



# Campaign Against

By Sulaiman Momodu

**L**iberia's Minister of Gender and Development, Vabah K. Gayflor, has a gruesome story for a very attentive audience at the University of Liberia Auditorium about a Liberian woman. "During the war, the woman was forced to watch rebels kill her husband by cutting him into many pieces with a machete. Eight of them gang raped her...She then

had to wrap the pieces of her husband in a 'lapa' and go home to her five children and bury their father's body. Stories like this are not unique; there are many more."

During Liberia's civil war, women were subjected to numerous indignities. Rape was a common occurrence. But five years after the restoration of peace, the rape statistics in the country still remain gloomy. "In the first five months of 2008, 450 cases of rape and 109 cases of domestic violence were reported to us. Of the rape cases, 379, or 84 per cent, of the sur-

vivors were younger than 18, 201(45 per cent) were younger than 13, and 39 (9 per cent) were between one and five years," says Gayflor. It is feared that these statistics are just the tip of the iceberg as the figures represent only cases reported and offered services at various health facilities.

As concerns mount over the alarming rates of rape and other forms of sexual violence, thousands of Liberians recently thronged the Samuel K. Doe Sports Complex in Monrovia for an "anti-rape" concert, which brought together a promi-



passed. We want to let you know that rape is no joke. We will do anything to stop it," said Liberia's Vice-President, Joseph N. Boakai. He pointed out that rape is currently the most frequently reported serious crime in the country and warned perpetrators that they would be prosecuted.

Urging Liberians to prevent and report rape, UNMIL's Deputy Special Representative for Rule of Law, Ms. Henrietta Mensa-Bonsu, called for speedy assistance to victims of rape. She said people should not blame a rape victim but should support her to seek help early. "Report it so that the security agencies and the justice system can deal with the matter."

Amidst thunderous cheers and applause, popular Nigerian movie star Stephanie Okereke described rape as a crime against a woman's pride and dignity and emphasized the need for change. "The future of this country is in your hands and change is now," she said, reminding the mammoth gathering about the campaign's theme: "It could be your mother, niece, sister or daughter." Various other performers urged Liberians to stop rape, pointing out that "Real men don't rape."

"It is a pity that many of the victims of rape are usually girls who have not reached puberty," lamented Liberia's

ment of local authorities.

Since its inception in 2003, UNMIL through its Office of the Gender Advisor and the Legal and Judicial System Support Division, has been providing technical support and advice to address rape and other sexual violence. UNMIL has supported the review of the penal law to address rape, conducted trainings and distributed tips on how to avoid rape and other information materials during the sensitization campaigns.

Although rape is no more a taboo subject and there is increased awareness to report it, dealing with perpetrators had often posed a huge challenge due to the tendency to settle such cases within the families involved. Now, however, a new rape law is in force with stiff penalties for rapists. The law stipulates that anyone found guilty of statutory rape (raping a female below 18 years) will be imprisoned for life while lesser penalty is placed on anyone found guilty of raping someone older. The amendment of the Rape Act by the National Legislature initially increased the penalty for rape to a death sentence, but this was later reduced to life imprisonment.

Although it is expected that the rape law would contribute to minimizing rape, human rights activists say life sentence for rape is a harsh penalty. "I think a life sen-

# Stop Rape

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ent Nigerian movie star and musical artists from Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia, to denounce the scourge. The clarion call to all Liberians is to 'Say No To Rape' and 'Report it'! The concert marked the end of the first phase of the six-month-long 'Stop Rape' campaign led by the Liberian government, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and other partners.

"Our Government is headed by a woman and we cannot see women being unduly disrespected, molested, and embar-

Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism, Dr. Laurence Bropleh, who has been going from county to county with the anti-rape sensitization team.

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ment in cases of rape is too harsh and I sincerely hope that the judges will not go that far," says the United Nations Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights, Technical Cooperation and Advisory Services in Liberia, Dr. Charlotte Abaka.

In June, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution declaring "rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide." ♦