

## ASR FORUM

The Case of Gender-Based Violence: Assessing the Impact of International Human Rights Rhetoric on African Lives

# International Human Rights, Gender-Based Violence, and Local Discourses of Abuse in Postconflict Liberia: A Problem of “Culture”?

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**Abstract:** In this article we draw on three years of ethnographic observation of postconflict humanitarian intervention in Liberia to consider the process whereby global efforts in the areas of gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights are interacting with local debates over kinship, entitlement, personal rights, and social responsibility. This article draws upon Liberian narratives, complaints, and efforts to regulate, in a national context, social norms and behavior in regard to gender-based violence issues in postconflict life while also engaging with an ongoing international human rights discourse on the subject of GBV. Our ethnography takes a multiscalar approach to give a sense of the process, multiple discourses, and dialectics of power involved in this issue, and to demonstrate how the definition of “the GBV problem” in Liberia, the target of complex GBV interventions, is different from the conception held by agencies, governmental ministries, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that are responsible for implementing global mandates.

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**Résumé:** Dans cet article, nous nous appuyons sur trois ans d'observation ethnographique des interventions humanitaires après la guerre civile au Liberia pour examiner la relation entre les efforts globaux dans les domaines de la violence contre les femmes et des droits de l'homme, et les débats locaux sur les questions de parenté, de droit commun et individuel, et de responsabilité sociale. Cet article se base sur des récits locaux, des plaintes déposées, et sur les efforts de régulation au niveau national des normes sociales et des comportements se rapportant aux problèmes de violence perpétrée contre les femmes dans la vie quotidienne d'après-guerre, tout en se rapportant à la discussion internationale en cours sur les droits de l'homme dans le contexte de la violence contre les femmes. Notre point de vue ethnographique se situe à plusieurs niveaux pour offrir une vue générale du processus, des discours multiples, et de la dialectique du pouvoir impliqués dans cette question, et pour démontrer que la définition appliquée au "problème de la violence contre les femmes" au Liberia, sujet à des interventions complexes sur ce problème, est différente des notions perçues par les agences d'intervention, les ministères du gouvernement, et les ONG chargés de mettre en place des mandats globaux pour faire face au problème.

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## Introduction

The following account is presented as a set of "intersecting texts." In a series of ethnographic "chapters" we document an actual encounter, observed by one author, which occurred in rural Liberia. Our analysis, interspersed with the ethnographic description of a single event, is placed in the context of several years of fieldwork with humanitarian organizations in postwar Liberia conducted by the first author, as well as years of research on that country, pre- and postwar, conducted by the second. In keeping with the ethical practices of our discipline (anthropology), we carefully disguise the identities of our informants and the exact location of the places where these events occurred. Our decision to organize our presentation in this manner was guided by the intention to represent, in textual form, the emergent, conflicted state of the discourse surrounding gender-based violence in this particular postconflict situation. This admittedly "experimental" mode of writing, we believe, best represents the confusions and misunderstandings currently experienced by practitioners in the field of gender-based violence, both Liberian and expatriate, by the communities they are attempting to change, and by ourselves, as anthropologists seeking to understand these processes.

### *GBV Intervention, Chapter 1:*

*One steamy afternoon in 2008, a white four-wheel-drive vehicle with tinted windows drove slowly into a rural community in the interior of Liberia. Although by definition a "village," the community was located close to the administrative capital of the*

*area and was just off the main (albeit unpaved) highway; it was therefore a popular destination for donors, journalists, and other visitors wishing to see the “real culture” or “traditional” way of life in postwar Liberia. In this case, the vehicle carried three foreigners—a historian, an anthropologist, and a lawyer—all white women invited by a prominent human rights NGO to join a team to study gender-based violence in postconflict Liberia. They were accompanied by Liberian NGO staffers, and by a local youth organization that had been funded to develop workshops on gender-based violence for rural residents. None of the foreign visitors (including the anthropologist, who had past research experience in Liberia) spoke the local language.*

*The vehicle pulled up to large thatch-roofed “palava hut” in the center of town. Despite ample warning, it took some time in this presentation-fatigued community to round up a group of adults willing to be interrupted from their daily chores. Eventually an audience of approximately one hundred people was collected. Because they knew that this was a “gender” event, older women sat prominently on benches in the front while adult men—including the town chief—sat off to one side. The three foreign visitors were ceremonially seated together behind a small table at the very front, facing the audience. The anthropologist, reflecting upon previous experience, expected that the small table would be used to serve kola nut and drinks; but when none appeared, she wondered if this lack of hospitality was due to postwar poverty. She was also concerned that, as visitors, they had brought no gifts for their hosts.*

In 2010, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked Liberia among the lowest ten countries in the world for gender inequality (Gaye et al. 2010). Only a year later, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and two activists, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for helping to bring a successful end to the Liberian Civil War by politically organizing Liberian women. It is in the context of this striking juxtaposition that we need to ask: How did the gender issues of a small town in the interior of Liberia become the focus of an internationally renowned human rights organization? What did the organization hope to gain by sending three academic visitors thousands of miles to this location to observe a humanitarian intervention to end gender-based violence? How were the visit and the “gender” event interpreted by the community members? Most important, what assumptions did the local and global participants bring with them about gender, violence, and the relationship between those terms? How were their basic definitions congruent or divergent, and what implications did that have for the success of gender-based violence interventions in Liberian communities?

At the core of these questions lies a common problem of whether or not there is a fundamental “incommensurability” (Povinelli 2002) between global discourses about gender-based violence and local understandings of gender, power, violence, and moral behavior in postconflict Liberian life. In this article, we examine the microdynamics of humanitarian-sponsored gender-based violence (GBV) interventions in postconflict Liberia. Drawing on more than three years of fieldwork and observation of gender-based violence interventions and discourses at the local, national, and international levels, we engage in a multiscalar analysis of how gender, conflict,

laws, and norms articulate with global discourses about human rights in local contexts of implementation. We explore this articulation by juxtaposing a running ethnographic narrative (presented in “chapters”) with a streaming ethnographic analysis that highlights how local populations have the capacity to powerfully contest global forms of humanitarian intervention through redefinition, displays of conflict, argumentation, and ultimately nonparticipation.

We situate this work in the context of an emerging scholarship on gender-based violence, law, and humanitarian intervention. Specifically, we draw on Honwana’s (2006) work on child soldiers in Africa, which demonstrates that the spaces that emerge under war conditions create alternative cultural frameworks for the social construction of gender, childhood, and the practices of violence and sociality. We lean heavily upon Merry’s (2006, 2008) work on transnational gender-based violence interventions, which offers the twin concepts of “translation” and “vernacularization” to understand the “dialogic movement” (Abramowitz 2009, 2010) of messages, resources, and GBV agendas between global and local initiatives. Hodgson’s (2011) exploration of the concept of gender justice helps to situate our own research at the nexus of human rights and customary rights-based discourses around gender relations. We also ally our own work with the ethnographic study of Coulter (2009), who examined gender-based violence in wartime and post-war Sierra Leone and arrives at an analysis quite similar to our own.

Our research is sited in postconflict Liberia, in which governance is weak, statutory law is in dispute, and the territory is largely administered through a fragile partnership between the nascent Liberian state and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). Given that concerns about GBV are located within rights-based discourses (from human rights traditions grounded in conceptions of citizenship as well as customary law traditions grounded in notions of kinship) (see Basu 1995, 2010), the paradox of our research is that it is situated in what is effectively an extralegal space. But in contrast to recent work that contends that humanitarian NGOs have hegemonic authority in the context of global–local dialogues (see Agamben 1998; Pandolfi & Fassin 2010), we present evidence that in the context of combating GBV, humanitarian NGOs and local communities seek cooperation and engagement but fumble in the face of how gender, culture, and GBV practices are defined in everyday life.

For our central premise, we argue that humanitarian-sponsored gender-based violence interventions in postconflict African societies must take seriously local African attempts to define, address, and resolve the problems of GBV in their own communities, or violence-mitigation initiatives will fail due to a lack of local relevance. In order to succeed, NGOs must integrate more complex ideas of “culture” into their programmatic operations than currently circulate in humanitarian discourse in order to build locally relevant frameworks for intervention. GBV initiatives must be “living” initiatives that can “hear” local problems, “see” local strategies for reso-

lution, and “think” actively about the best forms of engagement for local contexts before committing to specific tactics for intervention. They must be cognizant of, and sensible to, the underlying currents of social conflict within communities and societies, and to the dynamic nature of gender roles as they are taking shape in postconflict times.

### **The Context of the Liberian Civil War**

Humanitarian organizations currently working in postconflict settings across Africa carry into their engagements with local populations more than just preconceived notions about the nature of recovery, development, and peace-building—they carry into these encounters preconceived notions about the meaning of culture as a determinant of human behaviors, as well as the perception that the “state of crisis” requires certain forms of intervention. These concepts of culture inhibit and impair the ability of NGOs to engage effectively and meaningfully with local populations that are battling gender-based violence in postconflict contexts, and they lead to the labeling of population-based contestations as “noncompliance,” “ignorance,” or “traditionalism.”

To understand the “crisis temporality” (Terry 2002) that constitutes humanitarian NGOs’ perspectives, and the extended historical framework that shapes Liberian experiences, it is important to consider the role of gender in Liberian history up to and through the Liberian Civil War. From 1990 to 2003 the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars attracted international attention for their shocking displays of state collapse, violence against civilians, and sexual abuse. The kidnapping of young women by competing armed factions and their imprisonment in relations of sexual servitude, the forced conscription of young boys and girls into service as child soldiers (see Badmus 2009), and the rise of militarized femme fatales like Black Diamond and Jewel Taylor (see George 2004; Utas 2003; Coulter 2009) captured the world’s imagination. These images filtered their way into the global imagination just as the world was coming to terms with the massive scale of the sexual violence reported in the Bosnian and Rwandan conflicts.

Behind these images were complex regional histories of trans-Atlantic connections, the slave trade, colonialism, and postcolonial nation-building. In the geographical area of modern-day Liberia, states of war and fears of violence were hardly unusual or unexpected in the past, but indigenous systems of conflict resolution and multiple forms of overlapping authority kept the worst abuses in check.<sup>1</sup> Historically, small-scale chiefdoms and confederacies of the Guinea Coast or Mano River region were engaged in fierce competition and frequent conflicts over trade and the defense of local autonomy. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries this stretch of West African coastline became the site of experiments in resettlement by both the British (Sierra Leone) and the Americans (Liberia). As a result, free people of African descent, freed slaves, and Africans taken

from impounded slave ships created a creole society that composed the economic and political elite in both countries.

On an intimate level, kin groups and residential communities developed institutions for addressing violence between spouses, neighbors, in-laws, and all those who shared in the embedded relationships of daily life. Patrilineal descent and virilocal residence were the institutional structures that grounded an ideology of male dominance and female subordination. However, the crucial role that women played in food production and their ability to organize collective responses to unjust treatment served as a check on the authority of men. In the rural “traditional” sector, women, whose participation in prewar agricultural production was central to subsistence across the country, were widely recognized as breadwinners and their economic contribution was valued and celebrated. While women were charged with the responsibility to provide food for their families, their right to the proceeds from their own entrepreneurial activities was also recognized and protected. Indigenous communities had institutionalized authority roles for women, ranging from the Sande society hierarchy in the northwest to the classic “dual sex” political offices in the southeast. These cultural apparatuses allowed some to rise to positions of community and regional leadership. “Ordinary” women had authority within their kin groups and households as mothers, sisters, and aunts and could command the labor and respect of younger kin, both male and female, especially as they aged. All the indigenous communities of prewar Liberia, while insisting that men and women were not “equal,” provided spaces for women’s voices and agency and recognized their claims to exemption from unjust and abusive treatment. Rape and other sexual crimes were neither tolerated nor ignored, and well-established sanctions against perpetrators have been documented by observers since the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

While Sierra Leone remained a British colony until 1961, Liberia (which was never an “official” possession of the United States) became an independent republic in 1847. Well into the twentieth century, the presence of the Liberian state was tenuous beyond the coastal cities where the American-identified settler elite (accounting for less than 5% of the total population) was based. Cold War patronage by the United States in the post-World War II period bolstered the power of the national government to impose itself legally and institutionally throughout the territory it claimed, and an economic boom in rubber and iron ore drew many indigenous Liberians into participation in the market economy and other aspects of national life. Considerable pressure began to mount during the 1970s for greater political openness and transparency, with students, labor unions, and an active press all demanding an end to the single-party rule that had lasted for decades.<sup>3</sup> A military coup in 1980 brought to power young enlisted men of indigenous background and began a process of creating politicized ethnic groups out of what had been “tribes” defined by administrative units.

In urban, settler-immigrant (*kwi*) society, a different strain of Liberian patriarchy existed. It held that the ideal woman should be economically dependent upon her husband and that authority—both domestically and in the polity—falls “naturally” to the man. Deriving from the nineteenth-century settler and missionary tradition and reinforced through the Christian churches, it resembled the essentialist Victorian-derived gender constructions of the “modern” West. The association of upward class mobility with “freeing” women from their burden as agricultural producers had the paradoxical effect of increasing the dependence of educated women on their husbands, and perhaps of increasing their vulnerability to domestic abuse (see, e.g., Sirleaf 2009). This strain of Liberian patriarchy underwent its own transformation around the middle of the twentieth century. During the economic expansion of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, loosening social conventions among rural women and young people of both genders made it possible for them to free themselves from labor obligations to their structural superiors by earning their own incomes and using cash to monetize what had formerly been personal relationships (see Bledsoe 1980). In spite of official patriarchal ideologies, it is clear that prewar Liberia was a place in which many women were single heads of households, managed their own businesses, traveled unaccompanied and without fear, and exercised authority over others.<sup>4</sup>

With the central government unraveling by 1990 and refugees streaming into neighboring countries, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened with a military force. As a result, a stalemate continued for the next seven years and the war ultimately spilled over into Sierra Leone. The election of the rebel leader Charles Taylor to the presidency in 1997 sent his rival warlords back to their caches of weapons and perpetuated the instability and violence as more and more territory outside the capital, Monrovia, fell to armed factions. Estimates of civilian death ranged as high as two hundred thousand, more than half the population of about three million was displaced, and a significant portion was crowded into the capital city. Liberians lived in a state of insecurity, without a functioning legal, criminal justice, or military system for almost fifteen years.

Just before Taylor was removed from power, rumors of his impending fall washed over Liberian refugee populations and through the U.N. and humanitarian offices in neighboring countries. Early plans were put into place to engineer the massive relocation of half of the country’s population back to homes, communities, and cities that had been abandoned for periods ranging from several weeks to many years. By this time, humanitarian organizations had been providing food, medicine, shelter, and social services—including gender-based violence counseling, child protection and relocation services, and human rights education—to Liberians for over a decade. There was no doubt among these organizations that gender-based violence was a top priority and would be an aspect of the planned reform of Liberia’s legal system.

The Liberian conflict came to its conclusion in 2003, with Charles Taylor's exile to Nigeria and ultimate extradition to The Hague (where the Special Court for Sierra Leone indicted him for war crimes). Few institutions, buildings, social networks, or economic capacities remained intact after nearly a decade and a half of intermittent violence. The country he left behind was materially and socially devastated, and its legal and customary institutions were in shambles as well. While, theoretically, all Liberians were recognized as enfranchised citizens, the status of the "Rules and Regulations Regarding the Hinterland" was uncertain. The "Rules and Regulations," composed by urban elites in the early twentieth century, were a body of centrally administered "customary laws" aggregated into a system of indirect rule over much of inland Liberia, alongside a body of statutory law that was concurrently administered in urban and coastal areas. They had been enforced for many decades, then abandoned under Doe in 1985, who introduced a new Constitution, and then reintroduced again, with modifications, under Taylor in 1997. Consequently, in the postwar period, the "Rules and Regulations" *and* the statutory body of law for urban residents had uncertain legal authority. If operative, the former—which encompassed most aspects of civil life—would be administered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, while the Ministry of Justice administered the latter.

The dual system of rights and regulations posed a constitutional problem that has yet to be resolved. Therefore, at the time of this writing, no clear dominion of law obtains over the country. Reforming and systematizing these multiple legal systems are among the greatest challenges of the postconflict government and rank as a high priority for the international human rights community, professional women's groups in Liberia, and NGOs concerned with gender-based violence. But the implications of these legal wrangles are the greatest for ordinary Liberians, for whom profound uncertainty about these legal reforms shapes their efforts to reclaim their families, their homes, their futures, and their security.<sup>5</sup>

A survey of more than sixteen hundred women conducted in 2005 found that over 90 percent reported being subjected to some form of sexual abuse during the conflict (Hodson 2007:7). The horrific rapes and forms of sexual mutilation that militants deployed to terrorize the population during the war were linked to the collapse of both state and community-level institutions and controls on behavior (contra Ellis 2006). The long duration of the war, and its resulting trauma, have contributed to a normalization of violence in many social and political domains. This relatively new, but "normal," space of violence is being frenetically, but weakly, combated through the reassertion of state authority (in the form of the issuance of new, although unenforceable, laws), the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and GBV interventions on the part of NGOs. However, all these changes in an already transitional situation have created anxieties about how justice is to be served (see Shaw 2010 on transitional justice).

The Liberian state, attempting to take advantage of the window of opportunity offered by the postconflict moment, moved quickly to make statutory law consistent with international conventions and guidelines. Among the changes instituted and widely publicized was a 2005 law stipulating the penalty of life imprisonment for first-degree rape (and specifically for gang rape) and a ten-year maximum sentence for second-degree rape. This followed a 2003 act that defined women's property rights in marriage and outlawed the "recovery" of marriage payments by the husband's family in cases of divorce. Other sections of the law prohibited husbands from demanding compulsory labor from their wives or directing them to have illicit sexual intercourse with another man for the sole purpose of collecting damages. These new laws reflected the advocacy of organizations like the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL), which, in conjunction with international feminist organizations, lobbied to reform the legal system during the war and in its aftermath. AFELL, and the women it claimed to represent, saw "traditional" institutions such as bridewealth and patrilineal inheritance as serious impediments to full citizenship for women. AFELL activists were convinced that they were acting not only in the interest of less-privileged women, but indeed with their consent and agreement. Some rural women, however, saw that legal reforms intended to carve out greater rights for *wives* might conflict with women's interests in other social contexts, and that preserving ambiguity about the status of marriages could prove advantageous in certain circumstances. Basu has noted that while the U.S. women's movement focused on domestic violence as an aspect of "politicizing the private domain," women elsewhere might have well-justified fears about "state incursions in this area" (1995:10). As we shall illustrate below, the women in our example were skeptical and ambivalent about the impact of these new laws on their lives and relationships.

## Gender-Based Violence and International Law

As we demonstrate in the next narrative, critical questions of local customary law, statutory law, transitional governance, and international law are shaping the current framework for GBV interventions in postwar Liberia. At the level of international law, GBV interventions are implemented under the legal authority of U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1509 (2003), affirming for Liberia the core values of UNSCR 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security" (2000). Three basic premises are asserted for peace-building interventions: (1) that women should be included at all levels of decision-making, (2) that gender perspectives must be integrated into all aspects of peace-building to mitigate the impact of conflict upon women, and (3) that women should be protected from violence during and after conflict (see Black 2009).

Significant efforts have been made to implement Resolution 1325 in Liberia. Since President Sirleaf's election in 2005, the country has seen the

appointment of a female head of the Liberian National Police (LNP) and the emergence of a powerful and well-resourced Ministry of Gender and Development (see Morris & Kuhn 2005). The LNP has worked closely with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to train and equip police officers, staff members, and legal advocates on issues of gender-based violence, and Liberia hosted the first female battalion of U.N. Peacekeepers. In addition, a formal humanitarian coordination mechanism has emerged to share information and expertise on implementing the resolution among the numerous governmental and NGO bodies operating in the field. In its own way, Liberia is becoming renowned globally as a leader in the attempt to create gender equity in a postconflict situation, while it is simultaneously a living example of the ongoing struggle to make the application of Resolution 1325 meaningful in a humanitarian crisis (see Ndinga-Muvemba 2010).

However, the main work of addressing gender-based violence, and the space of our inquiry, lies outside of the legislative and executive domains, at the level of programmatic interventions. Here, we are concerned with the hundreds of international nongovernmental organizations working to implement a globally approved menu of services and training programs for Liberian communities, clinics, and families in villages, towns, and urban neighborhoods. These well-documented interventions include (but are not limited to): creating shelters for abused women, providing training to local leaders about GBV issues, training police and military forces about GBV enforcement, providing training and matériel for rape kits to local clinics, providing counselors to act as psychosocial advocates for victims of domestic abuse and rape, and moving throughout the country to provide community-based education initiatives to transform local social norms and values regarding gender and the role of violence in society.<sup>6</sup>

But despite the tremendous international investment in these initiatives in Liberia, gender violence as defined by global institutions continues to be rampant. Due to the long period of government breakdown, formal, aggregate statistics for postwar sexual violence are generally unavailable (with the exception of Swiss 1999), although official reports of rape, sexual assault against minors, and domestic violence are widespread (in a general humanitarian climate perceived as favoring men).<sup>7</sup> This raises a complex methodological question: how do we assess the impact of hundreds of programs, millions of dollars, and thousands of man hours of training, counseling, and intervention, not to mention national-level commitment, upon the Liberian population? Underlying this complex problem are even more troubling questions. How do global NGOs understand their project of social transformation and the role of “culture” in a context of tremendous human transition? And finally, how do Liberians see themselves in the context of these interventions? What do they expect of the NGOs?

## What is GBV?

### *GBV Intervention, Chapter 2:*

*In the center of the hut, a clear space was left for the workshop performance. The presenters—a Liberian youth group of men and women in their twenties—put on a play illustrating the proper postwar response to domestic violence. In the scene they performed, a woman saw her husband off to work and was then called away to assist a friend with a problem. The husband returned to find his wife not at home; jealous and angry, he waited for her to return, and then beat her savagely. The acting was exceedingly realistic and the audience participated actively, laughing and whooping along with the action. The play ended with another man breaking up the domestic dispute by explaining that the law of the land forbids such violence. A man must not beat his wife because doing so violates her human rights. It is a crime that must be answered for in court, and it is the duty of the police to arrest the offender and begin criminal proceedings. His injunction to the audience was clear: “A woman who has been beaten should report her husband to the police, and the town chief, himself a government official, should assist her in bringing criminal charges.” At the play’s conclusion, the actors invited the audience to discuss what they had seen and to ask questions they might have about the rule of law in the new, postconflict Liberia.*

In the world of humanitarian activism to combat gender-based violence, the problem of definition is foundational to the purpose and scope of intervention. In 2005 a U.N. Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) issued a comprehensive definition of gender-based violence (see text box, p. 130). This definition was one element in guidelines for humanitarian interventions that resulted from several decades of research, consultation, and collaboration involving hundreds of practitioners and organizations operating in the field of gender-based violence.

According to the IASC guidelines, the formal operational definition for gender-based violence encompasses both abstract principle and detailed practice. Included in the definition are three core statements: (1) a statement of principle coupled with a statement of legal protection, (2) a statement of scope, and (3) a nonexhaustive set of specific behavioral examples that fall within the class of violations. The statement of principle, which asserts that GBV “is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females,” is remarkably broad and potentially sensitive to cultural nuance. The statement of scope expands the statement of principle to ensure that practitioners recognize that acts of GBV may or may not be defined as illegal or criminal, and that the defining nature of these acts involves the subordinate status of women. The third statement, the list of examples of GBV acts, includes a narrowly defined range of crimes including rape, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, trafficking, forced or early marriages, and “harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, honor killings, etc.”

### IASC Definition of Gender-Based Violence (2005)

**Gender-Based Violence** is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females. Acts of GBV violate a number of universal human rights protected by international instruments and conventions.

Many—but not all—forms of GBV are illegal and criminal acts in national laws and policies. Around the world, GBV has a greater impact on women and girls than on men and boys. The term “gender-based violence” is often used interchangeably with the term “violence against women.” The term “gender-based violence” highlights the gender dimension of these types of acts; in other words, the relationship between females' subordinate status in society and their increased vulnerability to violence. It is important to note, however, that men and boys may also be victims of gender-based violence, especially sexual violence.

The nature and extent of specific types of GBV vary across cultures, countries, and regions. Examples include: (1) sexual violence, including sexual exploitation/abuse and forced prostitution, (2) domestic violence; (3) trafficking, (4) forced/early marriage, and (5) harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, honor killings, widow inheritance, and others.

This definition is grounded in the global legal framework of human rights: a framework with the capacity to embrace both universal standards and local relevance.<sup>8</sup> The two faces of human rights discourse, however, lead to incommensurable outcomes in terms of principles and practice. The flexibility of the GBV definition creates almost infinite opportunities for powerful and transformative activism in transitional contexts, but as practice has unfolded in Liberia, GBV has come to be understood and addressed within an extremely constrained set of parameters. Under the rubric of a loosely assembled Gender Coordination Committee, NGOs like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Refugee Committee (IRC), and the American Rescue Committee (ARC) have assembled significant staff teams to address the categories of GBV listed in the above examples: sexual violence and rape, domestic violence, trafficking, and “harmful traditional practices” within the scope established by the global definition. But as we saw in the drama presented above, in local application, the interventions that are targeted toward the Liberian population tend to be extremely topically specific. The logic of the *project* has quickly outpaced the logic of the *principle*, and in the space of a few short years GBV-related NGO interventions have come to be understood by Liberians and humanitarian workers alike as targeting a narrow range

of violent behaviors. They are also understood as being separate from relevant issues like women's health or access to educational and economic opportunities. NGOs have defined their agendas without reference to local populations' definitions of gender subordination, exploitation, and abuse, and in response, the Liberian populations who are the target of these interventions have responded by demanding that NGO activists attend to their own concerns, confusions, and needs.

***GBV Intervention, Chapter 3:***

*NGO staff translated for the three visitors while the dialog of the play and subsequent discussion were carried on in the local language. Very quickly, it became apparent that questions and insistent demands for answers were being directed to the three white women, uneasily seated before everyone else as a sort of tribunal. One by one, women rose from their seats to describe actual rather than hypothetical cases of what they considered to be gender-based violence. In startling fashion they complained about men in the audience as perpetrators and bemoaned the unwillingness of their village chief to hear cases and bring the culprits to justice. What was the remedy, they demanded, for the case of a man who had supposedly divorced his wife and left her without support for their children, yet kept coming "home" late at night, demanding sex? Did she have to satisfy him? No, said the lawyer, definitively; if he forced her, it was rape, and she should go to the police or to the U.N. peacekeeping authorities, and prosecute him to the full extent of the law. What about men who fathered children and refused to support them? According to the lawyer, such situations, while unfortunate, were "not GBV" and therefore not relevant to this discussion. Yet the Liberian women kept returning to the issue of financial support, arguing that most of the quarrels leading to one form of violence or another stemmed from the desperate economic situation. A man complained loudly that his wife had left him because he was not working, yet his son from another marriage was living with them, attending school and working on their farm. If his son was contributing to the household, was that "not me"? How could anyone know, they demanded, what type of offense was appropriate to bring to the police and what was not?*

Consider the contrasting visions of gender-oppression being demonstrated in the narrative above. The NGO-supported Liberian youth group offered a global definition of gendered oppression in their dramatic interpretation. Their focus was exclusively on an incident of domestic abuse, and they advocated contacting local authorities—police, or village elders or chiefs. However, when the community residents made their own concerns about gender subordination known to GBV advocates, their complaints were strikingly different from those depicted in the performance in chapter 2. The community's concerns focused on forms of structural and social violence that were associated with unclear gender roles and responsibilities, such as unclear sexual obligations and nonpayment of material contributions to the family unit. They believed that these conflicts constituted the causal framework for the subsequent acts of physical violence with which

the NGOs seemed to be obsessed. From the perspective of the townspeople, if NGOs could help them sort out their basic social and structural norms, obligations, and roles, violence would decline. From an NGO perspective, however, the violent act itself was the principle source of concern, and the “root cause” of this violence was the inherently unequal relationship between men and women sanctioned by “tradition.” While aware of the economic and structural issues causing family and community disarray, NGOs treated these problems as “confounders” of the postconflict situation, over which they had little control.

### **“The Problem Is the Culture”**

#### ***GBV Intervention, Chapter 4:***

*The people of this community had heard about changes in the national law regarding rape, the rights of children, and other “human rights.” They understood that the national legislature, under the previous government, had passed a new inheritance law regulating the property rights of spouses under both statutory and customary marriages and that this new law was intended to give women greater access to productive resources. They knew they were not supposed to “take the law into their own hands” and that the end of the war had resulted in a return to “the rule of law,” but the laws themselves seemed to be changing rapidly around them. Information campaigns seemed to be contradictory, on the one hand, emphasizing the punitive nature of the new laws, like maximum sentences for rape, while on the other emphasizing the possibilities for egalitarian access to authentic justice afforded by the new court system. Furthermore, the police and courts were located in the regional center or the national capital. Only those with cash to spare for taxis, court fees, and other costs could think of bringing criminal or civil charges. Yet, with more and more areas of personal relations falling under criminal statutes, people were very worried about their potential liability for not reporting something to the police. If all the neighbors heard the man who banged on the door at midnight, demanding sex with his ex-wife, were they all complicit in the “rape”? What were the limits of the chief’s authority under the new legal regime, in determining whether or not the couple was “really” married or divorced? The anthropologist by this time had come to suspect that the arrangement of the seating and furniture had been designed to create the simulacrum of a courtroom all along. Both the men and women of this community wanted answers to their legal questions, and they were anxious to make use of any resources that happened to blunder in to their town.*

In the past, legal entities existed to resolve legal and normative claims of injustice within families and communities, and often addressed matters that are now identified as contributing to the widespread presence of GBV. James Gibbs’s classic studies of indigenous legal institutions, conducted in central Liberia in the 1950s and 1960s, documented the presence of both formal courts and “informal, quasi-legal, dispute-settlement procedures” known in prewar communities as “house palavers,” or moot courts (1963:1). Gibbs described the efficiency of the formal courts run by Poro-sanctioned

chiefs, but he also noted that “the [statutory] court is particularly inept at settling [the] numerous matrimonial disputes because its harsh tone tends to drive spouses farther apart rather than to reconcile them” (1963:2–3). The less formal “house palaver,” or moot court, run by senior kinsmen of both parties, was the preferred means of settling domestic disputes, including those involving abuse and violence.

In other postconflict African contexts (see Sriram et al. 2010), local, culturally grounded forums for the redress of gender-related conflicts have been found to be preferred modes for social reconstruction. But under current postwar conditions, and following repeated exposure to the trainings and exhortations of GBV NGO workers, it would appear that postconflict communities are either deploying these mechanisms of dispute resolution quietly and with little local legitimacy, or that they are afraid to use the moot court structure in a new regulatory environment. In the example above, the community’s reception of the NGO’s message was a complex negotiation involving an attempted integration of human rights principles into a socially transitional and legally undefined context. The frustration exemplified in the narrative centers on the narrowly defined range of GBV behaviors and GBV solutions (criminal prosecution, marital or household dissolution, etc.). Women who sought protection from male violence but wished to remain in a household with men, and men who struggled to “be men” in spaces in which women were challenging their authority, were all in a limbo of social and legal ambiguity.

These legal changes have created tremendous uncertainties for both men and women about the meanings of kinship, marriage, and property rights, as well as the conditions of social and governmental control. War-time displacements have left many Liberians without any means of proving rights to land, either through traditional mechanisms or registered deeds, and women’s access to productive resources has been seriously threatened. The close timing of the two GBV-oriented legislative acts (the “Rape Law” and the “Inheritance Law”) as well as the extensive publicity and educational campaigns (all framed within a discourse of “human rights” for women) have raised serious fears for many men. One widely cited, but apocryphal, report claimed that under the new laws, a woman could charge her husband with rape, get him incarcerated for life, and then claim all of his property. (In fact, the new law makes no provision for marital rape and the inheritance law provides wives with only one-third of the marital property.) In this climate, the questions of marital status, rights to sexual access, and contributions to household expenses raised in the example above take on a highly charged meaning.

### ***GBV Intervention, Chapter 5:***

*As the questions mounted, they began to outstrip the ability of the visiting lawyer to answer, although she had carefully reviewed Liberia’s prewar legal codes and*

*postwar transitional justice plan. The three foreign observers, suddenly turned “judges,” clearly had no way to fit most of the cases brought before them as examples of gender-based violence into the legal framework defined by universal human rights conventions. The meeting ended on a dramatic note when the complaints began to single out the town chief as responsible for not taking cases to the next administrative level. The town chief replied by chastising the women for giving the visitors a bad impression of the town as a whole. He was in the middle of his speech when the elder women sitting in the front row of benches rose as a group, turned their backs on him, and walked out of the palava hut, followed by the young women who had provided most of the specific complaints. This was a rather stunning moment because the team of visitors had been hearing for the entire week that the root cause of gender-based violence in Liberia was the “traditional” oppression of women and their status as “property” under the law. Indeed, just that morning at the oldest and most elite private college in the country, they had heard these aspects of “culture” cited by well-dressed women students. After the exit of these supposedly powerless and uneducated rural women, the workshop broke up, “in confusion” as one member of the Liberian NGO staff put it. The men, including the town chief, went off laughing to cover their embarrassment while the visitors scrambled, with relief, back into their air-conditioned vehicle.*

As anthropologists, we observed that these tremendously frustrating encounters between NGO GBV staff and local Liberian communities took place over and over, throughout Liberian cities and rural villages, across ethnic lines, and without particular regard to class or other affiliations. NGO activists, government officials, and legal reformers in Liberia often complained of two problems plaguing their interventions: noncompliance and tradition. In the context of conducting fieldwork, one of the authors often found that scenes like the women’s walkout, narrated above, were routinely explained and summarized by NGO workers with one of two caption-like statements: “The problem is the culture,” or “The problem is noncompliance.” Presumably, if the communities would do what the NGOs asked them to do, the problems of GBV—and of humanitarian engagement more broadly—would overcome the forces of both “culture,” “ignorance,” and “resistance.”

Each concern needs to be considered separately. When NGO staff members complain about community noncompliance with their GBV training initiatives, they often express frustration over the failure of the recognized community authorities to intervene effectively in acts of physical assault, or to support the female partner in dissolving a violent relationship. A principle form of GBV intervention, and a large part of the NGO training (or the training of trainers), is directed to notables in the community such as village elders, chiefs, teachers, religious leaders, and members of secret societies. These local leaders are invited to workshops, where they are trained to understand the internationally legitimated definition of gender, the nature of gender oppression, the meaning of human rights, and the types of gender-based violence. These meetings often conclude with passionate appeals from the trainers to the community leaders to take the lead in stopping gender-

based violence in their communities. In these training sessions, NGO leaders attempt to transfer to local authorities the moral responsibility to intervene as regulators of social and domestic relationships. In some programs, GBV training is coupled with counseling programs or economic activities to support already identified victims of violence, or to provide economic resources to collectives of women seeking to leverage greater social capital in their community. Noncompliance is identified when community leaders participate in trainings, accept the financial support of NGOs, and then fail to follow through as enforcement mechanisms after the NGO's departure. Sadly, in the dark hours of frustration, fatigue, and too many beers, NGO workers (Liberian and foreign) often attribute noncompliance to "tradition," or the "savagery," "illiteracy," "traditionalism," and "backwardness" of their local partners. In other words, practitioners fall back on what Hodgson has called "the long discredited but still powerful stereotypes about passive, powerless, 'other' women" (2011:5). The local "culture," ultimately the source of the problem, seems to "win" in spite of all their efforts.

From the local community's perspective, the situation is rather different. Although community members are less focused on the *act* of violence, they agree that the fundamental principle of gender-based violence—the illegitimate use of force related to relations of gender subordination—should be engaged with and corrected. Crucially, here, the problem being contested is not patriarchy, but rather the illegitimate use of force. Like prewar Liberia, postwar Liberia is far from being a gender-egalitarian society. Today, as in the past, men and women spend much of their time in segregated working environments and deploy several distinct but intersecting discourses to justify the ideological assertion of male superiority. Indigenous constructions of family roles give husbands authority over wives within the marital unit (including the right to use physical force), although the same women might be subordinate "wives" in one context and authoritative "elder sisters" within their own patrilineal descent groups. Gender hierarchy is tempered by its intersection with relative age as a competing measure of value, but these measures can be conceptually fused, as in the proverb "men are always older than women" (see Moran 1990).

As the example above demonstrates, the concepts of "noncompliance" and "tradition" are insufficient to explain the recurrent failure of local interventions into gender-based violence. Where NGOs see violent acts, Liberians see ambiguous and undetermined gender roles and structural uncertainty; where NGOs see "tradition," Liberians see the absence of the force of *both* tradition *and* governance in their lives. As anthropologists have argued in the past, gender protections, gender adaptations, and gender innovations have existed across Liberian ethnic groups to provide women with the social space to avert interpersonal violence and to retain maximal flexibility in social, economic, and governance spaces.

But there is a positive side to the tremendous uncertainty observed here. These dynamics are working to pry open a discursive space for the

postconflict renegotiation of gender roles and relationships across the country. Moreover, the long-term implications of these changes for foundational social relations on the local level are utterly undetermined. The NGOs appear to be urging women to embrace their identity as Liberian *citizens*—that is, autonomous, bounded, rights-bearing individuals—at a moment when everyone understands that the state is still too fragile and resource poor to guarantee those rights (see Hodgson 2011). Women’s rights as members of kin-based domestic groups, however, have also been weakened and threatened over the years of war, and there is considerable moral uncertainty about just what men and women owe to each other. As Coulter has written of postwar Sierra Leone, women exposed to violence were failed in equal measure by the international community and by their own society, which proved unable to sustain intergenerational traditions: “rural men and women, and parents and children, no longer really know what to expect from each other. This is a development that many rural Sierra Leonean people find exciting, as it opens up new possibilities and creates new ways in which to be a woman or a man. At the same time it is distressing, as this fluidity in some cases delegitimizes traditional knowledge and authority” (2009:251–52).

In the incident described above, the community members, both men and women, were not rejecting the notion that they had rights as Liberian citizens, but they were clearly frustrated by the sense that their rights were being constructed for them, at some distance from their actual experience. Men and women alike saw the NGO visit as a chance to demand accountability from those they believed were really in charge (although, in reality, the three white academics had minimal power to influence policy). Drawing on Agamben (1998), one can infer that they were, in a sense, making a case for their recognition as more than bare lives, or *bios*, requiring physical protection; they were making a case for their political existence, their *zoe*, as members of moral and legal communities who demanded recognition. Community members were well aware of two powerful humanitarian imperatives—partnership with the central government, and GBV as a privileged humanitarian discourse. In their attempt to transform these powerful outsiders into a communicative conduit, they demanded the inclusion of related problems of justice, moral obligation, and economic responsibility into local and national discussions. If representatives of NGOs, however, can only audit and interpret these demands as the assertion of persistent (and resistant) “tradition,” the conversation stalls.

Consider how differently the encounter above might have concluded if it had indeed been understood as a “moot” or informal dispute hearing. As Gibbs describes it, the moot allows for a more complete airing of grievances than is permitted in the more formal chief’s court, and the “range of relevance applied to matters which are brought out is extremely broad” (1963:5). Gibbs compares the moot with Western psychotherapy by noting that each involves the elements of “support, permissiveness, denial of

reciprocity, and manipulation of rewards” (1963:6). Within the carefully circumscribed space of both the moot and the therapeutic interview, the participants are allowed to bring out all their thoughts and feelings, are assured that they will not be held responsible for any hostile or inappropriate expressions, are allowed to “reality test” different interpretations of contested events, and are provided with incentives to accept a program of changes to their behavior. The physical format of the training program we describe had some similarities to the moot, but the insistence on limiting the discussion to legally defined GBV cut off the possibility of a “therapeutic” outcome. The man who cited his sons’ economic contribution to the household as fundamental to his own rights and standing vis-à-vis his wife was dismissed as irrelevant. The woman who was unsure about the rights of her “ex” husband was encouraged to prosecute him under the formal legal system, even though she made it quite clear that she also wanted him to help support their children. The opportunity for NGO workers and community members to actually hear each other’s concerns was lost.

Given the context of uncertainty created by postconflict legal and social shifts, it is important to emphasize that the gender-based violence initiatives spearheaded by global NGOs were not unwelcome to the Liberian population, nor were they universally perceived as contemporary forms of cultural imperialism. As mentioned above, Liberian women, historically and in the postconflict period, have been powerful actors and advocates for themselves, playing important and visible roles in the peace movement, in initiatives for gender equity in politics, development, and health care, and in activism against gender-based violence. Given this apparent mutual alignment of interests, where is the conflict over gender-based violence intervention between humanitarian NGOs and local communities? In our observations, the negative community response was directed to the terms and the content of the practical interventions being offered, rather than the principle of intervention itself.

## The Nature of the GBV Encounter

### *GBV Intervention, Chapter 6*

*A few months later, in a cool, pristine conference room in the U.S., on a hot summer day, expatriate anthropologists, lawyers, NGO officers, and Liberian activists, government officials, and NGO workers met to discuss gender-based violence in Liberia. The conference opened with presentations from the anthropologists, who uniformly agreed that violence was not a core cultural feature of Liberian society. They concurred that the space of violence that currently existed was a product of specific historical formations that could be successfully challenged on local terms. Then the next panel began to speak.*

*One after another, regally dressed Liberian women rose from their seats to argue that “the problem was the culture.” Speaking of Liberian men and women, they*

*said—one after another—“it’s our tradition that has made us this way.” “It’s our tradition that makes people do these bad things.” The anthropologists argued. The lawyers responded. The air grew tense. Finally, one Liberian activist rose from her seat and said, “What are we doing. The problem is the MEN!”*

Hodgson writes, “The cosmopolitan world of government diplomats, UN and NGO experts, and donor officers, such as those working in transitional justice or development projects, is a world of frequent mobility around the globe in sites that they do not have time to get to know in detail, or necessarily think it is important to know. In these settings, culture refers to the way of life of the ‘other’” (2011:83). Most expatriate NGO workers in Liberia are unaware of the history of gender relations in the country and of the daily realities in which men and women negotiate their responsibilities in the present moment. They are also unaware of the ways in which the presence of international humanitarian organizations shapes the political economy of postconflict spaces and asserts a powerful, but indirect, influence over permissible discourses in those spaces. What are the consequences of this lack of awareness for reaching the goal of securing women’s rights to freedom from gendered violence?

In humanitarianism’s technical interventions to combat GBV, NGOs create shelters (e.g., IRC), provide psychosocial intervention and trauma counseling (see Lekskes et al. 2007), offer seed money to build women’s economic capital, and provide training to local leaders. Their expatriate and Liberian staff believe that these activities are legitimate, globally circulated “GBV best practices,” and many have in fact been developed internationally. So dearly do NGO workers hold the concept of “indigenization” that many expatriates believe they are being deferential to traditional structures and local cultures by working to indigenize the process of gender violence reeducation through local leadership structures. And these programs have had some undeniable successes. Liberian beneficiaries have given positive evaluations to trauma-counseling programs and grassroots economic development initiatives.

But, for the most part, NGO workers have to balance their day-to-day experiences of frustration, reversal, and local refusal against the technocrat’s faith that these programs, though challenging, are likely to succeed. Thus, in spite of hundreds of incidences of challenging and contested encounters like the narratives presented in this article, NGOs have not changed their beliefs about the detrimental effects of local “culture” or tried to incorporate local critiques of their programs since the debut of the postconflict moment in 2003. Instead, they continue to implement their programs, manage their staffs, meet with communities, and advocate for gender equity on the national level. But over time, NGOs have also introduced a formalized narrative of cultural patriarchy and cultural violence into their rhetoric, while simultaneously bemoaning noncompliance and

the force of tradition that defies some of their best efforts. Maintaining that “the problem is the culture” and that culture is static, originary, primordial (Kuper 1988), and never-changing, staffers believe that it will take years if not decades of exposure, education, and incentive to combat GBV in Liberia. As a consequence, they are prevented from hearing the alternatives presented by the very “clients” they want so much to serve.

Expatriates and sympathetic Liberian GBV activists have come to believe that, through sustained encounters, Liberian populations will eventually acquire a sensibility for the ineffable rightness of human rights rhetoric, and over time will come to accept the core value of equal rights for women. In spite of some Liberians’ explicit statements about their needs, wants, and concerns in regard to the goal of gender transformation, GBV programs maintain a belief in the fundamental moral and legal rightness of their own culturally specific mission. They believe strongly in the pervasiveness of a blind traditionalism guiding the population, even as that population persistently requests their support in finding a moral, ethical, and legal footing in the postconflict nation.

Povinelli (2002) has used the term “incommensurable” to describe the clash of fundamentally different worldviews within the structure of a legal framework that posits itself as universal. As we have demonstrated here, the Liberian GBV experience exhibits the incommensurability between the universal human rights approach and local vernacular interpretations of justice, protection, and obligation. The divergence between NGOs and Liberian communities has taken place at the point where shared principles encounter divergent solutions, and *not* at the level of culture or principle. While basic principles and priorities may be in agreement, divergent theories regarding the highly practical issues of violence causation, infraction, process, and consequence render the two approaches to violence against women mutually unintelligible. If Liberian men, Liberian women, and NGOs all agree in principle about the concept of gender justice, the *pratique* of the GBV experience renders all parties either silent or utterly divided over the question of a husband’s nonpayment of children’s school fees or spousal rights to each other’s income—both subjects about which men and women have deep grievances but on which GBV initiatives are silent. By contrast, the question of sexual access to one’s spouse after a conflict is a subject on which the official NGO stance is quite clear, but it is much more ambiguous in the real interplay of interpersonal relationships. The “root cause” of the empirical outcome of violence turns on the individual or institutional definition for legitimate grievement, and can be situationally varied.

### **Gender-Based Violence in the Vernacular**

Despite the empirical failings of the communicative encounter narrated in this article, the story presented here of a GBV intervention in Liberia offers

a framework for imagining how to create an inclusive process of humanitarian engagement around issues of GBV. Following Basu, who observed that “the challenge women’s movements encounter is achieving a productive balance between alliance and autonomy in several spheres” (2010:3), we have demonstrated that the encounters between local populations and NGOs go beyond efforts to “talk back” to power. These encounters demonstrate the capacity and the will of local populations to assert power and authority over the cultural narrative about gender violence that is being ascribed to them, even to the extent that local communities stymie the most basic of GBV initiatives with challenges to their legitimacy and authority.

Levitt and Merry’s (2011) survey of women’s NGOs worldwide looked for the factors that promote successful “vernacularization,” or “an active creation of human rights by civil society groups” on the local level (2011:100; see also Merry 2006, 2011; Hodgson 2011). They identified three strategies, all of which make use of international human rights language as “discursive and aspirational resources,” but without the “authority provided by formal law” (92). These are (1) emphasizing women’s rights, (2) integrating sexual minorities, and (3) linking the core concepts of human rights discourse to locally appropriate ideas and practices in new institutional settings (2011:91–2). But we contend that this “vernacularization” of human rights discourses about gender-based violence to locally specific contexts is not unidirectional; it is bidirectional, or “dialogic” (see Abramowitz 2009, 2010). Throughout these examples, we observe an already extant, two-way process of translating general rights-based principles into local idioms—but in the case narrated here, we see the process of NGO vernacularization and translation in the NGO’s attempt to map local voices onto their global template of expectations about GBV practices, and about local humanitarian beneficiary practices more broadly. After all, NGOs exist in a specific cultural space as well—the space of international development paradigms and human rights discourses—and the process of vernacularization at the NGO level that comes out of attempts to integrate cultural sensitivity into programming is one that has led to a distorted depiction of local “cultures” as the “root cause” of the violence that NGOs and local populations seek to eliminate.

It is worth noting here that over the last four years, NGOs and international observers have produced numerous “white paper” documents and evaluation reports indicating some of the problems that have emerged in the attempt to implement U.N. Resolution 1305 in Liberia. This demonstrates that while these institutions may be preoccupied with a singular definition and implementation plan for GBV in Liberia, they are not oblivious to the fact that these encounters are being frustrated by some unidentifiable barrier, and that they are failing.

We believe that it is imperative to integrate culture into GBV initiatives in postconflict contexts by adapting universal principles to local conditions and translating them into local idioms. But this process, we wish to emphasize, will be effective only if both sides of the encounter take into

account the concerns of local actors, and the limited capacities of international organizations—a claim that has been advanced by others calling for a greater awareness of “cultural dispositions” in humanitarian intervention (see, e.g., Rubinstein 2005). Unfortunately, as other scholars have also noted, the parties with the most visible power in the conversation—in this case the international NGOs—are wedded to the notion that “culture” is intrinsically oppositional to the full inclusion of women into human rights discourse.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, the less powerful parties (who retain actual power through passive tolerance, nonimplementation, nonattendance, or noncompliance) reject the principle that the “enculturated” women at stake are basically alienated from fundamental principles of rights, limits, and capabilities.

In postconflict situations where there is great deal of uncertainty about legal codes, transitional justice mechanisms, and dispute settlement in general, the attempts of ordinary people to maintain or recreate social relationships should be supported, rather than threatened, by GBV interventions. Hodgson reminds us that any gendered analysis requires attention to the transformations affecting men as well as women, since masculinity and femininity are each constitutive of the other. Yet too often “gender” is taken to mean “women” by local communities, expatriate activists, and state officials alike, and the core of social life—the interrelationships between men and women—disappears in the analysis. This inevitably leads to a defensive stance on the part of a beneficiary community in regard to NGO initiatives. As Basu says, “local feminism” may take the form of an “incremental, hidden form of subversion enacted to protect families and communities rather than undermine them” (1995:7).

## Conclusion

While the case we describe ended without a satisfying conclusion for the parties involved, it contains valuable lessons for the assessment of GBV initiatives. In our judgment, the impact of human rights discourse in gender-based violence interventions in Liberia is decidedly mixed. On a positive note, the encounter between NGO activists and Liberian populations has created fruitful alliances and opened new discursive and social spaces of possibility and action. Liberian women are not shy or hesitant in expressing themselves in public settings, even to the extent of challenging the authority or competence of their “traditional” leaders. Yet the notion of “culture” as an impediment has taken hold among GBV activists and become normative among certain groups of Liberian women who work closely with the international NGO community. In a peculiar iteration of class-based discourse that has some resonance with the historical antecedents of race and class in Liberian society, Liberian women leaders themselves are now often at the forefront of the culturalist message; they decry the tradition of Liberian patriarchy, assert that gender violence is deeply rooted in Libe-

rian culture, and advocate for the annulling of cultural norms in order to advance the status of women. In doing so, they are supported not only by global NGO discourses, but also by a current stream of international academic research. In taking this position, they risk abandoning the historical legacy of Liberian women in authority, and dismissing existing institutions for gender equity and protection in favor of a new discourse of primordialism. Undoubtedly, these questions will remain “contested space” for Liberian women for the foreseeable future, but the role of NGOs as partners and champions of some women activists will remain crucial.

The intense moment of questioning by a community undergoing rapid transformation, as described above, suggests both the possibilities and the dangers of the process of vernacularization. We have also shown how this strange and strained encounter could work otherwise. We can envision an alternative process by which vernacularization works productively in both directions. We can imagine gender-based violence interventions that begin by asking local residents about their prewar memories and experiences of safety and security, and about the obligations of spouses and kin to each other. From this starting point, we envision communities and activists working together to reclaim institutions that supported women’s economic security and political agency in the past, while adapting them to the changing national legal context of the present. We envision a postconflict space of humanitarian intervention where global human rights rhetoric is itself changed by these interactions with locally defined concepts of justice in order to build order and security without placing the roles of kin and citizen in opposition to each other. Finally, we envision a form of humanitarian intervention that resists the impulse to read historically recent incidents of conflict and crisis as “culture,” and seeks to support ordinary people as they rebuild their lives.

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## Note

1. On the history of violence in Liberia, see d'Azevedo (1962); Ellis (1999); Ferme (2001); Moran (2006); Shaw (2002).
2. On Liberian traditional justice mechanisms and indigenous institutions for addressing violence, see Abramowitz (2009:203–14); Gibbs (1962, 1963); Pajibo (2008). On the historical role of women in Liberia, see Carter and Mends-Cole (1982); Moran (1989, 2006); Okonjo (1976); Fuest (2008). On the role of women in the peace movement, see African Women and Peace Support Group (2004); Moran and Pitcher (2004); Disney and Reticker (2008).
3. See Burrowes (2004); Sawyer (2005).
4. While Western journalists heralded the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the "first" woman president in Africa, it is important to remember that she had served as a cabinet secretary in the 1970s and that Liberia produced a number of other "female firsts," including the first African woman to chair the United Nations General Assembly and the first woman president of a national univer-

sity. The prospect of a woman in a public, authority-bearing position was not new to Liberians, from the smallest rural community to the highest level of national life.

5. See George (2004); Powers (2006). For Sierra Leone, see Coulter (2009).
6. See Merry (2006, 2008); IASC (2009). On NGO practices in Liberia, see Fuest (2008).
7. See Schia (2009); Specht (2006); Amnesty International (2008).
8. See Donnelly (2002); Ignatieff (2003); Risse et al. (1999); Hodgson (2011).
9. See Hodgson (2011); Levitt and Merry (2011); Scully (2011), Okerere (2006); Abu-Lughod (2006).

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