**Liberia’s Child Prostitutes**

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MONROVIA, Liberia — Fourteen-year-old Jatu stands on the stoop of her one room zinc-roofed shack watching chubby teenage schoolgirls pass by. They have neatly braided hair and green tunics and their black school shoes click against the dusty uneven road of New Kru Town, a slum community in Monrovia. Jatu’s tank top scoops low across her breasts, which have been pumped up with the help of extra padding in what’s known as an “iron-titty bra.” Her skin-tight leggings slide down her lower back. As the girls pass, she turns her head to hide the scars carved into the left side of her face, neck and shoulders that have grown with her since she was mowed down by a taxi at the age of 8. The driver ran from the car and left her for dead.

In recent weeks, the world’s attention has been focused on the [horrific kidnapping](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/10/the-boko-haram-bidding-war.html)of more than 270 schoolgirls in a remote corner of Nigeria. It has been [shocked by the death sentence](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/17/in-sudan-a-pregnant-woman-may-be-hanged-for-marrying-a-christian.html) handed down by a Sudanese sharia court against a woman who is eight months pregnant for the crime of “apostasy.” But even in African nations that have adopted policies and laws aimed at empowering and protecting women and girls, violence against them remains a major challenge.

Jatu’s life has been shaped by a series of quotidian injustices that are common for many Liberian girls. She left home at 11, conscious of becoming a burden on her single mother and three siblings. She says it was her choice. She was unable to pay school fees, so she dropped out and moved in with an older friend who introduced her to street prostitution. She was still only 11 when her friend took her to a club and introduced her to a couple of “boys.” They danced to music pounding from the crackling speakers, sipped beers and then parted. Her friend asked her to meet her at a nearby junction, but disappeared. Jatu walked out onto the dark road and was met by the two boys who said they had paid her friend to “have” her. Before she could argue, one held his hand over her mouth, as they both dragged her behind a car and raped her. They left her bleeding on the ground.

Jatu and her grandmother went to the police to report the attack, and were asked for 1,000 Liberian dollars (around $12 USD) to register the case. The police never found the boys. “They ate my money,” she says about the police. “I say to my grandma, ‘Forget about it.’”

That was Jatu’s first taste of life on the street. Back then she was “forced,” but soon she started to hustle on corners “willingly,” and was paid for sex. For Jatu, even as an 11-year-old that was and still is “business.” The eldest women, who owned the tiny zinc room where Jatu and nine other girls slept with their backs brushing and feet tangled, took a share. Now Jatu works independently. She pays the *gronnah* boys (street boys and men) to protect her and sends what she earns to her mother who lives with her younger brothers and sisters in another suburb. She still hustles on that same street corner where she was raped.

Jatu is one of the many underage girls in Monrovia who “cut *jopu*,” or barter their bodies on the side of the street for goods and a little money, sometimes for less than a dollar a session. While there are no official figures on the number of girls involved, authorities in the police force claim the problem is worsening, with girls as young as 11 and 12 hustling in Liberia’s bars and night spots.

Unlike in many other developing countries where underage girls and boys are trafficked by crime syndicates, Liberian girls are encouraged by their peers, family and extended family who have direct or tacit knowledge about how they make their money.

Some women’s rights activists say the culture of transactional underage sex is a sad legacy of Liberia’s brutal 14-year civil war, which ended a decade ago, during which young girls became “girlfriends” of men in various fighting factions to secure access to food and other material goods.

Others argue the increasing number of girls hustling on the street is a result of growing economic hardship, combined with a culture that requires girls to do most of the domestic labor and support the household. The small West African nation remains one of the poorest in the world with over 50 percent of the population living in [extreme poverty](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/acp/country-cooperation/liberia/liberia_en.htm) on less than 50 cents a day, according to the European Commission.

But this assumption that girls should use their bodies to provide for the family has its roots in Liberia’s patriarchal culture, which has a long history of fetishizing and abusing young girls who were in the past often married off to older men when they reached puberty, according to Korto Williams, country director of ActionAid an organization that has focused on promoting women’s rights in Liberia.

Many of the girls I have interviewed are between the ages of 13 and 16 and used their earnings to support their families and kept a small amount to survive. Some lived on the streets, but the majority lived with their families or aunties and extended families and spent time sleeping at their friends’ places who had their own rooms. Few said their mothers or family members knew what they did, and they told their mothers and aunts they received money from an “uncle,” a “friend,” or a “friend’s dad.” Many of them had dropped out of school saying they could not afford to pay school fees.

But staying in school does not always protect girls from abuse and sexual exploitation. A study funded by IBIS, a Danish non-governmental organization, that focused on sexual and gender-based violence among schoolchildren in Liberia, found that 18 percent of girls and 13 percent of boys reported having been asked for sex for a better grade and many boys and girls agreed with the statement that men were superior to women and violence was a normal part of sexual relationships. More significantly, 93 percent of boys and 88 percent of girls agreed, “Sometimes girls do things to make sexual violence and abuse happen.”

Under the administration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa’s first democratically elected woman president, numerous progressive policies targeted at improving the lives of women and girls have been developed. Liberia also has some of the strongest rape laws and penalties on the continent. But many women’s rights activists question the impact of these policies and laws on the lives of girls and women.

In the aftermath of Liberia’s 14-year civil war, during which horrific acts of sexual violence against women and girls were widespread, the government took significant steps to address the issue, which remains pervasive. During her annual address to the legislature, Johnson Sirleaf raised the alarm about “the rise in gender based violence, particularly child rape.” In 2012, 68 percent of reported rape cases involved victims between the ages of three months to 14 years, according to figures from the Ministry of Gender. Statistics from 2011 show three-quarters of perpetrators of all rape cases were relatives, friends, neighbors, or intimate partners.

Under Liberia’s rape law, sex with an underage prostitute is rape and a first-degree felony. Indeed, Liberia’s rape laws, which came into effect in 2006, classify sex with anyone under the age of 18 by anyone over the age of 18 as rape if there is more than a two-year age gap. The punishment on the books is life imprisonment, although this is rarely enforced. Prostitution also is illegal.

With assistance from the donor community, the Women and Children’s Protection Section, a division within the Liberian National Police, was established in 2005 and charged with investigating cases involving violence or abuse against women and children. Liberia established Criminal Court E in 2008, a special court where sexual and gender-based violence cases are tried, followed by the opening of SGBV Crimes Prosecution Unit within the Ministry of Justice in 2009. But despite these efforts, the court has only completed 18 trials in the past four years, with just a handful of convictions. In 2012 only five trials were completed, and 93 percent of the cases were dismissed.

While much of this abuse goes on behind closed doors, the striking aspect of underage prostitution in Monrovia is its visibility. There are a number of bars, corners and hotels that are notorious for hosting young girls and their customers. General Africa, a club in the center of West Point, Monrovia’s largest slum, is known for the young girls who dance to attract customers in the dark, sweat-stinking nightclub where the walls are plastered with Nigerian movie posters and advertisements for Christian meetings and crusades by charismatic pastors. Young girls shake themselves with other women and drunk men, casting sideways glances at other men lined up against the wall who are sipping soft drinks and beer and watching them in awkward silence. The bare concrete walled hotel rooms, like prison cells, lie behind a doorway covered by a thin sheet where the boss’s young wife stands guard.

Many of the girls from New Kru Town say they mistrust the police and for the most part want to avoid them. Few said they would turn to them if they were raped or sexually assaulted. “You carry that case to the police station, that’s a dead case,” says 14-year-old Naomi, a friend of Jatu. “You yourself will go in jail.” If she was attacked, she said, rather than going to the police she would go to the hospital for some medicine. “I would buy tablet.”

Jatu said she was made to have sex with a police officer when he helped her retrieve money from a customer who refused to pay. She fought with the man outside the motel room in the early-morning hours. The police officer passed by, asked her what was wrong and retrieved the money. Then Jatu offered to give him some of it, but “the policeman say I not pay but he must have me,” she tells me. He took her back into the same motel and had sex with her. She was 12 years old.

The elfin-faced Naomi, who has been a “short-time” prostitute for two years,  has never been tested for HIV and doesn’t think it exists. “I don’t believe that AIDS is real.” Naomi says statutory rape is “when the person force you against your will and you too small.” And unlike the other girls who describe *jopu* as “business,” Naomi describes it as “rape,” and says the customers, the men, know it is rape, but in the end she thinks there is nothing to be done about it.

The girls dance on in the club. Jatu bows her head awkwardly to ensure her scarf covers the scarred side of her face. She looks sideways as the monster speaker booms and trembles and young men dance toward her. She and her friends continue to make the moves they have practiced without making eye contact.