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Toward a Better Understanding of...

The Body as a Battleground: The Impact of Gender Violence During Liberia’s Civil Conflict

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During Liberia’s recent civil wars, many women were victims and witnesses of gendered violence, sexual assault and rape. Women’s bodies became a platform through which violence took place: as the country was in conflict, the female body was a battleground. This project explores the attitudes and actions of young Liberians in their sexual histories and current relationships in light of this exposure to gender violence. Through an ethnographic study, I examine the extent to which the trauma of experiencing or witnessing gender violence impacts sexual relationships.

In general, the literature on the psychological consequences of sexual and gendered trauma does not focus on Liberia. This project, therefore, informs an area of academia where there is presently no conversation. Through this ethnography, I seek to give a voice to those underrepresented in the academic conversation. I plan to visit Liberia and conduct interviews and as I learn the thoughts and actions of young Liberians concerning their past and current relationships, I seek to determine if they follow the patterns described in the literature. What makes them unique, and how should the academic community adapt to this knowledge?

Some scholars of gender violence have highlighted how historical attitudes and beliefs about women created a situation in which gender violence can thrive. Gauging the extent to which these are relevant currently can shape the conversation about gender and sexuality. Cultural beliefs and actions can be better understood if it is known where ideas are birthed and how experiences with trauma change them. I seek to tie together information from the current literature and the words of those living the experiences in order to better understand how experience with gendered violence shapes the individual.