

Women and Postconflict Security: A Study of Police Response to Domestic Violence in Liberia

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Domestic violence or Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the form of violence against women (VAW) that is most reported to the police in Liberia.¹ This violence cuts across class, ethnic, religious, and age lines (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, et al. 2008) and results in psychological trauma, physical injuries, and, in some cases, death. Societal beliefs that frame domestic violence as a regular part of life serve to legitimize and foster the problem in Liberia (Allen and Devitt 2012; LISGIS et al. 2008) and pose a challenge to the state and to international organizations (IOs) and women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have introduced measures to combat domestic violence since the end of the country's 14-year civil war in 2003. One such effort is the Women and Children Protection Section (WACPS) of the Liberian National Police (LNP), established by the government in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other international partners in 2005. Although the section was established primarily to address rape, its officers are mandated to investigate all forms of VAW, including domestic violence.

The aims of this article are to describe and examine how officers within the WACPS have responded to domestic violence and to study the factors

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1. Women and Children Protection Section, Liberia National Police Force, Case Disposal Statistics (2006–2010), in author's possession.

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that have influenced their actions. I draw on interviews and documentary evidence to describe the police's approach to domestic violence before the civil war and examine how this approach has changed since the end of the war. I then discuss officers' decision to either withdraw a domestic violence case or refer it to the court. This study advances our understanding of the policing of domestic violence in a postconflict African state.

Although there is an extensive literature on police response to domestic violence, much of this work does not focus on Africa. The gender and security literature lacks studies that systematically examine police officers' thoughts, beliefs, and actions as they relate to domestic violence in Africa in general and in postconflict states in particular. Consequently, there is a gap in our understanding of how domestic violence laws are enforced in these contexts. My research, therefore, seeks to contribute to knowledge in this area of inquiry. In 2010 and 2011, I conducted fieldwork in Liberia to assess how the police have enforced the country's rape, human trafficking, and simple and aggravated assault laws and to probe the factors that have shaped their actions (Medie 2012).² Interviewees for this project included survivors of domestic violence, police officers, staff of key ministries, leaders and staff of women's NGOs, and staff of IOs such as the UN. I found that officers generally withdrew cases of simple assault when the victims requested a withdrawal, except where the accused was a repeat or belligerent offender. Officers who stated that they did not withdraw aggravated assault cases attributed their decision mainly to the seriousness of the offense and the possibility of being held responsible by their superiors and by the victim's relatives should she suffer health complications from the initial assault or be reassaulted by the offender. Officers who withdrew aggravated assault cases offered the victim's preference and refusal to cooperate with prosecution as explanations for the withdrawal.

This study of police officers' response is necessary in a state that saw a high level of brutal VAW during wartime and continues to be plagued by VAW in the aftermath of the civil war. It advances the gender and security literature and its findings are relevant to combating domestic violence in Liberia.

2. Liberia does not have a domestic violence law. Thus, the crime is prosecuted as simple assault or aggravated assault. Marital rape is not criminalized. *The Training Manual: Investigation of Sexual Assault and Abuse in Liberia* of the WACPS, however, notes that other offenses such as rape, harassment, blackmail, and false imprisonment occur in the domestic context.

In the next section, I discuss the problem of domestic violence in postconflict settings. I then review the literature on police response to domestic violence. After this I present the study's methodology and findings on police response to domestic violence in pre- and postconflict Liberia. I then analyze these findings and conclude with a discussion of how this area of research can be extended.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE AFTERMATH OF CONFLICT

In the literature on VAW during conflict, sexual violence has received more attention; however, studies show that domestic violence is also prevalent during wartime (McWillians and Ní Aoláin 2013). The perpetration of this violence precedes the outbreak of conflict and continues into its aftermath (Abdullah, Ibrahim, and King 2010; McWillians and Ní Aoláin 2013). In fact, the political and socioeconomic conditions that prevail during wars render women particularly vulnerable to domestic violence. Kinship structures that traditionally provide some protection to women are fractured as people become displaced (Okello and Hovil 2007). Customary and formal justice sector mechanisms are significantly weakened or cease to function, leading to impunity for domestic violence and other forms of VAW. During conflicts, high levels of poverty and the resulting stresses within the home also contribute to domestic violence (Carlson 2005). Finally, the ease of access to weapons during this period facilitates lethal violence against women (McWillians and Ní Aoláin 2013). And even after a war has ended, its political and socioeconomic consequences continue to engender domestic violence.

Studies suggest that when members of a society witness, perpetrate, and experience violence during wars, violence, including domestic violence, becomes normalized postconflict. In a study of IPV in postconflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, the majority of women in focus group discussions revealed that the war in each country had directly contributed to men's use of violence in the home in several ways (Horn et al. 2014). One way was that men who had fought in the war or been associated with fighters "... had come to see violence as a normal way of responding to challenges or frustrations and as an appropriate way of getting what they wanted" (7). In a nationwide survey conducted in postconflict Liberia, Vinck and Pham (2013) found that "Among men, exposure to crimes, direct experience of war-related potentially traumatic events, coercion, witnessing war-related violence, and taking part in the

conflict were all associated with higher odds of beating a spouse or partner” (45). This normalization of violence also works together with evolving gender roles to contribute to men’s use of violence against their partners.

The social disruption caused by conflicts has led many women to assume political, social, and economic positions that were largely held by men. For example, in some families, women have become the primary breadwinner, often a reflection of their economic activities during wartime. Studies show that women’s economic independence provokes violence from their partners, some of whom are unemployed or hold low-paying jobs and are thus unable to provide for their families (Bernstein et al. 2013). Vinck and Pham (2013) found that a higher income was associated with a higher likelihood of being beaten by a husband or partner. Conversely, Horn et al. (2014) found that the relationship between women’s changing roles and IPV was complex and not universally positive or negative (10–11). But regardless of men’s reactions to evolving gender roles, the continued ease of access to firearms increases the likelihood of lethal violence within the home (McWilliams and Ní Aoláin 2013). Even though these risk factors exist in states that have not recently emerged from conflict, they are more exaggerated in postconflict states, rendering women particularly vulnerable in this setting.

Furthermore, weak criminal justice sector institutions contribute to low levels of reporting and prosecution of offenders. Domestic violence is generally viewed as a private matter in most societies and is, therefore, highly underreported. It is, therefore, not surprising that studies conducted in postconflict states have found a low rate of reporting of domestic violence (e.g., Isser, Lubkemann, and N’Tow 2009). Victims often do not perceive the act as a crime and also subscribe to the notion that it is a private problem in which outsiders such as the police should not be involved. Distrust of the criminal justice system due to its perceived ineffectiveness and the corruption and abuse practiced by law enforcement officers also discourage victims from reporting (Annan and Brier 2010; Bernstein et al. 2013; Manjoo and McRaith 2011). And even after women have filed complaints with the police, these factors contribute to the attrition of cases from the criminal justice system. Women’s financial dependence on their abusers, their fear of retaliation, and pressure from relatives also lead to the attrition of domestic violence cases. While none of these factors is unique to postconflict states, the high levels of poverty, the normalization of violence, and the weaknesses of the criminal justice sector that usually result from war make them

more pronounced in this setting. It is as a result of these gaps in the criminal justice sector that the Liberian government, in collaboration with international partners such as UNICEF, established the WACPS in 2005. This article describes and examines how officers of this section have enforced the simple and aggravated assault laws. It, however, first reviews the literature on police response to domestic violence in order to understand the drivers of police behavior.

EXPLAINING POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

There is an extensive body of work focusing mostly on North America and Europe that covers how police officers have enforced domestic violence laws. Early studies documented police failure to arrest and charge offenders and to take domestic violence seriously. Hirschel and Hutchison (1992) summarize the police response to domestic violence thus: “In the past, domestic violence calls were often assigned low priority. Police reluctantly responded to abuse calls, attempted to restore peace and order between the disputants, and typically left without taking more formal action” (80). The authors give several reasons for the weak response, including the views that domestic violence was a private matter and that intervening in such a case was not real police work.

Studies document a change in the police approach to domestic violence in the United States beginning in the 1980s when women’s organizations began to advocate for a stronger response (Hirschel and Hutchison 1992). In many states, this stronger response came in the form of mandatory arrest and no-drop prosecution policies. These policies sought to limit the influence that extralegal factors have on the criminal justice response to domestic violence and to eliminate police officers’ and prosecutors’ use of discretion when making decisions to arrest, charge, and prosecute men accused of domestic violence (Goodmark 2009). According to Brenner (2013), “Law enforcement has refocused priorities and moved beyond a systemic pattern of non-response to domestic violence, and prosecutors frequently adopt aggressive policies designed to impose sanctions on batterers” (304). Studies, however, show that even with this change, a variety of factors continues to shape how police officers respond to domestic violence.

The literature is broad, and some of it is inconclusive on the effect of certain variables on police response. Dichter, et al. (2011) review the literature on police arrest decision and identify three categories of factors: (1) incident factors, (2) agency factors, and (3) community factors.

Incident-level factors include the characteristics of the victim, the perpetrator, and the crime (Dichter et al. 2011). Agency factors include the availability of resources while community factors include the racial composition of the neighborhood. These factors determine police decision to arrest. They also influence the decision to charge offenders. For example, Dawson and Hotton (2014) in their study of IPV in Canada found that police officers were more likely to recommend the filing of charges when the victim sustained an injury, when it was a case of serious assault and attempted murder, and when there were multiple victims (17). These studies are important for understanding police behavior, but there is a need to study this subject in other political and socioeconomic contexts.

DATA COLLECTION

I conducted this study over a period of five months in 2010 and 2011 in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, and in Gbarnga, the capital of Bong County. In this article, I present the findings of interviews conducted with police officers in Monrovia. The 2008 census recorded the Greater Monrovia region as having a population of 1,010,970. It is the largest urban area in Liberia and is also the area with the most reported cases of domestic violence. It has the most WACPS units and the majority of NGOs and IOs that work in the area of VAW are headquartered there.

Interviews and documents produced by relevant state and nonstate agencies were the main sources of data. I conducted in-person, in-depth, and semi-structured interviews with 48 serving police officers and telephone interviews with two officers who had served prior to the civil war. I also interviewed officials of the Ministry of Gender and Development (MoGD) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), staff of 12 IOs, and the founders and staff of 12 local women's NGOs. I interviewed this selection of people to gain insight into their anti-domestic-violence initiatives and their interaction with the police and knowledge of police practice. I also interviewed eight female survivors of domestic violence with the purpose of learning about their experiences within society and with the police.

Finally, WACPS' statistics and reports produced by other state and nonstate institutions were sources of data and informed my analyses. Other documents analyzed were police training manuals, anti-gender-based-violence (GBV) campaign materials, and newspaper reports of domestic violence. I also observed police officers as they interacted with

complainants and attended meetings of the National Anti-GBV Taskforce, which shed light on the measures that had been taken and were underway to tackle domestic violence and on the activities — successes, failures, and challenges — of the WACPS.

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BEFORE AND AFTER THE LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR

Due to poor training, patriarchal norms, corruption, and a lack of resources, the police's response to domestic violence in Liberia has always been inadequate. This response has, however, improved slightly since the end of the civil war. In this section, I draw on interviews and the analyses of documents produced by the police and other institutions to describe and analyze how the LNP has dealt with domestic violence.

The Liberian National Police's Response to Domestic Violence: Preconflict

There is a dearth of studies of domestic violence and other forms of VAW before the civil war. I, therefore, cannot estimate the rate at which this act occurred. However, anthropological studies conducted in the late nineteenth century and the early to mid-twentieth century among a few ethnic groups describe the occurrence of domestic violence (McAllister 1896; Schwab 1947; Sibley and Westermann 1928). On the other hand, they also show that domestic violence was not always accepted by victims or by society. Some women divorced abusive husbands to escape severe violence (Schwab 1947), and this sometimes occurred with the support of the women's relatives. Disputes resulting from domestic violence were also resolved in family palavers or in customary courts. And there is evidence that under certain conditions, judgments in customary courts were passed in the women's favor, although the intent of these hearings was not to punish offenders but to award damages and to reconcile partners where possible (Gibbs 1960; Sibley and Westermann 1928).³

The reliance on traditional forms of dispute resolution continued into the latter part of the twentieth century. This was partly because of

3. Gibbs (1960) describes a case in a Kpelle chief's court where a man inflicts a head wound on his wife. The chief admonishes the man for spilling the woman's blood — Gibb's explains that the spilling of blood was taboo among the Kpelle — fines him, and directs him to pay the cost of dressing the wound.

people's preference for the nonadversarial nature of customary justice mechanisms but also because of the weaknesses of the formal criminal justice system. Consequently, domestic violence was rarely reported to the police, and reported cases often did not lead to prosecution. Interviews with LNP officers who served during the 1980s revealed that they received very few reports of domestic violence and only took seriously the incidents that resulted in grievous injuries or death. According to one such officer,

[m]uch emphasis was not placed on abuse against women ... simply because that trend that trickled down the line about women being, you know, chastised by their husbands because of wrongdoing, was kind of almost, I will say, acceptable in the sight of the law as a matter of discipline. Except where it went to the extreme of the woman being injured, I mean physically injured, and then that's when the attention of the government would be drawn. But to say where a woman is being really abused by her husband, or her fiancé, of whatever have you, I can't really remember where the law really took its course during those years. (Interview, Officer No. 42, male, August 2011)

Interviews with women's rights advocates show that police officers rarely took domestic violence cases seriously and that the act was normalized in society. According to K. D.,

... domestic violence has always been there, like I told you earlier, domestic violence for people was not much [of an] issue, it was part of the love relationship. The woman must be beaten, some of them would even boast way back, if your husband beats you it means he loves you, it means he really cares. (Interview, staff member of women's NGO, Gbarnga, May 25, 2011)

However, the failure to arrest, charge, and prosecute offenders went beyond individual officers and was institutionalized. There was no specialized police section devoted to domestic violence, and the police did not recognize domestic violence as a category of crime. Consequently, officers did not receive training on how to respond to domestic violence and to other forms of VAW. Most offenders were, therefore, able to act with impunity. This impunity became even more entrenched during the civil war.

Each of the warring factions in Liberia's 14-year civil war perpetrated gross atrocities against civilians and targeted women for sexual, physical, and psychological violence. The fragmentation of communities and the destruction of the already-weak criminal justice system, which was

caused by the war, ensured that women had minimal recourse to justice. And even after the war, most offenders continue to act with impunity.

The Liberian National Police's Approach to Domestic Violence: Postconflict

Domestic violence is a major problem in Liberia. According to the country's 2007 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 44% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 had experienced physical violence in their lifetime, and 28.9% of women experienced this violence in the twelve months preceding the study (LISGIS et al. 2008). Among women who had ever been married, 60.7% of abusers were current husbands/partners, 18.5% were former husbands/partners, 4.5% were current boyfriends, and 6.8% were former boyfriends.⁴ The level of violence reflects society's attitude toward the problem. Of the women surveyed, 59.3% agreed that wife beating was justified in certain circumstances, including when a woman argued with her husband (42.7%) and when she went out without telling him (41.9%). In the same survey, 30.2% of men surveyed agreed that a husband was justified in hitting or beating his wife. Of this number, 20% agreed that hitting or beating was justified when a woman argued with her husband while 16.2% said these acts were justified when a woman went out without telling her husband. The study's authors theorize that women's higher rate of justification of domestic violence might be an attempt to rationalize the violence they have experienced. Regardless of the reasons for their acceptance of domestic violence, the DHS shows that domestic violence in Liberia is a deeply entrenched social problem. Its acceptance not only renders women vulnerable but also influences if and how they interact with the criminal justice system after they have been assaulted. For example, a study conducted in three counties showed that only 1% of domestic violence cases were reported to a formal forum such as the police (Isser, Lubkemann, and N'Tow 2009).

However, the state's response to VAW has changed since the end of the war (Medie 2013). When the warring factions signed the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), there was already a heightened awareness of VAW in Liberian society because of the beating, rape, and murder of women by all factions in the war and because of the efforts of

4. Never-married women were also assaulted by relatives (52.9%), teachers (3.2%), coworkers (0.2%), and police/soldiers (1.8%).

women peace activists who brought these violations to the attention of the international community (African Women Peace and Support Group 2004). Their activism was in line with the international community's focus on ending VAW, particularly sexual violence during and after wars and the inclusion of women in the peace building process as conveyed in documents such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Consequently, the end of the war saw the placement of VAW on the state's agenda. This led to the establishment of several state agencies dedicated to addressing the problem.

The UN Police (UNPOL) led the reform of the LNP. They reconstituted the police force, provided training, and launched a drive to increase the number of female recruits (Aboagye and Rupiya 2005).⁵ In 2005, the government in collaboration with UNICEF and other international agencies created the WACPS, a section devoted to the investigation of all forms of GBV. The WACPS' offices that I visited in Monrovia shared the same compound and, often, the same building as other sections within the LNP. As of December 2011, there were 56 WACPS units across the country (23 in Montserrado County) employing 144 male and 71 female officers. Tasked with responding to domestic violence and to all other forms of VAW, officers undergo a four-week specialized training in the "professional handling and management of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse cases involving women and children" (WACPS 2010,4).

The establishment of the WACPS has led to some changes in the LNP's approach to addressing domestic violence. The principal change is that the LNP now recognizes domestic violence as a crime. Although acts of domestic violence continue to be investigated, charged, and prosecuted as simple and aggravated assault due to the absence of a domestic violence law, WACPS training clearly identifies domestic violence as a category of crime to be handled using specific steps and techniques. This is a distinct improvement from the prewar period where the LNP did not recognize domestic violence as a crime or provide related training for officers. The second area of change is in the enforcement of the aggravated assault law. Through training, supervision, and sanctions, the WACPS has made some effort to reduce the withdrawal of aggravated assault cases by police officers.⁶ Supervising officers have, however, not

5. For a discussion and criticisms of this reform, see Bacon (2012).

6. Although supervisors and frontline officers spoke of the LNP sanctioning officers for withdrawing cases of aggravated assault, I was unable to get data on officers who had been sanctioned and on the details of their sanctions.

emphasized the nonwithdrawal of simple assault cases. A senior officer summarized the WACPS' approach to simple assault thus:

So the issue of domestic violence where a woman was beaten by her husband or boyfriend, we handle it very carefully. Because number one, we look at the protection and interest of the victim, the woman. So most times for our Liberian setting, the females take it to be a normal thing to be assaulted by their husbands and when we look back in Liberian history, women were subject to their husbands. Their husbands beat on them anytime and they take it to be a normal life. So coming to modern day reality, issues of women's rights have taken precedence now in Liberia ... most women still bear in mind that their husbands beating on them is not anything major so most of the time most of them cry to the police that "I don't want to go to court, in fact, don't put the man in jail" and other things. So most domestic violence cases, we embark on the advice and educative measure. (Interview, Officer No. 10, male, 14 October 2010, Monrovia)

Therefore, the unwritten WACPS' policy was that officers could pursue a strategy of advising offenders in simple assault cases. Consequently, officers generally said that they withdrew simple assault cases upon victims' request. For example, a female officer explained that

[w]hen it is something like simple assault, it is a minor charge. They will tell us that they want to withdraw their case and we will tell them to make a withdrawal in our receipt book and if you leave from here and there is any new development on this case that you have brought here, the police won't be held responsible. (Interview, Officer No. 4, Monrovia, September 29, 2010)

Another officer stated:

But if [it is a] simple assault case, if they decide to settle it, the complainant will only come and withdraw their case from the station, they carry it. Simple assault, disorderly conduct against one another, most often that one when they come [and] complain, they can withdraw it and carry it to the house but aggravated assault is very great (Interview, Officer No. 28, male, Monrovia, September 29, 2010).

However, where a victim of simple assault wanted the case to proceed to court or the case involved a repeat or belligerent offender, the police would sometimes forward it to court. According to a male officer stationed at the section's headquarters,

...when it reaches the point where maybe the male's part seems very unreasonable, where he feels he is the man and his voice should always

be heard, and he doesn't want to come to accept what we are saying then we have him actually investigated, then take [a] statement from him, you know, detain him and send him to court . . . If you are a repeat offender, we don't compromise the issue even if the woman doesn't want to go to court, we insist on the case going to court. (Interview, Officer No. 10, male, Monrovia, October 14, 2010)⁷

Senior officers interviewed, however, said that frontline officers were trained and told not to withdraw aggravated assault cases but to instead refer all such cases to court. Officer No.10 stated that officers caught withdrawing aggravated assault cases were reprimanded and sometimes served with a warning (Interview, Monrovia, October 14, 2010). At the same time, he explained that there were conditions under which frontline officers could withdraw cases of aggravated assault: "...but depending on the circumstances, if you took your decision in the best interest of the victim, sometimes we just pat on you and tell you that next time, let it be settled at the court level" (Interview, Monrovia, October 14, 2010). In justifying this caveat, he argued that due to the high level of poverty in Liberia, many women were financially dependent on their partners and stood to suffer if these men were sent to jail. It was, therefore, sometimes in the women's best interests to withdraw cases of aggravated assault. This caveat created room for frontline officers to use their discretion to either refer cases to court or to withdraw them. It still, however, is a change from the pre-war period when the LNP did not actively seek to curb the withdrawal of such cases.

Indeed, these changes introduced in the LNP represent a shift in the police's response to domestic violence. But as is the case in most postwar institutions, the WACPS faces many challenges, and its enforcement of the simple and aggravated assault laws have been subject to many criticisms. Due to the lack of buildings and equipment, many small towns and villages lack WACPS units. This prevents many women, particularly those who are poor, from accessing the section. And where present, WACPS units are often poorly equipped. They lack equipment and supplies such as vehicles, fuel, cameras for crime scene investigation, filing cabinets, and paper on which to write complainants' statements (Medie 2012). Police mostly relied on complainants to provide transportation to crime scenes. Furthermore, studies have

7. Police officers used "compromise" to mean the withdrawal of cases in agreement with complainants or in collusion with the accused. Compromising a case could, therefore, involve withdrawing a case at a complainant's request, but it could also mean accepting a bribe from the offender and withdrawing the case against the complainant's wishes.

reported that corruption is rife within the criminal justice system and police officers are abusive towards both victims and perpetrators (Human Rights Watch 2013; United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women 2009). It is within this context that I assess the factors that influence police decision to withdraw cases and to refer them to the court.

Police Enforcement of the Aggravated Assault Law

In 2009, the WACPS received 1,183 reports of assault. Of these reports, 994 were of simple assault, and 189 were of aggravated assault. While 147 simple assault cases were referred to court and 653 were withdrawn, 69 aggravated assault cases were referred to court, and 56 were withdrawn. This article examines the behavior of 24 frontline officers interviewed in Monrovia. Of this number, 11 said that they did not withdraw aggravated assault cases while 13 said that they sometimes withdrew these cases. Those who said that they did not withdraw gave two main justifications for their decision: (1) the seriousness of the offence and (2) the future implications of the withdrawal of such a case for the police and the victim. On the other hand, those who sometimes withdrew aggravated assault cases explained that they did this because of (1) victims' preference for withdrawal and (2) victims' refusal to support prosecution when cases were referred to court against their wishes. I explore these two sets of responses below.

Nonwithdrawal

For officers who did not withdraw, victims' preference was not a determining factor in decision making. Instead, the degree of physical harm caused to the women was the most important consideration.⁸ According to a male officer,

... aggravated assault where you'll see wounds, deep wounds, cuts, where a doctor report will be coming to you and you will see a lot of stitches and that is a high degree ... so for that issue you go to court but with the simple assault case, because we are peacemakers when it comes before us we can settle it. (Interview, Officer No. 17, male, Monrovia, July 12, 2010)

8. Officers relied on doctors' reports, where available, but also determined the degree of assault by visually inspecting victims.

In addition to the degree of injury sustained by the victim, some officers also considered the fact that the offense was a second-degree felony. A female officer stationed in Monrovia illustrated this when she said,

Aggravated, you know is a felony crime. Aggravated assault cases we don't take sides with it, we send it to court. Whereby you hurt the person, the person takes ten stitches, five stitches, then those kinds of cases we don't compromise, we send it to court. (Interview, Officer No. 2, Monrovia, October 4, 2010)

For some, the gravity of the offense was coupled with the fear that a victim in a previously withdrawn case of aggravated assault could suffer complications and even die from injuries sustained. This fear contributed to the insistence on referring such cases to court. According to a female officer,

When it gets to the family they will persuade that woman to withdraw the case if not the man will leave her. So for this reason she should withdraw the case so that the man will not leave and they are begging the woman not to go to court, because looking at the wound, the wound is so grievous that if they happen to carry the husband to court, they will carry him to central prison, so they will be begging that woman to the extent that if she is not strong she will want to withdraw the case. But we the police will tell her "No," because for that kind of wound we cannot withdraw the case, they should go to the court and settle it from the court. Because whenever you withdraw those kind of cases it can backfire and they [superiors] will ask for the police officer that withdrew such a case. And you will be into problem. (Interview, Officer No. 47, Monrovia, September 14, 2010)

Officers explained that they could be held responsible by their superiors at the WACPS headquarters and by a woman's relatives if she was reassaulted or murdered by the same person after a police officer had withdrawn her complaint. Thus, even though officers were allowed to use discretion when they thought that it was in a victim's best interest, they could be blamed if that use of discretion further endangered the victim's life. Officer No. 5 further illustrated the challenge that came with withdrawing cases:

For domestic violence, aggravated assault, those are not cases that we settle in this office, we forward them to court because sometimes those kinds of cases are far beyond police imagination. Because sometimes when you try to handle it, the next thing is that it will blow up and be more than what you were handling. Sometimes when it happens, you the officer will be very

much embarrassed so this is why we don't compromise those kinds of cases. (Interview, female, Monrovia September 21, 2010)⁹

This fear of being blamed (and possibly reprimanded or sanctioned) for events that occurred after the complainant left the police station, therefore, contributed to the decision not to withdraw aggravated assault cases. However, this was not the case for all officers interviewed.

Withdrawal

Thirteen frontline officers said that they sometimes withdrew cases of aggravated assault. The victim's preference has been the overriding factor in this decision. These officers reasoned that victims were often reluctant to prosecute their abusers and when forced to do so, they usually refused to cooperate with the state and often could no longer be located by the police. For these officers, being blamed by their superiors and by victims' relatives did not appear to be an overriding factor. According to a male officer interviewed,

[W]ith this domestic issue the complainant will come and say "I don't want to go anywhere with this case because this person is the breadwinner for the house and I don't want to carry this case [to court], if he and myself go to court, when he comes from there, he and myself will no more be together." So they can say right there they don't want to go to court and so long [as] the person [is not] willing to go to court, even if you carry the accused to court they will ask for the complainant and if the complainant [is] not available they will not see the person [accused], that is the reason why when the complainant is saying that they don't want to go to court we make them solve the problem. (Interview, Officer No. 14, male, Monrovia, September 15, 2010)

They have, therefore, withdrawn cases at the police station, sometimes in consultation with their immediate supervisors. They have asked victims who have made withdrawal requests to complete and sign withdrawal forms that state that the withdrawal is being made at the request of the victim and absolves the police of blame should the offender again attack the victim or should she suffer complications from the initial assault. According to a male officer,

9. "Embarrassment" in this sense refers not only to shame but to being put in a difficult position or a position of inconvenience.

... the lady will say she doesn't want to go to court. Sometimes she will say "I want to withdraw my case to go home to my husband" and you the police, you will not force her to say "you have to go to court, you have to go to court". So you liaise with her. She says "I want to carry my case home, I want to withdraw my case," you tell her "OK, you brought it here ... put it into writing," you know, to defend us too, we the officers, tomorrow. (Interview, Officer No. 18 Monrovia, September 16, 2010)

The financial burden that a trial and the imprisonment of the accused would place on the victim also factored into this decision to honor women's requests to withdraw cases. According to a male officer,

Officer No. 45 explained that he withdrew cases, in consultation with his immediate supervisor, when the accused was the breadwinner. (Interview, Officer No. 45 Monrovia, September 16, 2010)

This assessment of the social and economic costs of participation in the criminal justice process on the victim was echoed by other officers and underscores the importance of these issues. Also important was the pressure from victims' relatives, discouraging them from cooperating with the police. Officer No. 18 explained,

It always happens here [victims refusing to cooperate]. Just the day before yesterday it happened. Sometimes we see the woman with bruises, you know, beating marks. She comes with vexation, crying. The police will do their job by following up, arresting, bringing the man to the police [station], acquainting him with his Miranda rights, investigating. Then you will ask the woman, because it is a husband and wife case, "What do you want the police to do?" Sometimes she will say "I want to go to court". The police will do their work, detain the man. Sometimes we send her for treatment. "Go home and take treatment, come tomorrow and we will send you all to court". The next morning you will see she's coming with the family, telling you, "Officer, the people talked to me, I want to carry my case home"... In such a case, you know, in any case, there must be a complainant, she says she doesn't want to go to court. Sometimes if you the police you say "No, the way this man beat on you, we are not satisfied, we have to send you people to court so that they can prosecute this man", sometimes the lady will say "Ok, I am not going to court". Sometimes she turns her back and goes. And how will you send such a man to court without a complainant? Sometimes after the 48 hours he has to be released or sometimes be guaranteed for. (Interview, Monrovia, September 16, 2010)

This pressure from relatives reflects the perception that domestic violence should be resolved within the family and does not require the intervention

of the state. Victims could also bring pressure from relatives and from influential members of society to bear on the police officer.

Overall, the interviews demonstrate that officers have based their decisions and actions on several factors. While those in the nonwithdrawal group gave the gravity of aggravated assault, consequences of withdrawal, and the law as explanations for their choices, those in the withdrawal group argued that victims could not be forced to participate in the criminal justice process partly because they would refuse to cooperate with the prosecution if compelled. In the absence of victimless trials, the victim's refusal to cooperate could halt all proceedings. The police had the option to hold the victim for contempt of court, but this was rarely done. Most WACPS units did not have vehicles and other resources to track down complainants and compel them to appear before the court.

Two central questions arise from these findings: (1) Why are officers in the nonwithdrawal group compelling victims to go to court when there is a chance that the victims will refuse to show up in court and the case will be thrown out? (2) Why are officers in the withdrawal group not driven by the fear of being blamed by victims' relatives and of being possibly reprimanded or sanctioned by their superiors? Statements made by some officers provide an answer to the first question. Interviews with some officers in the withdrawal group show that they were aware that some cases sent to court would not be prosecuted, but they insisted because they did not want to be the ones who prevented or were seen to prevent this prosecution. That is, they wanted aggravated assault cases off of their desks and on the court docket, even if those cases would not be heard. Officer No. 19 illustrated this point:

... we will make you to know that if you want to withdraw your case against this man you can do it at the court but not here because we are seeing you and seeing the wound on you so we can't just waive that case in case tomorrow something happens then they will say the police [is to blame].
(Interview, female, Monrovia, September 16, 2010)

What this implies is that the complainant could refuse to show up in court or could show up in court and ask the judge to drop the charges against the accused. This individual officer, however, did not want to be the one who withdrew the case. Another example illustrates this point:

... like it is aggravated where we can't handle it at the police level, it will go to court. We will tell you to go to the court and withdraw the matter from the court, let it be done at the court When aggravated, go to court and handle it from there. When it is simple, if you decide to make a notation

to the police that I want to withdraw my case for home settlement, if there are further developments, the police will not be held liable. We make that notation in our book, you sign. (Interview, Officer No. 26, male, Monrovia, September 14, 2010)

These answers demonstrate that the prosecution of the offender was not the only reason why these officers were referring cases to court. As explained above, they were also compelling victims to go to court because they did not want to withdraw and thus be blamed for withdrawing a case. This is because even though the WACPS allowed officers to use their discretion to act in a victim's best interest, this caveat would not save them from the anger of a victim's family or the questioning and possible reprimands and sanctions from their superiors if the victim later suffered serious health complications or died. This leads to the second question: Why were officers in the nonwithdrawal group not basing their decision on the possibility of being blamed? An analysis of the data reveals that the differences in responses cannot be explained by gender, rank, or unit in which an officer is stationed. One possibility is that officers in the nonwithdrawal group are more risk-averse than those in the withdrawal group. The literature on police response to domestic violence shows that there are multiple other reasons that could explain the difference in officer's behavior. I, however, did not systematically include each of these variables in the study and therefore cannot establish which one of them best explains this puzzle. Nonetheless, these findings offer some insight into police response to domestic violence in Liberia.

DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING POLICE BEHAVIOR

The interviews with officers of the WACPS reveal the complexity of their decision-making processes. Recognition of this complexity is important because too often, explanations for police responses to VAW in Liberia and other African countries have been largely limited to patriarchy and corruption. The perception has been that police trivialize domestic violence cases because they approve of the practice and because they are corrupt and, therefore, connive with the perpetrators for personal gain. This article does not dispute the significance of these variables in Liberia but argues that they are not the only explanations for the withdrawal of cases.

The interviews showed that officers who did not withdraw cases were driven by the gravity of the offense and also by self-preservation — that is, the need to protect themselves from blame should the complainants in

withdrawn cases die or suffer medical complications or further assault from the offenders. For those who withdrew, the victim's preference and unwillingness to support the prosecution of the offenders were the main explanations. Underlying victims' preference for withdrawal and thus, police decision, was the socioeconomic conditions in Liberia. Officers were constrained by the economic conditions in Liberia that compelled women to stay in abusive relationships for financial reasons. They reasoned that when poor women were separated from their abusers, they and their children suffered economic hardships.

This problem is not unique to Liberia, but the level of poverty — particularly female poverty — in the country magnifies this issue and affects how police officers perceive victims and respond to cases. Many Liberian women (74.7%) are employed in the low-paying informal sector, with 51.5% of them in the agricultural sector (LISGIS 2011). Most women earn very little from these economic activities and therefore need the financial contributions that are made by their intimate partners. The loss of this support could translate into the inability to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves and their children. Police officers were aware of these outcomes, and some factored them into their decisions. In the absence of state welfare programs that could assist women and their children who flee violent relationships, the separation of the offender and the victim could result in severe economic hardship for the latter. Some officers thought that this hardship had to be avoided and therefore agreed to withdraw cases. They educated offenders and victims about domestic violence with the expectation that this knowledge would prevent future violence.

CONCLUSION

This study has described how some police officers in Monrovia respond to domestic violence and has discussed the factors shaping their actions. There is a need to further explore police response to domestic violence in Liberia and elsewhere in Africa. Scholars could further probe the factors affect response and could examine how victims' preferences are shaped within the confines of the police station. It is also important to examine how the actions of police officers affect women in the short and long terms. We need to probe how this postwar response to domestic violence — whether one of withdrawal or nonwithdrawal — affects

individual women and the fight against domestic violence. The findings of such studies should inform the WACPS' approach to domestic violence.

In conclusion, it is important to underline the weaknesses of the LNP as a whole and the WACPS in particular. Due to these weaknesses, many people have continued to commit acts of domestic violence with impunity. Furthermore, these weaknesses combined with a lack of social services deny victims the assistance they need. The changes that have been introduced in the police force since the end of the civil war are important but they are only a first step to addressing domestic violence in Liberia and ensuring women's security.

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