

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Home > Research Program > Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests

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22 February 2013

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Liberia: Situation of single or divorced women living alone, particularly in Monrovia; whether they can find work and housing; support services available to them
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Situation of Single Women

Information on the situation of single or divorced women living alone in Liberia was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a professor of anthropology and Africana and Latin American studies at Colgate University in New York State, who has published studies on Liberia and conducted field research there, explained that although no laws or customs prevent single, widowed or divorced women from living alone in Liberia, particularly in Monrovia, it would be "unusual" (Professor 13 Feb. 2013). However, she stated that it is a common and accepted practice for women, especially in urban areas but also in rural areas, to head a household or family (ibid.). According to a 2008 census conducted by the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, approximately 30 percent of households in urban areas were headed by women, and in rural areas, approximately 24 percent of households are headed by women (Liberia Dec. 2011, Table 1.4.1).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a senior researcher and associate professor with the Nordic Africa Institute, located in Sweden, who studies Western Africa, including Liberia, where he has conducted field research and whose subject areas include gender-related issues, stated that it is "quite common" for women in Monrovia to live away from their immediate family, but that this is not the case in rural areas (12 Feb. 2013). However, the Researcher added that women generally prefer not to live alone, that instead they become part of a neighbourhood or integrate into an extended "family," which is not necessarily made up of a woman's relatives (Researcher 12 Feb. 2013). The Professor stated that "kinship relations are really flexible and often fictive and people create networks that operate like families, simply based on living in proximity to each other" (13 Feb. 2013).

The Senior Researcher (12 Feb. 2013) and the Professor of Anthropology (13 Feb. 2013) both stated that Liberians generally prefer to live communally. The Professor explained that it would be "highly unusual...for either a male or a female to live entirely alone, in the US or North American sense" (ibid.). The Professor added that there has been a "strong preference since the [civil war that ended in 2003] for groups of people, even unrelated, to live together for mutual protection" (ibid.). She stated that, especially in urban areas, people often rent a single room together from a homeowner and live communally (ibid.). According to the Professor, both women and men enjoy greater prestige based on the number of people who are dependent on them and can form households easily by taking in younger people, to whom they may or not be related, or boarders (ibid.).

The Professor further stated that, because of the effects of the war on housing, living conditions in Monrovia are very crowded (ibid.). According to the 2008 census, approximately 38 percent of households

headed by women lived in housing without basic amenities, compared with approximately 32 percent of households headed by men (Liberia Dec. 2011, Table 1.4.3).

According to the Researcher, some women could nevertheless have "slightly more difficulty" living on their own, for example, if they are Muslim or members of a "more extreme" Pentecostal community (Research 12 Feb. 2013). However, he stated that these difficulties are not as great in urban areas, where it is easier to live alone (ibid.).

1.1 Safety

The Professor (13 Feb. 2013) and the Researcher (12 Feb. 2013) indicated that women live alone not just for cultural reasons, but also for safety reasons. Violence against women is very pervasive in Liberia (United Nations Nov. 2012; Small Arms Survey Sept. 2012, 1; US 24 May 2012, 15). According to the Professor, a woman living alone would be "quite vulnerable" (13 Feb. 2013).

1.2 Divorced or Widowed Women

According to the Researcher, there are "lots" of divorced or "unofficially" divorced and separated women in Liberia, and divorced women tend to live with their family or extended family (Researcher 12 Feb. 2013). The Researcher stated that there may be situations in which men block or try to block access to shared social networks (ibid.). The Researcher also indicated that it is more difficult for a woman to live on her own if she is financially dependent on her husband or her husband's family (Researcher 12 Feb. 2013). He noted that an income is needed to survive because Liberia does not have a social security system (ibid.). Corroboration of this statement could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Researcher also stated that, in some cases, when the husband dies, the widow may be accused of "witchcraft" (ibid.). According to the Researcher, there is a greater risk of such accusations if the husband was very wealthy and the widow is not (ibid.). Corroboration of the Senior Researcher's statements could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Employment and Access to Services

According to the Professor of Anthropology, single women face no official barriers to obtaining work or banking (13 Feb. 2013). The Researcher stated that there is nothing preventing women from opening bank accounts and accessing services, and that skills are more important than gender when it comes to obtaining work (12 Feb. 2013). However, according to the Professor, women in Liberia are "statistically" at a disadvantage with respect to education, experience and the contacts required to obtain work (13 Feb. 2013). The Researcher stated that a strong social network is important in order to find work (Senior Researcher 12 Feb. 2013). He indicated that even someone with a high level of education will find it difficult to find work without a good social network (ibid.). The Researcher also stated that it is harder for women to obtain land rights, especially in rural areas (ibid.). Cited in an article published by the United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks, a representative of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) stated that women do not hold equal rights to land and that customary law does not fully protect women in land disputes (UN 17 May 2010).

According to a 2010 study by the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, approximately 60 percent of women have a job, compared with approximately 66 percent of men (Liberia Dec. 2011, Table 1.3.4). Approximately 87 percent of women in the labour market have vulnerable employment, compared with 68 percent of men (ibid.). The study also shows that about 75 percent of women have informal employment, compared with approximately 61 percent of men (ibid.).

3. Support Services

Information on the support services available to women living alone could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Liberia. December 2011. Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services. *Statistical Bulletin*. Vol. 3, No. 01. <http://www.lr.undp.org/Documents/PDF/Statistical_Bulletin.pdf> [Accessed 19 Feb. 2013]

Professor of Anthropology and Africana and Latin American Studies, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York. 13 February 2012. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.

Senior Researcher and Associate Professor, Nordic Africa Institute, Sweden. 12 February 2013. Telephone interview with the Research Directorate.

Small Arms Survey. September 2012. *Peace without Security: Violence against Women and Girls in Liberia*. Issue Brief No. 3. <<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/G-Issue-briefs/Liberia-AVA-IB3.pdf>> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2013]

United Nations. November 2012. World Health Organization (WHO). "Combating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Liberia." <http://www.who.int/features/2012/psychosocial_support_liberia/en/index.html> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2013]

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United States (US). 24 May 2012. Department of State. "Liberia." *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011*. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/186422.pdf>> [Accessed 14 Feb. 2013]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: A research officer at Oxford University and representatives of Medica Mondiale and Volunteers To Support International Efforts In Developing Africa were unable to provide information within time constraints. Attempts to reach professors and representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful: Emory University, Northeastern University, University of Liberia, University of Michigan, ActionAid Africa, ActionAid Liberia, Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia, Equip Liberia, Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy, Mano River Women's Peace Network, National Women's Commission of Liberia, Sirleaf Market Women's Fund, United Nations Development Programme, Women NGOs Secretariat of Liberia.

Internet sites, including: Africa Online; AllAfrica; Association for Women's Rights in Development; Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia; World Bank; eoi.net; Equip Liberia; Factiva; Global Development Network; Liberia – Ministry of Gender Development, Ministry of Health and Social Welfare; Mano River Women's Peace Network; Panapress; PeaceWomen; Rights and Rice Foundation; Training for Peace; United Nations Development Programme; Women NGOs Secretariat of Liberia.

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