from the results and achievements reported by NHRF grantees in 2013–2015. During this period, the NHRF supported work that contribute to increased respect for and observance of women and children's rights in Liberia, especially outside the capital Monrovia where government presence is limited.

Despite persistent challenges nationwide, the reported results from grantee organisations show overall progress in efforts to increase respect for and observance of women's and children's rights in their respective communities. The reported results also show that the work supported by the NHRF has had positive social impact in the target communities where the projects were implemented. These local actors are thus important contributors to the overall struggle for safeguarding women's and children's rights and against impunity for perpetrators in Liberia. The NHRF is proud to share this important work of the supported local human rights organisations in Liberia during this period in this report.

■ *A total of 69 applications from organisations in Liberia assessed in 2013–2015*

■ *A total of 21 projects, spread across 11 different organisations, were funded during the 2013–2015 period*

■ *Six to eight local organisations implemented human rights projects annually (eight projects in 2013, seven projects in 2014 and six projects in 2015)*

■ *These organisations work on: women's rights, sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) including rape, sexual abuse and exploitation in schools and communities, and harmful traditional practices affecting women.*

Results and achievements

The 21 supported projects (2013-2015) collectively brought about documented and quantified reduction in various cases of female genital mutilation (FGM), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), corporal punishment and child labour in schools, as well as increased access to justice for SGBV victims. Some key results include:

- **In Bomi:** Closure of a traditional "bush school" where 80 girls were circumcised annually
- **In Lofa:** A 47%-to-18% decline in the incidence of FGM among the target group
- **In Nimba:** Establishment of committees in 15 schools for reporting on sexual exploitation and abuse in target areas and a 63% decrease in the number of reported cases in these schools
- **In River Gee:** 53% of children, ages 12 to 17, among the target group feel safer regarding SGBV in schools
- **In Bong:** A decline in the number of SGBV cases from seven to two a day among target group
- **In Bong:** Documentation and follow-up of 124 SGBV issues among target group
- **In Margibi:** Documentation and follow-up of over 140 SGBV issues among target group
- **In Grand Bassa:** Documentation and follow-up of 90 SGBV issues among target group
- **In Montserrado:** 32 SGBV cases sent to court

Reducing FGM practices

Overall, the organisations working against female genital mutilation (FGM) reported a **marked decrease in the incidence of FGM** in their audiences, and an **increased transparency in the local community** when it comes to discussions about an extremely sensitive issue that it has previously been difficult to address. Local leaders now allow more discussions regarding FGM involving parents.

The work done by the grantee organisations has resulted in **the closure of a traditional "bush school" in Bomi, where an average of 80 girls were circumcised annually**. The work has also led to an agreement between local authorities and traditional "zoes" (spiritual leaders) about the establishment of a centre for the production and sale of traditional goods, as an alternative source of income for those who have traditionally run "bush schools" in the area. In Lofa, the implemented projects contributed to a **decline in the incidence of FGM from 47% to 18%** among the target group during the project period. The grantee organisation emphasises that their work has been one of several factors in this process and that there has been a general change of attitude in the target group, consisting of individuals of both sexes, ages 10 to 60. This work has led to increased awareness about girls' and women's right to education and protection from FGM and child marriage among school girls, traditional female executives, managers of women's groups, parents, teachers and school management. This work is a testament to the importance of strengthening local efforts and capacity to support girls' education in combating FGM and child marriage.

Fighting against SGBV in schools

Project results show further **progress in the fight against sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), economic exploitation and corporal punishment in schools** among the target group to organizations working in this field. The work supported by the NHRF resulted in the creation of committees in 15 schools in Nimba for **reporting corruption and sexual exploitation and abuse** (Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA)), and an **overall decline of 63% in the number of reported SEA matters at these 15 schools** (from 67 to 25 cases) during the project period. 3,500 people in the local population have gained access to relevant information through copies of domestic law, and no corporal punishment of children in the current schools were reported last year of the project period.

In two districts in River Gee County, a baseline survey on abuse against school children conducted by a grantee organisation before and after the project period showed **53% of children felt safer at school** regarding sexual abuse in the project's final phase, compared to 37,5% of the children before the project's commencement. This change was made possible due to the establishment of anti-SGBV clubs in schools in the area, which in turn has resulted in increased awareness of SGBV among teachers, parents and students. Information from the field suggests that the positive trend in schools has positive effects in the community at large, with increasing degree of safety outside the school.

«School based debates organized among competing schools have provided a platform for students to debate and expose vices of early marriage, FGM and SEA in schools.»

– Grantee organisation, WOSI

Documenting and Monitoring SGBV

All in all, the project results from the relevant organisations show **progress in the fight against SGBV** in the respective communities. The reported results show a decline in the number of SGBV cases in certain project areas during the period. In one of the target areas in Bong, the **number of abuse cases has gone from about seven to two a day**, as a result of lobbying, hearings, documentation, reporting and monitoring supported by the NHRF during the project period. Combating SGBV and the work for increased rights access for victims, include documentation, review and monitoring of cases in the judiciary.

«My husband treats me bad and sometimes refuse to provide support for the children. WAN taught me how to seek redress in abuse and non-s upport situations. I am making use of the knowledge and processes.»

– Participant of a NHRF-funded project by grantee organisation, WAN



Among the target group in Bong, the NHRF's support led to **documenting and monitoring of 124 cases**, which include rape, violence against women and forced marriages. The majority of cases were brought to the police (48 cases) and the judiciary (47 cases), while the rest were resolved through mediation, facilitated by the grantee organisations in the area. The case outcomes included imprisonment, conciliation and/or financial redress for victims.

Among the target group in Margibi, efforts have led to the **documenting and monitoring of more than 140 cases** during the period, of which the majority of cases (around 118) ended in penalties against perpetrators. The remaining cases are either pending trial or dismissed. The cases included rape, death threats, restrictions on freedom of movement and economic deprivation. In Grand Bassa County, the project has contributed to **documenting and reporting of 90 cases** among the target audience. The cases included threats to life, violence, abuse of children, rape detention and verbal attacks. 74 of the cases were resolved, and the outcome varied between imprisonment, warnings and reconciliation. The cases that remained unresolved were mainly due to a lack of willingness among victims and/or family members to pursue the matter further.

«Women are speaking out now. Women never used to speak out for fear of beating, but they are voicing out their concerns now – abused women found their voice.»

– Grantee organisation, **WORIIWA, Liberia**

In West Point in Monrovia (Monteserrado), **32 SGBV cases were sent to court**. Twelve of these were rape cases where the alleged perpetrators were detained pending trial. Six cases regarding women abandoned by their husbands were settled in court. All the above cases amounts to overall significant results in the fight against impunity for perpetrators in Liberia.



Concluding comments

In addition to the concrete results listed above, it is important to underline that awareness-raising and competence building has been an important part of the work supported in Liberia. The NHRF would thus like to stress that as a result of this, thousands of men, women and children in rural areas have obtained knowledge about human rights, including the importance of fighting abuse and harmful practices against women and children.

Beneficiaries among the various target groups interviewed by NHRF consultant Aloysius Toe in March/April 2016, explained that awareness about their rights has opened their eyes and empowered them to claim protection of their natural resource rights, including their ability to access land and to claim, use, and defend rights to land and other natural resource tenure

rights. Many women in rural communities are pressing for property ownership and are indeed also owning properties; taking leadership in rural communities; contesting for traditional leadership seats and are active in decision making – all of which the beneficiaries attribute to the intervention of NHRF supported projects.

Many of the organisations have also worked actively towards local government, police and the justice system in their rights struggle. Experience from these projects show that in a country where state institutions are weak and local police often lack resources and capacity, local organisations and their networks become instrumental in monitoring and reporting human rights violations. Without them many more cases would go unreported. ■