

**Note for Implementing and Operational Partners**

**by**

**UNHCR and Save the Children-UK**

**on**

**Sexual Violence & Exploitation:  
The Experience of Refugee Children in  
Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone**

**based on**

**Initial Findings and Recommendations from Assessment Mission  
22 October - 30 November 2001**

**February 2002**

## I. INTRODUCTION

This assessment was initiated by UNHCR and Save the Children-UK (SC-UK) due to growing concerns, based on their field experience, about the nature and extent of sexual violence and exploitation of refugee children and other children of concern to UNHCR<sup>1</sup> in the countries of the Mano River Sub Region<sup>2</sup> in West Africa.

The purpose of the assessment was primarily to gather further information, primarily through consultations with children, about the scope of the problem in the countries concerned and the responses of the different actors: UN agencies, governments, NGOs, refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) communities and the children themselves. This would inform the development of an action plan for UNHCR and the child protection agencies to better address the problem.

The report of the assessment is not yet finalised. However, given the serious nature of the findings and in the interest of the protection of the children themselves, UNHCR and SC-UK are releasing this summary of the draft assessment report in advance in order to inform the humanitarian community about the problem and to allow agencies to review their own practices in this area.

The general findings of the assessment team indicate high levels of risk and vulnerability, with respondents reporting incidents of sexual abuse within family settings and the wider context of the camp and surrounding communities. In addition, from the interviews and group sessions conducted with 1,500 adults and children, the team also received allegations of abuse and exploitation against 67 individuals based in a range of agencies responsible for the care and protection of refugee and IDP communities. The agencies that are possibly implicated in some way include UN peacekeeping forces, international and local NGOs, and government agencies responsible for humanitarian response. The assessment mission was not intended as an investigation and was therefore not conducted with the methodology that would have been required if this had been the purpose. Further evaluation of the overall findings is required in order to clarify the extent of the problem and UNHCR has assumed responsibility for following up on investigatory issues.

Based on the initial information available at this point, it is clear that a number of actions need to follow in the short, medium and longer term. There are, however, immediate steps that must be taken to ensure the protection of children and to pave the way for policy and practice initiatives that will help address the underlying issues identified by the assessment. A UNHCR working group has already drawn up a framework for implementation of numerous remedial measures to combat sexual violence and exploitation of children in the region. These measures are outlined in the Framework Plan of Action at the end of this note.

UNHCR and SC-UK believe that the issues raised by this assessment can be adequately addressed only by ensuring that all parties involved in protecting and assisting refugee children work together, which we are intending to facilitate.

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<sup>1</sup> The reference to refugee children will hereafter include also other children of concern to UNHCR (e.g. IDP and returnee children)

<sup>2</sup> Guinea, Liberia & Sierra Leone

## II. METHODOLOGY

The assessment was conducted by reviewing existing research related to the issue and by conducting a field mission to the three countries. In each country, the team consulted with different groups within refugee and returnee communities, as well as host communities (children, community leaders, government officials, international & national NGOs, UN agencies and security forces).

The mission team comprised an independent consultant, a UNHCR consultant and a staff member of SC-UK who formed the core group. Their work was facilitated in each country by staff members from UNHCR and SC-UK.

The findings of the assessment indicate that sexual violence and exploitation of children appears to be extensive in the communities visited and involves actors at all levels, including those who are engaged to protect the very children they are exploiting – UN staff, security forces, staff of international and national NGOs, government officials, and community leaders.

## III. KEY FINDINGS

### A) Sexual Exploitation

#### a) The problem of sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation was defined by children as: *‘when them big man go loving with small girl for money. Them big men can go loving to small girls, they can call girl when she walking along the road, and then the girl go and they go in house and lock the door. And when the big man has done his business he will give the small girl money or gift’*

The exchange of sex for money or gifts appears to be widespread and the majority of children consulted said they knew of at least one other child involved in such an exchange. The children themselves, whilst aware of the exploitative nature of the exchange, felt this was often the only option they had in order to receive food and other basic necessities and to pay for education. Parents were often aware of the exploitation but also felt that there were no other options for their family to secure a livelihood and whilst not approving it, generally turned a blind eye. In some cases, however, it was reported that parents encouraged their daughters to engage in such activities to bring an income into the family.

The majority of children involved are girls between the ages of 13 and 18 years. Younger girls were sometimes befriended by men to gain access to their older sisters or to their mothers. A few boys were reportedly exploited in a similar way by older women, but there were no suggestions of boys being sexually exploited by men. This may have to do with the greater taboos surrounding homosexuality.

The children most vulnerable to sexual exploitation were those without the care of their parents, children in child headed households, orphaned children, children in foster care, children living with extended family members and children living with just one parent.

One observation was the attitude held by many men interviewed i.e. that younger girls are more desirable as sexual partners. This view seemed to be commonly held by many of the men interviewed, including agency workers and community leaders. Some also believed that sex with a virgin could cleanse a man from infection.

The assessment suggests that those who exploit children are often men in positions of relative power and influence who either control access to goods and services or who have wealth and/or income. This power and influence is then used in exchange for sexual favours from children. The report indicates that it is a relatively prosperous 'elite' – including UN staff, peacekeepers and NGO workers – whose resources are considerably more than those of the refugees who exploit this extreme disparity surrounding the refugee population. Exploiters appear to be able to pay for sex when and with whom they want, and to do so with impunity, since the very people they exploit are not able to complain about their situation for fear of their source of basic survival being removed.

#### **b) Exploitation by humanitarian agency staff**

In all three countries, agency workers from international and local NGOs as well as UN agencies were reportedly the most frequent sex exploiters of children, often using the very humanitarian aid and services intended to benefit the refugee population as a tool of exploitation. Most of the allegations involved male national staff, trading humanitarian commodities and services, including oil, bulgur wheat, tarpaulin or plastic sheeting, medicines, transport, ration cards, loans, education courses, skills training and other basic services, in exchange for sex with girls under 18. The practice appeared particularly pronounced in locations with large established aid programmes. From the assessment report there appears to be a pattern of this type of abuse in refugee camps in Guinea and Liberia in particular: *“It’s difficult to escape the trap of those (NGO) people; they use the food as bait to get you to sex with them”*. (adolescent in Liberia)

Agency workers use their positions to withhold services that are meant to benefit children. Such services are held back and excuses made until sex is proffered: *“Your name is not on the list”, “The computer swallowed your card”, or “Your name did not come from head office”*.

Some allegations by children were confirmed by adults: *“In this community no one can access CSB (a soya nutrient), without having sex first. They say “a kilo for sex” (refugee women in Guinea); “If you do not have a wife or a sister or a daughter to offer the NGO workers, it is hard to have access to aid” (returnee male in Sierra Leone); “If you see a young girl walking away with tarpaulin on her head you know how she got it” (refugee leaders in Guinea)*

Agency workers with special responsibilities for children, such as caring for children with disabilities, providing accelerated learning programmes, and loans for the vulnerable, were allegedly using the very same resources intended to improve children’s lives and reduce their vulnerability, as a tool of

exploitation. Frequent reports were received by the assessment team on how agency workers give these services to girls in exchange for sex.

Some agency drivers were reportedly using transportation as a means of sexually exploiting children, either by exchanging sex for lifts or by bringing items to the camps which the refugees would not otherwise receive. Some agency workers reported seeing male drivers have sexual relationships with different girls for short periods of time. *“They change girls so much and none of them marry the girls and if she becomes pregnant she is abandoned, with no support for herself and the child. Most of us used to just look at them and wonder. Our brothers, they have a problem.”* (agency worker in Liberia)

Agency workers allegedly ask girls for sex in exchange for employment and continued to demand sexual favours even after the girls were employed. The girls said they were reminded that the salary they earn was payment for sexual favours. *“No girl will get a job in this camp without having sex with NGO workers. NGO workers who are female already loving with an NGO man. He will continue to go loving with other girls, but girls see it as competition. It is survival of the fittest”*. (agency worker in Guinea)

Agency workers are seen to have status, good jobs, money, drive nice cars. From a position of power girls are seen as easily exploitable. *“For a man when he has a powerful position, status, drives a nice car and earns good money, what do you expect? He can want a girl and yes she can get pregnant”*. (Child Protection Committee chairperson)

Even though agency workers may pay more than other exploiters, this might still amount to very little in most cases. A Liberian refugee girl, for example, may get the equivalent of US 10 cents in exchange for sex with which she would be able to buy a couple of pieces of fruit or a handful of peanuts. More often than not payment may be in kind such as a few biscuits, a plastic sheet, a bar of soap.

Refugees felt unable to challenge the behaviour of agency staff firstly because of their dependence upon the goods and services for their survival and secondly because of the power held by these staff. *“If the NGO worker runs away, there will be no food for us”*. (adolescent in Liberia). *“NGO workers have so much power that people treat them as really important people and the community cannot challenge them.”* (refugee leaders in Guinea)

The lack of senior and international staff presence in the camps was reportedly allowing junior agency staff to behave with impunity. The assessment describes a 'conspiracy of silence' that exists amongst agency workers and suggests that staff will not pass on information about a colleague involved in sexual exploitation for risk of being stigmatised and ostracised. It was further suggested that the pressure to conform within the humanitarian community, led staff to also indulge in exploitative behaviour.

There are inadequate mechanisms for reporting abuses available to refugees and little prospect of doing so in a way that is safe and confidential: *“If you report one NGO worker you will not only be in trouble with that person, but with the other staff also”*. (adolescents in Guinea and Liberia)

Refugees complained that they have tried to send written complaints through other staff but that the information has been held back. Children complained that they are harassed or labelled or denied services when they tried to complain. Refugees spoke of trying to see senior staff but being stopped by security guards outside their offices. They also said that it is easy for their complaints to be discredited as they hear humanitarian workers tell their seniors: *“Refugees are traumatised and they have a lot of issues that they need to deal with. That is why they are always complaining”*.

In most of the camps, the refugee and IDP leaders are they not reporting or dealing with issues of sexual exploitation. Some children said: *“because they themselves are involved and because how can they report the very people that put them in power. They want to maintain their power and one way of doing it is by siding with the NGO workers.”*

### c) **Exploitation by security forces**

Some national military personnel that provide security within and around the camps reportedly sexually exploit girls, usually for little or no payment as the girls fear the consequences of refusing to have sex with these men.

With respect to peacekeeping personnel, the assessment team was informed that they are, on arrival in the location, briefed on the Code of Personal Conduct: *“Every soldier, officer has been read and shown the code of conduct; no one can plead ignorance”*. (UNAMSIL officer) However, the code of conduct and the reality on the ground appeared to be different matters. The assessment team reported many allegations of sexual exploitation by peacekeepers from several countries. A few examples of reported cases are given here.

Peacekeepers are alleged to have sexually exploited children in exchange for money and food. It is claimed that even some very young children have been asked to pose naked in exchange for biscuits, cake powder and other food items. *“When ma asked me to go to the stream to wash plates, a peacekeeper asked me to take my clothes off so that he can take a picture. When I asked him to give me money he told me, no money for children only biscuit.”*

Children and adults spoke of teenage girls being asked to strip naked, bath and pose in certain positions while the peacekeepers took pictures, watched and laughed. Some are alleged to have had sex with the girls without using condoms.

Peacekeepers are reportedly among the highest paying customers for sex with children. They pay from US \$5 to \$300. Some peacekeepers are alleged to pool money to obtain a girl and then all have sex with the same child. Certain battalions used a locally well-known phrase “jig jig 5 block” to procure sex from girls in their early teens.

Some peacekeepers reportedly go as far as meeting the parents of a girl and claiming they have good intentions. However, when the time comes to leave, *“Some of them leave without even saying good bye, and some will leave the parents some money to take care of the girl. Others will give the girl some of their personal belongings.”* Asked how much and what personal belongings, the girls laugh and say, *“If he*

*really liked you he would leave you his cooking things, bedding and a picture. If he loved you he might leave you his underwear to remember him by (more laughter)".* (adolescent and women IDPs in Sierra Leone)

In one community, peacekeepers were reported to have rented a room in town and used it for sex with teenagers. When this practice reached unacceptable levels, the community repeatedly tried to do something. All the girls who were caught were paraded and mocked by the community as punishment. Such measures did not act as a deterrent given the money to be made. The girls then reportedly sent middle "men" instead - young boys, including brothers, relatives or friends - to find peacekeeper clients for them.

Teenage girls complained to the assessment team of the difficulty of making a living through hard work. Girls who are trying to earn a living through selling items at the market are made fun of by other girls. *"Why are you suffering here wasting your time. Look at me and all the nice things I can now buy. If you want to live good go to UNAMSIL".* (adolescent girl in IDP camp in Sierra Leone)

Girls allegedly come from far and wide to make money in this way, from as far afield as Guinea, with Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugee girls making their way to Sierra Leone irrespective of security considerations.

The position of power, wealth and status enjoyed by peacekeeping personnel gives them the ability to do as they wish. In Freetown, nationals spoke about the behaviour of the 'boys in blue helmets' with a feeling of helplessness and sadness. *"All you need to do is go to Paddys (a bar in Freetown) around four o'clock and in the evening you will see for yourself, or just drive along the beach. All the restaurants there, you just see these big men with little girls. You go to Lumley Beach and Laka Beach and no one needs to tell you anything."* (comments from a police officer, government representatives and agency staff in Freetown)

#### **d) Exploitation by others**

In addition to the reported exploitation by agency staff and security forces, the assessment also identified a range of other categories of individuals that use positions of trust, authority and power to sexually exploit children.

- Teachers are said to extract sexual favours from children in return for good grades
- Refugee leaders that have gained status due to close association with UNHCR, NGOs and other implementing and operational partners, are also then in a position to control access to resources and to exploit children on the basis of this.
- Commercial sector people such as diamond miners, logging company employees and local businessmen are also in positions of relative prosperity and so able to negotiate sex with girls in exchange for small sums of money or gifts.

## e) Factors contributing to sexual exploitation of refugee children

### i) Poverty, lack of livelihood options and consequent inability to meet basic survival needs

The underlying issue of poverty and lack of livelihood options for all the refugees and IDPs interviewed as part of the assessment was considered to be the principal factor contributing to the exploitation of children. The involvement of children and women in sexually exploitative relationships has become a mechanism for survival for many refugee families. The assessment makes it very clear that sexual exploitation cannot be addressed without providing alternative means and opportunities for earning an income. The dependence on exploitative relationships for basic survival is illustrated as follows: *“If I tell you the name of the NGO worker I have to sex with, he will get fired, and then how will I feed my child and myself?”* (girl mother in Guinea); *“Yesterday I was walking with a friend of mine and this kind NGO worker stopped his car and gave me 100 Liberian dollars (US\$ 20). I was able to help my child and myself. If I tell you his name and he loses his job, what will I do?”* (girl mother in Liberia)

The absence of livelihood options has left parents feeling helpless. Parents feel their position has been compromised because they are unable to provide for their families even to minimum standards.

Policies of host governments sometimes hinder refugees from being hired as salaried employees. The humanitarian community, therefore hire refugees giving them only incentives. The other reason that was consistently given to the assessment team was that *“If refugees are given jobs, they will not want to go back home.”* (UNHCR staff) Asked about this, the refugees said, *“Home is home. Who would want to stay as a refugee in someone’s country, just because of a job, and anyway such low paying jobs that become available within the camps.”* (Refugee in Guinea)

Refugees told the assessment team that the only way to access money in the refugee community is to sell the food ration and to let their daughters enter into sexually exploitative relationships.

### ii) Insufficient food rations/supplies

In every meeting, insufficient ration was raised as a primary factor contributing to sexual exploitation. Food given to the refugee community for thirty days was said to finish within ten days and refugees did not have land to grow their own food to supplement. When the food finished and the family needed more, the immediate option was to get money quickly and buy food. The girls would become a means to access money quickly and easily. *“I am a mother of seven children and when the food finishes my youngest child keeps crying and pulling on my skirt, what do you think you can do if your daughter brings you some?”* (refugee woman in Liberia)

Despite the constant complaints about the inadequacy of the food rations, refugees said that little effort has been made to acknowledge this as an issue and to try to work out solutions that involve the refugees themselves.



iii) Issues in relation to the management and delivery of humanitarian aid

It appears that the overall pattern of humanitarian assistance has led to overwhelming dependency of refugees and also increases the risk to children. From interviews and discussions during the mission, the team found that:

- The size of the plastic sheet determines the size of the house but for larger families in particular it is inadequate and affords no privacy. Children are being exposed to sexual activity of adults from an early age;
- The food ration is for thirty days but it is calculated on kilocalories and not quantity and so finishes within ten days. There is not enough land to grow additional food;
- Non-food items given are not replaced and there are not enough income-generating jobs for the refugees to earn money to buy their own;
- Education is free but all the other related expenses are left for the parents to provide, like books, pencil, uniforms and shoes. This often prevents children attending school.
- Information on basic rights and entitlements to food, shelter and services is not known, especially to children, which allows corrupt and exploitative patterns of behaviour to flourish in presenting access to basic entitlements as a 'privilege'

iv) Pressure from peers and parents

In the absence of other ways of meeting their basic needs themselves and those of their families, of making money to purchase clothes and socialise with friends, adolescents often feel compelled to sell themselves. Girls may be mocked if they do not have 'fashionable clothes' and there is also evidence of parental collusion and even encouragement for girls to enter into exploitative relationships in order to bring in money.

When a girl takes home some money questions are not asked as to how she has earned it. When asked, children said that they tell their parents different stories like *"I picked the money up on my way from school, a kind uncle/man gave it to me, my friend gave me, my auntie gave it to me."* In most situations the children said there was no need to explain how they earned the money because parents were only too glad that the money was there. In other situations the parents allegedly sent the child. *"You know we need 1500 today and we do not have it. Go and find it and do not come back until you have the money"*, or *"You are now big enough and you should start contributing to the food in this house"*. (adolescent boys and girls in Guinea)

The pressure to conform to traditional harmful practices such as female genital mutilation also led girls into exchanging sex for 'sponsorship'. In such cases, men would allegedly provide the necessary payments associated with these procedures and receive sexual favours in return.

Girls are also forced into early marriages in order to relieve families of the financial burden of supporting them. *“I was 14 years old and my grandfather forced me to marry an old man. I was so sad, I became pregnant and had a child. Again I became pregnant and I had another child. I waited for him and prayed until he died, now I am free and I have never looked at another man again.”* (adolescent girl in Liberia)

## f) Consequences of sexual exploitation for refugee children

### i) Teenage pregnancies

Most girls find that their families and care-givers reject them when they become pregnant. One option becomes terminating the pregnancy. However abortion is illegal in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and is reportedly a felony offence punishable with life imprisonment. The medical services that are supported by UNHCR and located in the refugee camps, do not carry out an abortion as the staff must abide by the law. Children therefore resort to different traditional and other informal methods. Children and women spoke of the different methods that are used, a combination of traditional herbs and easily accessed pharmaceutical products.

Children said that even if they went to the medical clinic they would not tell the staff they had induced the abortion. Children from IDP camps spoke of the medical staff chasing away girls who go to the clinics to try and seek medical attention. *“They will refuse to treat you no matter how sick you are, and they will chase you out of the clinic threatening to report you to the police for having committed an offence. They will tell you that you killed a person.”* Children also said they would only go to the clinic if their lives were in danger and even if they went they would not tell the medical staff about what they had done for fear of being threatened and called names.

### ii) Girl mothers

The assessment had a lot of difficulty in obtaining data relating to the number of teenage girls who have been pregnant, are pregnant, married or have had a child. However, the presence of girl mothers as a result of teenage pregnancy was very apparent in most camps. The assessment team could see that this was one group of children that had few or no programs targeted towards them. *“If we had alternative ways of making money, I would never look at another man again for a long, long time.”* (girl mother in Guinea)

In most meetings, the girl mothers displayed visible signs of broken spirits. They were the only group that at times were not even able to give the assessment team recommendations. They were resigned to their situations to a degree that they saw no way through. Most of them had become mothers between the ages of 13 and 16. Even though these girls were now 19, they already had three to four children and had first become pregnant when they were 13 or 14 years. Information from the community gave very alarming figures of the rates of girl pregnancy e.g. six deliveries every week by girls 18 years and below; 50% pregnancy rates of all the teenage girls in the camp; 75% pregnancy of all the girls in school. The assessment team was, however, not able to confirm these figures, as there are no available records from any NGO.

Girls who were allegedly made pregnant by fellow students, fellow refugees, and agency workers, had one thing in common. Regardless of who the father was, they took no responsibility for the child and the mother. *“They want you when you are young and single but once you get pregnant and with a child they reject you.”* (girl mother in Sierra Leone); *“An NGO worker made me pregnant but now he left me and is loving to another young girl.”* (girl mother in Guinea)

Some NGO workers were allegedly using code names in some places to avoid responsibility for the child. The children said that if a person uses a code name and they make you pregnant, they would then deny responsibility and start using their real name.

### iii) Reduced educational opportunities

There were high illiteracy levels among girl mothers. Some of them did not even know their age. In groups of 25, there would be one or two who would still be going to school or skills training. Girl mothers who tried to start or continue their schooling spoke of the difficulties they had to find help. Most of them had to go to school with the child and they said these created difficult and embarrassing situations. *“When I go to school with the child I feel bad because I am not free and if the child messes up I have to leave class and clean him up. The other students will be complaining that the class smells and I feel really bad.”* (girl mother in Guinea); *“When I am in class I will not concentrate. I worry about what I, my little sister and my child will eat when I get home.”* (girl mother in Sierra Leone)

Throughout the assessment period, there was no mention of programs that support girl mothers with childcare while they are in school. The family support network that would normally take on this role has been further weakened, exposing the girls to more abuse.

The means for the girl mothers to make money in order to feed and support the child and themselves emerged as another contributing factor for girl mothers dropping out of school. A few quotations demonstrate the difficulties most of these girl mothers have to endure: *“I have to sleep with so many men to make 1500, so that I can feed myself and my child. They pay me 300 each time, but if I am lucky and I get an NGO worker he can pay me 1500 at one time and sometimes I get 2000”* (girl mother in Guinea); *“I leave my child with my little sister, who is ten years old, and I dress good and I go where the NGO workers drink or live and one of them will ask me for sex, sometimes they give me things like food, oil, soap and I will sell them and get money.”* *“I sleep with different men but mostly NGO workers because I have to eat and feed my child”* (girl mother in Liberia); *“The wife of the business man saw me with her husband who promised to pay me and she came and beat me, I could not fight her because she was big, the man refused to pay me because I shamed him”* (girl mother in Sierra Leone)

Girl mothers spoke of the difficulties they face in being accepted in society: *“The adult women treat us as children and make us feel we do not belong to their group. The young and single girls of our age who have no children make us feel we dirty because we did something bad and they feel if they are with us the men will not like them, so they do not like us anymore. We are lonely most of the time.”* (girl mother in Guinea)

With the reported high prevalence of sexual exploitation by teachers exchanging grades for sex, the education system is contributing to producing illiterate girls who will be the future illiterate mothers and women.

#### iv) Sexually transmitted disease (STDs) and HIV/AIDS

The assessment team did not have the mandate and the capacity to assess the numbers of refugee children who have become HIV positive as a result of sexual exploitation and violence. However, all the indicators point to high-risk behaviour patterns, which expose children to STD and HIV/AIDS infection. The combination of immature bodies, poverty, lack of negotiating powers and practices of unsafe sex, disbelief about HIV/AIDS are factors that increase the risk.

#### v) Pattern of sexual relationships

The assessment found a more equal power balance in peer relationships between boys and girls and thus a better possibility of negotiating safe sex through the use of condoms. However, between female adolescents and male adults there is limited or no room at all for negotiating safe sex. The amount of money the adult pays undermines the negotiating power of the girl.

The strong link between sex and money has made it difficult for boys to find girlfriends since their financial status is very poor. In some camps children said that some young boys are resorting to rape since they are not able to pay the amounts demanded by the girls.

### B) Sexual Violence

The assessment also focused on the problem of sexual violence. This was defined by children as: *“when one person wants to do woman business and the other one does not want, and he sex her by force.”*

Most of the children who took part in the assessment knew of or had heard of a child who had been sexually violated (generally understood as forced penetrative sex). Some of the children spoke of their friends who had experienced sexual violence. *“My friend she went to church for lessons, the pastor called her to come in front, he started to do man business with her, and when she cried, he took a cloth and put it in her mouth. When she went home she told her parents, but her father said nothing should be done to the pastor. He is still at church and my friend feels very bad.”* (girl in Sierra Leone)

#### a) Those affected by sexual violence, abuse and harassment

The findings of the team indicate the following:

- Girls between the ages of four and 12 were also reported as being sexually harassed, either verbally or through touching of buttocks, breasts, or genitals. Children said boys of their age group also did the same, but that adult males were mostly responsible. *“Each time ma sends me to the market them big men like touching my waist line and my boobs”;*

Children reportedly experience attempted rape mostly when they go to use the toilets or take a bath. The toilets and bathrooms are all located in the same place, and divided along gender lines. Children say adult males lay watch for when the child is going to the toilet. They then follow the child and try

to rape them. *“Me and my friend went to the toilet and when I got in this man came and tried to sex me. I screamed and he got scared I run away with my friend.”* (girl in Liberia);

- It was reported that very young children are also affected;
- Most of those experiencing sexual violence suffer rape by penis penetration of vagina or by finger penetration. It seems there have been rare cases of oral rape, mainly by male parents with infants;
- Incidents of rape among children by their grandparents were also reported. Most of the children are left in the care of their grandparents by their parents. It is during the period of the parent’s absence that male grandparents sexually violate the child;
- Girls living in female-headed households (no husband) are more vulnerable to sexual violence by neighbours, care givers and male friends of the mother;
- The level of sexual violence experienced by abducted girls and in IDP situations is much higher than those in refugee camps, especially where awareness campaign have been conducted as part of the sexual and gender-based violence program;
- Children who attend dance/bola nights and who go to video shows without by adult siblings are also particularly vulnerable.
- Children who are sent to sell food and non-food items are vulnerable to sexual violence as the adult person waits for them in isolated or abandoned buildings on their way to and from selling things. Some of the children are sent to sell food items near drinking places and are expected to stay late at night until the items are sold. Some children are sent to sell food items at parking areas for long distance truck drivers.

**b) In addition to those persons described above, additional alleged perpetrators include:**

- Adult men including security personnel;
- Adolescent boys and young men against their peers;
- Men with drug and/or drink addictions;
- People known to the children, including neighbours and relatives;
- Unmarried men who cannot afford to pay for sex;
- Mentally ill people;
- Ex-combatants;
- Medical staff

**c) Where sexual violence takes place**

- Sexual violence is committed in areas around the camps such as streams where children are sent to wash their clothes and kitchen utensils, where children take baths, the bush when children are sent to look for food and firewood;

- In the surrounding villages or host community as children go looking for work in the palm wine plantations and rice fields;
- Dark and isolated places, be it buildings or bush areas within the camp, or between two parts of the same camp;
- In transit centres or emergency booths where hundreds of people are sleeping under one roof. The emergency booths are supposed to house families for a short time but in some situations families live there for more than six months. Children, especially girls, find themselves sleeping next to adult men who are not their relatives;
- In toilets and latrines, particularly where male and female latrines are in close proximity.
- At night during the bola/dance nights, and video shows. Children who attend dance and video clubs late into the night will at times try to walk home alone. The dance and video places, even when there are a lot of people around, are ideal places for perpetrators to pick out girls who seem alone and without money to pay to get in;
- During conflict situations and large scale population movements (both during flight and repatriation), at checkpoints along the route or close to IDP areas, or at military/ security locations within refugee camps;
- In the perpetrators' and or survivors' own homes.

There are reports that some boys also experience sexual violence, although the response to this notion was always met with disbelief and arguments that such things do not happen in their communities. *“Within our community it is a taboo to have sex with a boy or another man.”* However, most of the time the focus groups failed to differentiate sexual violence against boys from homosexuality, which is highly frowned upon and condemned by men, women and children. The lack of available reports or data on sexual violence towards boys cannot be taken as a sign of the non-existence of such acts, but rather as a silencing factor hindering boy children from coming forward and seeking assistance. *“The stigma towards boys who get raped is so strong in the community, that the boy will just keep quite, and if he told his family, the fear of shame for the whole family will make them encourage the child to keep silent.”* (adolescent boy in Guinea)

#### **d) Factors influencing levels of sexual violence**

- Regional conflict;
- Prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse;
- High prevalence of sexual exploitation;
- Lack of reporting reinforced by the social stigma associated with being victim of sexual violence and negative experiences of legal and investigatory procedures.

## **IV. FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION**

UNHCR has adapted and adopted the recommendations made by the assessment team. They have been incorporated into the attached Framework for Action, which has been sent to all UNHCR offices concerned. The framework is outlined below.

## **a) General Policy Guidance**

- Promote the setting aside of land for agricultural purposes during negotiations over refugee settlements to enable self-sufficiency and to avoid the types of protection and social problems which can result from over-dependency.
- Be more gender-sensitive in operational design and implementation and be aware that this issue is symptomatic of the low status of women in camp communities.
- Foster initiative among communities and not dependence and powerlessness especially vis-à-vis agency workers. The refugee community should be actively engaged to be concerned for and to protect its own.
- UNHCR should strengthen promotion of and adherence to the definition of a “child” as everyone below the age of 18 in accordance with the standard established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## **b) Immediate Action**

- Convene a meeting with all staff to inform them generally about the allegations and the seriousness with which the Organisation is dealing with them. Provide general guidance on the behaviour and conduct expected of staff.
- Branch Offices in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone should prepare a plan of action to implement the recommendations contained in this framework and report on all actions taken.
- Determine what disciplinary actions are available.
- All UNHCR staff to be provided gender-awareness training. Implementing Partners should be invited to participate.

## **c) Provision of Humanitarian Assistance and Services**

### **i) General**

- Review humanitarian assistance currently being provided to refugees (food, shelter, land etc.) to verify whether allocations meet minimum requirements and basic needs.
- Ensure humanitarian assistance reaches a minimum level where refugees have no other means of meeting their basic needs.
- Review the availability of adequate alternative livelihood options (micro-credit, land for farming etc.) to see if more can be done to enable refugee communities to be self-sufficient.
- Review camp layout and design (toilets, sleeping arrangements) to take adequate account of the need for privacy and physical security and to ensure that the physical plan of the camp does not exacerbate problems of sexual violence/exploitation.
- Review and improve monitoring of humanitarian aid and services being provided by implementing partners to ensure that assistance which has been allocated reaches refugees and is not being manipulated to become a tool of exploitation in itself. In particular, review methods and adopt more effective techniques e.g. spot checks, informers in refugee community etc.
- Review special programmes for vulnerable groups (e.g. supplementary feeding, loans, agricultural activities, housing) to ensure that they are reaching those they are intended to benefit e.g. verify whether unaccompanied and separated children are able to access assistance and services as individuals

rather than having to register as part of a family grouping; e.g. reconsider definitions of “vulnerability” to ensure that the most needy are encompassed by such programmes.

- Encourage field offices to focus attention and follow-up on sexual violence/exploitation as a protection concern and a cornerstone of UNHCR’s mandate- and to take actions to remedy violations.

## ii) Community Involvement/Consultation

- Branch Offices should hold more regular consultations about policies and programmes before decisions are taken. This consultation should take place at a broad level and encompass all sectors of the refugee community and UNHCR international staff.

- Review the way in which camp management structures are set up and managed to ensure that all sectors of the refugee community are adequately represented especially children and women.

- Encourage field offices to consult children on the design and implementation of programmes and policies impacting on them.

- Help the refugee community to develop guidelines regarding various aspects of camp life e.g. dances, video clubs.

- Direct appropriate UNHCR international staff to undertake more regularly visit and monitor activities in camps, in accordance with guidelines set in conjunction with headquarters.

- Devise ways of increasing the presence of senior international staff in camps e.g. establish a rota of UNHCR and implementing partner staff to ensure that international staff members are present in the camps at all times.

- Strengthen the reporting mechanism to ensure that refugees have a way of raising complaints directly with senior-level UNHCR international staff member, and require camp leaders to report abuses by agency staff directly to such a person.

- Hold regular meetings in camps involving senior-level UNHCR international staff where individual refugees can raise their concerns in a private manner.

## iii) Programming for Sexual Exploitation

- Ensure that the need to address the sexual exploitation of refugee children is incorporated as a major component of existing programmes. Existing sexual and gender-based violence programmes have not identified sexual exploitation as an issue and are not sensitive enough to the special needs of children.

- Review existing sexual and gender-based violence programmes to address the issue of child sexual exploitation. Incorporate specifically designed initiatives to protect children from sexual exploitation and to rehabilitate those who are already victims. This would include inter alia:

- Taking measures to identify girls in the refugee community who are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation (girls from single parent households, unaccompanied and separated children - perhaps living with relatives unable to provide e.g. elderly grandparents, girls who are street traders/or whose mothers are street traders);

- Providing aid and services to girls who are identified as at-risk e.g. ensure enough assistance to meet basic needs, education and training for alternative livelihood options/income-generation, health care and advice, psychological/social support, life skills;



-Conducting broader education campaigns in the refugee community (children, men, women, special interest groups etc.) to address knowledge, attitudes and practice concerning sexual exploitation and its consequences. The breakdown in social values and responsibilities of all sectors of the refugee community (parents, leaders, children, etc.) needs to be tackled.

- Identify existing initiatives concerning child sexual exploitation in the local community and see whether the provision of financial support and specialist expertise would facilitate the expansion of such projects to encompass refugee children.
- Where they do not exist, implement projects to tackle the question of child sexual exploitation where there are no possibilities of doing this under sexual violence/exploitation initiatives in the refugee or host communities.
- Document experiences and lessons learned from work by other organisations on sexual exploitation and children with a view to replication in refugee settings.
- In implementing SGBV programmes, field offices should recognise that boys too can be targeted for sexual exploitation and abuse despite the fact that girls are the main victims. Special efforts are needed to create an environment where boys feel able to report sexual abuse.
- Strengthen existing sexual and gender-based violence programmes as a whole in terms of coordination, capacity building of staff and refugee participation.

#### iv) Education Programmes

- Build in safeguards into education structures to ensure that sexual exploitation does not take place within the school system e.g. close attention to recruitment and monitoring of teachers, more female staff.
- Ensure that the education system does not impose excessive superficial demands (e.g. expensive uniforms) which can deprive children of education and/or lead them into exploitative relationships.
- Adapt existing education programmes to see how they can address the issue of child sexual exploitation (e.g. UNHCR peace education and life skills training).
- Provide support to enable teenage mothers to continue their education e.g. child care.

#### v) Training and Awareness-raising Activities

- Expand awareness raising campaigns for the refugee community on a diverse range of subjects (especially HIV/AIDS, child rights, sexual violence/exploitation, harmful traditional practices).
- Carry out information campaigns to ensure that all groups in the refugee community especially children understand their entitlements and rights (food, services, repatriation etc.). This information should not only be given to community leaders.

#### vi) Other Programme Initiatives

- Support programmes aimed at making women, especially adolescent girls, self sufficient through skills-training, micro-credit, small businesses.
- Establish sporting and environmental activities for children in line with current initiatives being undertaken by headquarters.
- Initiate programming activities to address other forms of exploitation that affect boys particularly e.g. exploitation in the labour market.

#### vii) Staff Management

- Deploy more female staff, especially at the level of direct contact with the refugees. Services concerning girls and sexual health especially should be operated by women.
- Do not establish staff residence quarters in camps. Where this is essential for operational reasons, staff should be housed at a nearby location outside the camp. Additional safeguards should be put in place to ensure that staff residences do not become a location for abuse e.g. close monitoring, mixing male/female staff.
- Move field staff between camps on a regular basis to ensure that entrenched patterns of behaviour are not allowed to develop.
- Impose tighter controls on the use of official vehicles especially out of office hours. In particular there should be tighter restrictions on transporting refugees except for work-related reasons.
- Deploy more field staff to address these and other protection concerns properly. Cuts at international level and especially among sectors most directly concerned with such issues – protection and community services – are having a detrimental effect on protection coverage on the ground.

#### viii) Relations with Implementing Partners

- Insist that partners be accountable for the behaviour of their staff. Convene a sub-regional meeting of all implementing and operational partners to discuss programmatic follow-up.

#### d) Development and Enforcement of Legal Standards

- Lobby governments to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC has been signed and ratified by all three countries.
- Lobby governments to sign and ratify the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Support concrete measures to strengthen justice system, processes, and legal standards.
- Undertake measures to increase the accessibility of the legal system by refugees e.g. provision of transport, legal advice, interpretation, mobile courts.
- Institute measures to increase security in camps e.g. deployment of police officers, facilities to arrest and detain suspects etc.
- Carry out monitoring and advocacy to ensure that criminal laws are enforced where violated.
- Lobby government to ensure that abuses by national police and security forces are prevented and effectively prosecuted if they occur.
- Ensure that civil laws e.g. employment legislation is used to optimal effect to prevent the sexual exploitation of children of concern to UNHCR.

#### e) Preventing Future Abuses by Employees

- Develop a UNHCR code of conduct/child protection policy. This should be disseminated on a systematic basis to all current and new employees. This policy should be wide-ranging but at the same time specific in the types of behaviours it seeks to address.
- Encourage staff to speak up about abuses. Parallel mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that staff are not penalised for making reports and that their security is adequately protected.

- Review codes of conducts/child protection policies instituted by other organisations to facilitate the development of an appropriate policy for UNHCR.
- Apply the code of conduct to all permanent or casual employees of the organisation, including volunteers. It should also be made applicable to refugee camp leaders who have been put in a position of trust and authority by UNHCR.
- Provide training for staff in general on appropriate behaviours and standards of care, and staff responsibilities towards refugees.