
‘The One God Sent to Stop the Boys from Killing Me’: Using Storytelling to Communicate Survey Findings about Liberian Women Living in Displaced-Persons Camps

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In this article we describe a collaborative project addressing violence against women by faction fighters and government soldiers during the Liberian civil war (1989–97). In 1994, members of Women’s Rights International (WRI) began a long-term collaboration with six Liberian women in the Women’s Health and Development Program (WHDP) at the Mother Patern College of Health Sciences in Monrovia. WRI and WHDP worked closely together in the field to design a project that would meet the needs of women who were living in Liberia during the war. During small group discussions with women and girls in a variety of settings it became clear that many women had experienced physical and sexual violence by soldiers and fighters. But without some form of probability sampling the true scope of violence against women during the war could not be known. How many women had been beaten, raped, and detained illegally? Were women from specific ethnic groups targeted? In what kinds of situations were women at greater risk of sexual violence? During the ongoing conflict, WRI and WHDP developed a survey to document the impact of the war on women’s lives (Jennings and Swiss, 2001). The goals for conducting a survey were twofold: (1) to document the scope of physical and sexual violence against women during the war, and (2) to develop a program that would promote discussion and community action among Liberian women to address the consequences of violence in their lives, and to rebuild communities that had been shattered by the civil war.

The WHDP collaborators wanted to document the experiences of as many

different groups of Liberian women as possible. We conducted the survey with 205 women who were randomly selected from four different settings: young women in high schools, women selling in the markets, women from rural areas living in displaced-persons camps, and women living in urban communities in Monrovia. The survey contained several sections addressing demographics, economic status, reproductive history, and experiences of physical and sexual violence by soldiers and fighters during the war. Some of these findings have been reported elsewhere using formal statistical reporting techniques, including data tables and analyses of risk factors (Swiss et al., 1998).

In addition to reporting the results to Liberian organizations and the international community, one of the top priorities for the WHDP collaborators was to be able to return to the settings where women had participated in the survey to report the findings to them. Many of the women in those communities did not read or write, so we developed a method using storytelling to communicate the survey findings.

The storytelling method we describe here consisted of two main steps. First, the WRI collaborators developed a quantitative description of a fictional 'typical' woman based on the average and most frequent responses to the survey (see Table 1 for example survey questions and findings). Second, the WHDP collaborators placed the statistical character into a fictional story context that put the quantitative findings back into a meaningful framework of events occurring in time and place. The WHDP collaborators used these survey-based characters and the fictional stories to communicate the survey findings about the most common types of experiences (e.g. strip search) and consequences (e.g. loss of husband) reported by Liberian women in the four settings.

CREATING THE STATISTICAL STORY CHARACTER

The statistical analyses of the survey data indicated that the findings were different for each setting, so we created a separate statistical character for each of the four settings (high schools, markets, displaced-persons camps, and urban communities). Table 1 presents the quantitative findings (averages and percentages) for selected survey items for 50 women living in displaced-persons camps and 40 women selling in the markets. Following Table 1 is a brief excerpt from the fictional story that reports those same findings about the women living in displaced-persons camps, without using numbers and percentages. The data for the market women are included in Table 1 for comparison. Different stories (not included here) were written to communicate the findings for the market women, high school girls, and the urban women.

We used several different strategies for determining what characteristics and experiences to assign to each story character. To determine characteristics with a numerical value, like age, we used the average. To determine characteristics that had a 'yes or no' nature, such as being married, we used percentages. If greater

TABLE 1
Mean values and percentages for selected survey items for women living in
displaced-persons camps and women selling in the markets.
(Survey items have been translated from the original Liberian English.)

Survey Item	Displaced Women (N = 50)	Market Women (N = 40)
Demographics/background information		
1. What is your ethnic group? (mode response)	Kpelle	Bassa
2. How old are you? (mean)	32.0 yrs	28.5 yrs
3. Did you ever go to school? (percent 'yes')	30%	50%
Marital status		
4. Have you ever been married? (percent 'yes')	82%	65%
5. Are you and your husband living together now? (percent 'married' who said 'yes')	44%	54%
6. Why aren't you with your husband? (percent 'married' 'not with husband' for 'war-related reasons')	83%	50%
Reproductive history and child survival		
7. How many times have you given birth? (median)	5	4
8. How many are alive? (median)	4	3
Household composition and socioeconomic status		
9. Before the war, what kind of work were you doing to make a living? (percent who said 'yes' to the following items)		
Market/business	34%	63%
Farming	46%	3%
Events of war (percent who said 'yes' to the following items)		
10. Did the war make you move from your home?	100%	88%
11. Was your house burned down or destroyed by soldiers or fighters?	74%	38%
12. Did any of your relatives or friends tell you that a soldier or fighter made them have sex when they didn't want to?	56%	30%
13. Did any soldier or fighter tell you they were going to kill you or your family?	54%	35%
14. Did any soldier ask you to speak your ethnic language?	52%	43%
15. Did you have to leave any elderly relative behind at home when you were running?	50%	20%
16. Did any soldier or fighter strip you to search you?	40%	38%
17. Did you see a soldier or fighter killing anybody?	40%	38%

than 50 percent of the women said 'yes', the story character was assigned that characteristic. For example, Table 1 indicates that 82 percent of the women surveyed in the displaced-persons camps were married. Of those married women, only 44 percent were living with their husbands at the camp. The story character, therefore, was married but she was not living with her husband at the camp.

For the experiences of physical and sexual violence, the assignment strategy was more complicated because a simple 50 percent cutoff was not appropriate for these multiple responses. Each woman surveyed may have experienced no violence, one type of violence, or multiple types of violence. To determine what kinds of violent experiences to include with the story character, we first computed the average number of kinds of violence reported by women in the displaced-persons camps. We then selected that number of the most frequently reported types of violence. For example, the women living in the displaced-persons camps experienced an average of seven different kinds of violence. We included the seven most frequent kinds of violence experienced by women living in the displaced-persons camps into the story character (see Table 1). The story characters were not based on any individual woman's experiences, they were created from the average characteristics and the most frequent experiences reported in the survey.

CREATING A STORY CONTEXT FOR THE STATISTICAL CHARACTER

Rojatu Turay-Kanneh, from WHDP, put a story context around the statistical story character representing the survey findings for women living in the displaced-persons camps (Table 1). Her ability to create a fictional story about the woman living in the displaced-persons camp was based, in large part, on the knowledge about Liberian women's experiences during the war that she gained while designing and conducting the survey. Only a few brief excerpts from the story are included below. The Table 1 survey item numbers that form the basis for each story item are noted in parentheses. All of the names, places, and events are fictional but realistic.

The story opens with Zinnah (the fictional story character) on her way to tend the piece of land she farms (9). Zinnah's best friend, Jebbeh, comes running to tell her that the war violence is approaching their village. Zinnah's husband (4) is away visiting relatives, and in the course of the story Zinnah never finds him again nor is she able to discover whether he is still alive (6). As the fighting approaches the farm where Zinnah is working, she runs back to her house which she finds has already been destroyed by the fighters (11). Zinnah collects her children (8) and flees her village (10) on foot for Monrovia. She is forced to make the 'impossible decision' of leaving her elderly relatives behind in the village (15) because in the chaos of fleeing she is unable to find them. Zinnah must also leave one of her young sons behind because he joins an armed faction. Zinnah does not see this son again until a chance encounter with him at a checkpoint¹

along the road to Monrovia. What follows is an excerpt from the story describing Zinnah's encounter with faction fighters at that checkpoint. (Note: The story is excerpted exactly as written in its original Liberian English. Some terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader are clarified in brackets [].)

The first checkpoint they reached, Zinnah told her children to wait because there was a man on the ground begging for mercy. The [faction] fighters had accused him of being a [government] soldier and while Zinnah and her children were standing they killed him (17). She got so nervous that she fell down. The fighters saw her and told them to 'Advance and be recognized!' The children held her up and they walked to the checkpoint. When the boy [fighter] asked for her name and tribe she said that she is Kpelle (1). He asked her to speak it (14) and she said that she can only speak Gola and Mende. The fighter said she was lying. That the man they just killed is her husband that's why she fell off [fainted]. They started to abuse her and one of the fighters told her to take off her clothes so that they would search her (16). They all decided to kill her (13) because she is the wife of a [government] soldier who is considered an enemy force. All Zinnah's children started to cry and beg. While all this commotion was going on one C.O. [faction commanding officer] came with one of his small [child] soldiers. Luckily, this small soldier was Nyanqueh [Zinnah's young son]. He ran to his mother when he recognized her. Nyanqueh then told his C.O. that the woman is his mother and the boys wanted to kill her. The C.O. intervened and Zinnah was freed.

[Later at the displaced-persons center Zinnah encounters Jebbeh, her best friend from her home village.] 'What happened to you, Zinnah?' Jebbeh asked . . . 'Is it true that Nyanqueh joined the people [faction fighters]?' 'Yes oh,' Zinnah replied reluctantly. 'In fact, he was the one God sent to stop the boys from killing me.' Zinnah explained the whole story of the incidence at the checkpoint to Jebbeh. Jebbeh sighed and said: 'You are lucky they only took off your clothes, my own they made me their woman [forced me to have sex] (12). I was so shame since that day I don't go back that way . . .'

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This collaborative approach to research and program development facilitated the design of an innovative way to support Liberian women in dealing with the impact of war violence. The results of the survey informed the development of a set of training manuals (WRI/WHDP, 1998) and a series of workshops using storytelling and role-playing to bring Liberian women together to address physical and sexual violence in their lives. These workshops are ongoing and have been conducted in nearly every region in Liberia.

The survey-based stories are one small part of the collaborative WRI/WHDP project in Liberia which is now in its tenth year of continuous operation. In 1998, the WHDP program's emphasis shifted away from reporting the survey findings back to the participants and toward broadening the program's outreach to Liberian women throughout the country. Although the ongoing program uses a variety of stories, activities, and role-plays written by the WHDP collaborators,

the survey-based stories have yet to be incorporated into those ongoing workshops. We report the methodology here for two reasons. First, we believe it is a useful example of how working in the field and learning about a community can support the development of research methodologies that meet the needs of local community members. Second, one of the foundations for WRI's work is the conviction that research conducted about a community should be designed in collaboration with community members and should also be given back to that community. The storytelling method provides an example of how data from complex statistical surveys can be reported at multiple levels. By tailoring the reporting techniques to different audiences, survey findings can be communicated to international organizations, health professionals, and people living in the community from which the data were collected, even if they are not able to read or write.

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NOTES

1. The war was characterized by fighting among government soldiers and multiple armed factions, mainly in rural areas, causing large numbers of Liberian civilians to flee their villages into neighboring countries, or into the urban capital of Monrovia which was under the protection of a West African peacekeeping force (ECOMOG). Since the civil war began in 1989, almost half of the population of Liberia has been internally displaced or have become refugees in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ghana. One of the most dangerous points of terror and violence for civilians occurred during travel – government soldiers and armed faction fighters controlled territory by putting up checkpoints along the roads where civilians were detained, beaten, raped, and killed.

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