

Advancing Women's Sexual Rights in Liberia Through Legal and Safe Abortion Access

Narrative Annual report

Report Summary

This report accounts for activities implemented over the period in review by Community Healthcare Initiative Inc. with support from Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) under the Project, “**Advancing women’s sexual rights in Liberia through access to legal and safe abortion.**” The project seeks to yield results in public discourse among policymakers and stakeholders on access to legal and safe abortion is increased, being part of collective actions taken by CSOs networks advocating for legal and policy reform on access to safe abortion and creating more awareness of Stigma and discrimination against women and girls accessing abortion is reduced. The project hopes to reach a more significant population across Montserrado and Margibi counties to increase awareness among policymakers, religious and traditional leaders on dealing with safe abortion as a right issue, increase collaboration among CSOs network in advocating for amendments to the restrictive provisions within the statutes that limit women’s rights to safe and legal abortion and to reduced harmful social norms and behavior that undermine women’s access to safe abortion within the targeted population.

The project earmarked four communities in two counties to be implemented, namely; Margibi (Henry Town and Kpans Town) and Montserrado Counties (King Gray and Chicken-soup Factory). The project is intended to last for a period of 18months. During the period in review, CHI implemented the following activities;

- Community Entries meeting,
- Dialogue session with 20 communities leaders on SRHRs and Safe Abortion.
- Training for 20 Communities Leaders on SRHRs and Safe Abortion.

1.2 Community Entry

CHI conducted a community Entry meeting that sought to develop a working relationship with community leaders, introduce RFSU project objectives, determine the community's willingness to engage with the project activities, and examine community leaders' readiness to implement the project. The community entry also assessed the community's capacity to collect and report situations around covid-19, highlighting how the virus affected the community and the safety mechanisms deployed to prevent and contain the virus. The community entry was conducted in Montserrado and Margibi counties, covering 4 communities; Kpans Town, Henry Town, Chicken-soup Factory-Gulf, and King-gray. Sixty (60) persons comprising of local authorities at all levels, religious and traditional leaders/persons, youth and women leaders, and other

influential persons within the community formed part of the community entry. By the end of the activity, the community, its leaders, and most relevant stakeholders welcomed the project and committed to working closely with CHI to fight the deadly coronavirus.

1.3 Stakeholder Dialogues on SRHRs and Safe Abortion

On January 18th and 19th, 2022, CHI conducted a face-to-face dialogue session on SRHRs and Safe Abortion at its office in Lower Margibi, Marshall. The Dialogue's purpose was to obtain and understand the communities' perceptions on SRHRs and Safe Abortion, accessing SRHR and abortion services, and to determine the need to advocate for access to legal and safe abortion within project communities. The Dialogue brought together twenty (20) participants (five persons per community); town chiefs, youth leaders, women's chairs, nurses/ health practitioners, pastors, and Imams. Twelve (12) males and 8 females from 4 communities within the 2 project counties attended the Dialogue.

1.3.1 Communities' Perception on SRHRs and Safe Abortion

During the dialogue, CHI used the participatory approach to ensure that all participants contributed equally regardless of education and position of power. Leaders from the 4 project communities expounded on rape, inability to negotiate protected/safe sex, unemployment, limited access to SRHRs information and services, unwanted pregnancies, the stigma associated with single motherhood, GVBV, religion, failed contraceptive, school policy, and stigmatization of people seeking abortion as circumstances leading to SRHRs issues and unsafe abortion.

Statements from the dialogue suggest that most advice on acquiring unsafe abortions was obtained from friends, relatives, or spouses. Adding to the discourse, the CHI host listed various frequently used unsafe/dangerous abortion methods such as; the traditional Herb-(RPG), a double dose of Cytotec, Ampicillin, and Aspirin, bleach, cassava sticks, glass bottles, and seeking help from traditional doctors and unregistered clinics. The host also emphasized that unsafe or improper abortion care often results in long-term mental and health complications or death.

Interestingly, community leaders believe the reasons women and girls seek unsafe abortion are associated with the stigmatization in obtaining an abortion, harassment of women who seek abortion care, health practitioners lack of confidentiality, and the narrative of Safe Abortion being illegal if it is not life-threatening.

The dialogue took an interesting turn as participants expressed concern about whether or not abortion was legal in Liberia and why access to legal and safe abortion is important. Women leaders stated that there were still many deaths resulting from behind-the-house abortion care using the traditional herbs that are not measurable and other means that are harmful to women and girls. Because of the frequent deaths and complications that unsafe abortion brings, participants pledged to support the project team in fighting for access to safe and legal abortion as they advocate for the amendment of Liberia's Abortion laws.

1.3.2 Issues Identified by the (4) Communities Leaders in accessing Legal and Safe Abortion

Community members limited knowledge of SRHR and Safe Abortion

- Lack of/limited laws that prioritize the Legalization of Safe Abortion as a right-based issue.
- Limited access to information and Family Planning services in the communities.
- Division and conflict among practitioners who are willing to perform abortions and those who refuse to perform abortions for cultural and religious reasons.
- Confusion amongst practitioners regarding the legality of abortion in our constitution often puts health practitioners' discretion of who can then choose whether or not it is right to perform an abortion through a medical procedure.

1.3.4 Recommendations from the Communities

- The inclusion of other communities on the project to have more buy-in on the conversation to push for legislation on the amendment of laws that speaks to accessing Safe Abortion as rights-based in Liberia.
- To educate medical practitioners on patient's rights to abortion.
- Build more networks to equip advocates and campaign team with vital skills needed to work with traditional and religious bodies at both local and national levels on SRHRs and Safe Abortion.
- Engage Politicians to incorporate SRHR and access to legal abortion into their campaigns messages.
- Include religious and cultural groups in trainings and awareness campaigns.
- Advocate for and admonish that abortion should be done by a qualified person and in a hygienic place.
- Create awareness on the functionality of the sexual reproductive health services hotline.
- Set up a database that would register and monitor the system.
- Project teams should have conversation with facilities in their communities so that if they can refer cases of unsafe abortion within their communities.

1.4 Training Community Leaders on safe abortion using the human rights-based approach.

On January 25th and 26th, 2022, CHI trained 20 persons (Imams, pastors, local leaders, nurses, etc.) from King-Gray, Chicken-soup Factory- Gulf, Henry Town and Kpans Town on SRHRs and Safe Abortion. The training was held at CHI's office in Lower Margibi, Marshall. The training's purpose was to help participants understand SRHRs, the narrative around Safe Abortion, the concept of preceding advocacy that can be used to challenge cultural norms, to actively engage duty bearers for an effective change of policy on access to Legal and Safe Abortion for women and girls in Liberia.

The training was delivered using the Human Rights-based Approach. The training equipped participants with the tools and knowledge needed to strengthen their advocacy and build their confidence to continue reporting and challenging all harmful cultural and social norms. The training technique delivered a space for learning and sharing ideas on SRHR and Safe Abortion issues that affect women and girls in their communities and the steps involved in ending unsafe Abortion. The training session was inclusive of 12males and 8Females. Key topics covered in training are:

- ✚ **Human Rights** – this session provided the bases for community’s leaders to understand the human rights instruments as it relates to the International, regional and national levels, thereby admonishing them in respecting the rights of everyone regardless of religion, beliefs, ethnicity, culture, sexual preferences, etc.
- ✚ **Understanding Gender and Sexuality-** gained knowledge in seeing gender as not just male and female as it may be looked at in many societies but it goes beyond our biological make-up and depends on our social differences. Emerging at sexuality, participant got understanding of what is sexuality, how do we express our sexual feeling without harm and make one to identify who you are.
- ✚ **SRHRs-** during this session, participants understood the importance of their sexual Rights, Reproductive Rights and Health Rights and how they can make a sound decision that will impact their lives and the use of contraceptive services and information.
- ✚ **Abortion-** Gained knowledge on abortion, in general, looking at both the Safe and Unsafe methods of abortion, the risk factor of unsafe abortion, why women and girls abort and why is it important to joined the advocacy in accessing legal and Safe Abortion in Liberia.

In account of progress made so far in 2021

- Four (4) community entries meeting were held in 2 selected project counties.
- One (1) Dialogue session was conducted with 20 community leaders.
- Provided trainings on Human Rights, SRHR and Safe Abortion to strengthen community leaders’ capacities in addressing issues that affects them and how they can claim their rights and understand the narrative using the Human Rights Based Approach.
- Developed Community Action Plan to carryout community advocacy awareness.

Significant changes.

One significant change is that a network has been established by CSOs to work together as a team to build a strong link for advocacy around accessing Legal and Safe Abortion. Community leaders have seen that the cost of complication from unsafe Abortion place a significant burden

on women and girls. Therefore, leaders that were trained has already started working with other community members in highlighting the importance of women and girls' rights in accessing legal and safe Abortion. The Project team in implementation is working with local leaders at the community level and other key stakeholders at the National level (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, the women Legislative Coccus). Over the period, there are still some backlashes of the society seeing Abortion as a forbidden act but with the help of other strong Civil Society Actors, gradually we are getting there.

Unexpected Project Outcomes

CHI project team did not expect community leaders to commit, accept, and offer unwavering support to working with the SRHRs-FGM Network of Liberia.

Implementation Strategy

With regards to implementation strategies, the project team engaged the communities and other stakeholders via mobile phone and face-to-face interaction. All project activities were conducted in direct observation of Covid-19 measures or protocols instituted by the Ministry of Health. Participants and CHI staff wore masks, observed social distance, and mandated the washing of hands.

Conclusion

Finally, CHI project team completed and implemented all activities successfully. Women and girls across Montserrado and Margibi continue to die due to unsafe abortion practices, limited access to SRHRs information and services, unwanted pregnancies, the stigma associated with single motherhood, GVBV, religion, among other things. We must all continue to advocate and do the ground work if we hope to one day live in a world where women and girls rights are respected and given freely.

CHI thanks its partners for investing and committing to fighting for women and girls' rights and access to safe and legal abortion in Liberia. Under the year in review, we had a wonderful experience working with women, girls, boys and community leaders. We would like to appreciate RFSU for the technical support provided to us over time, and we look forward to more successful partnerships.



Community Entry Meeting



Participants in Dialogue



Demonstration of Community members stating their role



Participants in Training



Participants playing Value Game during session