



Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children

Country visit to Liberia 9-18 December 2024

End of mission statement

Background

The Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children conducted a country visit to Liberia from 9 to 18 December 2024. The Special Rapporteur is grateful to the Government of Liberia for their willingness to facilitate the visit, excellent cooperation throughout the visit, and particularly thanks the Chairs of the National Anti-Trafficking Task Force for the constructive dialogue. She also wishes to thank the United Nations Country Team in Liberia for their assistance and expert support.

During the visit, the Special Rapporteur visited Monrovia, Bong County, Ganta in Nimba County, Margibi County, Bomi County and Bo-Waterside in Grand Cape Mount County where she met with Government officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, and the Ministry of Education. She also met with the Liberia National Police, Liberia Immigration Service, and the judiciary, including the Civil Court and the Office of the War and Economic Crimes Court. In addition, the Special Rapporteur met with the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission, Liberia National Bar Association and the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia.

The Special Rapporteur held consultations with civil society organizations, women and youth groups, survivors of trafficking, disability rights organisations, and sex workers, as well as the Independent National Human Rights Commission, National Civil Society Council of Liberia, and the Transitional Justice Working Group. She also met with the diplomatic community, UN agencies, ArcelorMittal Liberia and the senior management of Western Cluster Liberia Limited in their Tubmanburg office in Bomi County.

The Special Rapporteur visited Monrovia Central Prison and Government-run safe homes for victims of trafficking and gender-based violence in Bomi, Margibi and Paynesville to assess the protection systems in place. She met with local authorities and stakeholders in areas bordering Guinea and Sierra Leone, including the Independent National Human Rights Commission monitors, labour commissions and inspectors and the Joint Border Security Team comprised of heads of anti-trafficking units, immigration and police officers, drug enforcement agents, and national security personnel.

Positive developments

Effective action to combat trafficking in persons is essential to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the attention to rule of law, governance and strengthened institutions in the ARREST Agenda for Inclusive Development (AAID) and the 15 County Development Agendas (CDAs). To combat all forms of trafficking in persons, it is essential to prioritise gender equality, empowerment of women and girls, rights of the child, youth empowerment, and disability inclusion, in all development planning, particularly focusing on rural areas.

The Special Rapporteur notes the adoption of the 2021 Revised Act to Ban Trafficking in Persons, which removes the requirement of force, fraud or coercion in child sex trafficking cases, a critically important measure to ensure access to justice for child victims and accountability.

The National Anti-Trafficking Task Force is an important national coordination mechanism, with potential to ensure that anti-trafficking measures are integrated across policy and planning in key Government Ministries, and in all development planning. However, inter-agency coordination remains limited, and further measures are required to ensure implementation, in practice, of anti-trafficking legislation and the National Action Plan, particularly in rural areas. The reduction in budget allocation to anti-trafficking action, however, will severely curtail the implementation of the Action Plan and the work of the Task Force.

The Special Rapporteur welcomes the Ministry of Justice gender policy and five-year action plan launched in October 2024. Achieving SDG 5 (Gender Equality) requires action to combat trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation in Liberia, particularly affecting women and girls. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the prioritisation of prevention of trafficking of women and children, particularly for sexual exploitation, by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. The focus on protection of children in street situations, and launch of new hotlines, awareness raising materials, including through radio and cooperation with schools, is very welcome. Significant resources will be required to ensure the reach of child protection and social services across the country, in particular in rural and hard to reach areas, and in mining sectors where sexual exploitation of women and girls is prevalent.

The Special Rapporteur also welcomes efforts to combat sexual and gender-based violence, particularly affecting women and girls, including through measures to strengthen access to justice for victims, protection services and accountability. Measures to combat trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation must be integrated into such programmes. The participation and leadership of survivors in design and implementation of programmes should be ensured.

The launch of the first-ever National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2024-2028) in August 2024 is also a welcome development, and was one of the key recommendations of the UN Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises from their country visit to Liberia in 2022.

The Special Rapporteur highlights the strength of civil society in Liberia and commends the Government's engagement with civil society through the work of the National Anti-Trafficking task force, and other initiatives on sexual and gender-based violence. Civil society, human rights defenders, and trade unions, play a critical role in combating all forms of trafficking in persons. An enabling environment for civil society, particularly in rural and hard to reach areas, is essential, including through provision of sustainable funding.

The Special Rapporteur notes that the Independent National Commission on Human Rights and its monitors are important partners to combat all forms of trafficking, particularly internal trafficking in rural and hard to reach areas. Continued and expanded support is needed to sustain the work of human rights monitors.

Significant efforts have been made to strengthen effective investigations including through specialised training and capacity building of anti-trafficking teams within the Liberian National Police force, and joint border security entities. The prioritisation of prevention of child trafficking at border check points is welcome. The Special Rapporteur also welcomes the training and capacity building measures of the labour commissions to combat trafficking for forced labour, including child labour.

The Special Rapporteur highlights the importance of child-friendly justice measures, for child victims of trafficking and welcomes the attention given to access to justice for children, and prioritisation of child rights in development programming. Significant progress in birth registration rates has been achieved, an important measure to prevent child trafficking. It is essential that such progress is maintained and strengthened, with dedicated budget support.

The Special Rapporteur welcomes the prioritisation of women and girls' empowerment in peace building measures and highlights the importance of integrating prevention of trafficking in persons in the Women Peace and Security Agenda, and participation and leadership of victims and survivors in design and planning of anti-trafficking programmes. The Special Rapporteur highlights the importance of engaging men and boys in measures to combat trafficking for sexual exploitation, particularly affecting girls and young women.

The establishment of the Office of the War and Economic Crimes Court is a historic step towards justice and accountability. Recalling Security Council resolutions 2331 (2016) and 2388 (2017), the Special Rapporteur highlights the importance of ensuring accountability and effective access to reparations for conflict-related trafficking in persons, including sexual exploitation, recruitment and use of children, forced marriage, and forced labour. As stated in Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019), a survivor-centred approach to preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations, including trafficking for sexual exploitation, must be ensured. Ensuring comprehensive reparations for conflict-related trafficking will be critical to continued inclusive peacebuilding and transitional justice. The Special Rapporteur highlights also the role of the Palava Peace Huts in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality, in all aspects of peacebuilding, and in responding to gender-based violence, and their potential role in anti-trafficking actions.

Preliminary findings

Trafficking in persons occurring internally in Liberia remains under-reported, with limited data on the prevalence and forms of trafficking, particularly for purposes of sexual exploitation. The identification of victims of trafficking, particularly internal trafficking, remains very limited. The Special Rapporteur highlights that identification of victims, and persons at risk of trafficking, particularly children, is a positive obligation on the State, and should not be dependent on reporting or complaints by victims.

Trafficking of children for sexual exploitation is a serious concern, and particularly affects girls in rural areas, at high risk of trafficking to urban areas for purposes of domestic servitude, exploitation in street vending, and sexual exploitation.

High risks of child trafficking are exacerbated by weak child protection systems, poverty and gender inequality. The Special Rapporteur notes with concern the limited budget allocation to combat trafficking in persons, to support implementation of the National Action Plan.

Assistance and protection of victims of trafficking

The limited availability of assistance and protection measures, safe homes, and short-term emergency shelter accommodation, is a serious concern and must be urgently addressed. Long-term assistance measures are limited. As a result, victims are returned to families and communities, with limited follow up due to lack of staffing, resources and capacity, particularly in hard-to-reach rural areas. The capacity of Independent National Commission on Human Rights monitors, border agents and labour commissions to identify and refer cases of exploitation needs to be strengthened, particularly for at risk sectors such as agriculture, mining, fisheries, and domestic work.

Trafficking in the context of migration

The Special Rapporteur is concerned at the limited access to safe and regular migration pathways in line with the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Significant risks of trafficking arise on migration routes through Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and onwards to the Middle East, and to Europe. Young people are targeted through social media networks, and recruitment intermediaries with promises of employment and education opportunities abroad and are at serious risk of trafficking for forced labour, domestic servitude and sexual exploitation. The Special Rapporteur met with survivors of trafficking, who highlighted the risks arising in the context of labour migration, and need for urgent action to strengthen prevention and protection measures, and accountability.

Assistance and protection of returning survivors of trafficking is limited, with short-term assistance provided by international partners. Gaps remain in the provision of longer-term assistance and protection measures. Access to remedies, including compensation, is weak or non-existent.

No shelters or short-term accommodation is available at border crossings. Identified victims of trafficking are returned to countries of origin with limited assessment of risks of re-trafficking on return, due to lack of resources and capacity. Anti-trafficking units frequently cover the cost of transport for victims to safe homes or for medical care. Health care workers at border crossings have not received training on identification of victims or referral pathways, and facilities to provide assistance or for confidential interviewing are non-existent.

The Special Rapporteur received information on trafficking into Liberia from Sierra Leone, Guinea Conakry, of children and young women, in particular. Trafficking into Liberia is occurring for purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labour. While cooperation with Embassy officials is good, and cross border cooperation to facilitate repatriation of victims is working, there is limited capacity to undertake comprehensive pre-removal risk assessments or best interests determinations for children. Urgent action is needed to strengthen prevention and accountability.

Trafficking victims are provided with access to Government-run safe homes regardless of their nationality, and assistance is provided. However, resources to support access to medical assistance, psychosocial assistance or longer-term protection are limited.

Business and human rights

Effective measures to ensure just and fair conditions of work, and rights of all workers including migrant workers will be essential to effective implementation of the Business and Human Rights National Action Plan. Monitoring and enforcement of labour rights, prevention of forced labour and child labour in supply chains, in particular in mining, fisheries and agriculture, is critical to prevention of trafficking. The prevalence of trafficking for sexual exploitation of children in concession areas and other mining areas, must be urgently addressed by businesses, and accountability through criminal investigations and prosecutions ensured.

Trafficking for purposes of forced labour: High-risk sectors

Women and girls are at risk of forced labour and sexual exploitation, especially in high-risk sectors, such as domestic work, agriculture, mining and fisheries. Effective measures to prevent trafficking for forced labour and child labour in supply chains is urgently required, in particular in rubber plantations where reliance on small scale sub-contractors, and limited oversight of labour conditions, remains a concern.

Weak enforcement of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing regulations contributes to risks of trafficking for forced labour and child labour in the fisheries sector. Concerns in relation to the effectiveness and capacity of the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Authority (NaFAA) to combat illegal fishing, and consequent limited action to prevent trafficking in persons. The Special Rapporteur highlights continuing concerns in relation to implementation of ILO standards on minimum age in fisheries and weak capacity for inspections and enforcement.

The Special Rapporteur highlights the high risks of forced labour and child labour in the context of illegal mining. The limited capacity of labour commissions remains a serious concern, given the significant challenge of ensuring effective oversight and regulation of mining in remote areas. Internal trafficking for sexual exploitation may be linked to illicit mining activities where law enforcement is weak, and access to justice limited. Such exploitation particularly affects young women and girls.

Domestic work is a high-risk sector where trafficking for purposes of forced labour and child labour, is prevalent. Children, mostly girls, are trafficked through informal networks, often involving family members, from rural to urban areas. Promises of education opportunities are given, but children remain out of school and are instead exploited in domestic households. There are limited inspections or monitoring of the working conditions of domestic workers, or access to remedies for victims.

Labour commissioners and inspectors reported limited capacity to undertake unannounced inspections. The Special Rapporteur noted with concern that there are very few women engaged as labour inspectors or commissioners. Officials from previous administration were not retained and there were significant turnovers without proper handover on inspection reports. There was limited understanding on the modalities of conducting inspections for domestic workers. The commitment of inspectors and commissioners to undertake often

difficult and challenging work was commendable. Inspectors also reported concerns at risks of intimidation or harassment in some concession areas.

Migrant workers work in mining areas, including in illegal mining. Data on the number of migrant workers in concession areas is limited and incomplete, particularly in illegal mining. The capacity and role of trade unions in engaging with migrant workers is limited, in particular due to lack of interpretation facilities. The lack of access to interpreters hinders the effectiveness of labour inspections.

Trafficking of children and rights of the child

Measures to ensure access to justice for children and child-friendly justice procedures are welcome but are limited in scope and reach, particularly in rural areas. Weak child protection systems and limited access to quality education contribute to high risks of child trafficking, including in domestic households, which can be disguised as familial support and caregiving.

In 2022, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection identified 366,585 children in street situations with 153,982 out-of-school children across Liberia. The Special Rapporteur is concerned at reports that sexual harassment in schools in the form of ‘sex for grades’ and ‘sex for school fees’ is common. The Ministry of Education also profiled over 6,000 volunteer teachers and found that 19.2 per cent did not have sufficient credentials to teach children. The Special Rapporteur commends the Ministry of Education for rolling out a ‘back to my classroom’ campaign in partnership with UNICEF to reach out-of-school children. Expanded support by international partners for child protection and social protection services, including long-term assistance, accessible safe homes, foster care placements and follow-up measures are urgently required to meet the State’s obligations towards child victims of trafficking, and to strengthen prevention.

The Ministry of Health decentralised and digitised interoperable birth registration systems with support from UNICEF. As a result, under five birth registration rates increased from 4 per cent in 2007 to 66 per cent in 2019-2020. Birth registration and school feeding programmes are important child protection measures, and critical to prevention of child trafficking, in line with SDG target 16.9. Engagement with communities to prevent child trafficking, particularly for purposes of sexual exploitation and domestic servitude, should be strengthened.

The Special Rapporteur notes that Liberia has not acceded to the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child trafficking or abduction is prohibited under Article VII, Section 8 of the Children’s Law of Liberia 2011, which recommends establishing a child offender registry. Children leaving Liberia are issued exit clearance certificates as a preventive measure against child trafficking. However, it remains difficult to monitor irregular border crossings. Limited training on standard victim identification and national referral mechanisms among border agents, health and social workers, increases risks that trafficked children will be undetected. The Special Rapporteur is concerned at the risks of exploitation of children with disabilities and limited resources and capacity to provide long-term assistance and protection.

Rights of persons with disabilities

Current measures to combat trafficking in persons are not disability inclusive. Information on assistance and protection services, or on prevention of trafficking was not provided in

accessible formats for persons with disabilities. Organisations led by persons with disabilities were not part of a non-governmental organisation consortium on anti-trafficking, which comprises more than seventy organisations. Children with disabilities may be at increased risk of exploitation in begging or sexual exploitation in particular, with limited child protection services available. Urgent action is needed to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities, in particular women and girls, and effective implementation of the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

LGBT persons and persons of diverse gender identities

The Special Rapporteur highlights the risks of exploitation, including of trafficking, of LGBT persons and persons of diverse gender identities, due to discrimination and criminalisation, and calls for urgent action to decriminalise consensual same sex sexual acts, and to prevent exploitation, including trafficking in persons among LGBT communities.

Transitional justice and conflict related trafficking in persons

The Special Rapporteur met with the newly appointed Executive Director of the Office of the War and Economic Crimes Court. She notes the Government's commitment to establish a reparations trust fund for victims of conflict and highlights the importance of ensuring that conflict-related trafficking in persons is addressed, including recruitment and use of children, sexual slavery and sexual exploitation, forced labour and domestic servitude. The Special Rapporteur is impressed that national transitional justice measures are complemented by strong community-led reconciliation initiatives, such as the National Palava Hut Program and Women's Peace Huts. She emphasises that robust partnership with civil society and inclusion of women and youth leaders is paramount in achieving transitional justice.

Climate change risk reduction

Liberia is vulnerable to climate change due to climate-sensitive rain-fed agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy and mining, which are the main sources of livelihood. Those living in coastal areas reside in poorly built homes and face displacement risks without protection from sea and storm surges. To mitigate such risks, the Government entered into a financial agreement with the World Bank under the 'Liberia First Resilient and Inclusive Growth Development Policy Financing with a Catastrophe Deferred Drawdown Option,' which allows for the provision of immediate liquidity in the event of a declared natural disaster or health emergency. Displacement and loss of livelihoods due to climate change, environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity, increases risks of trafficking, particularly of children. The Special Rapporteur highlights the importance of ensuring a gender equality focus on climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Regional and international cooperation

As a member of the Economic Community of West African States, Liberia has been taking part in regional strategies and platforms on trafficking, such as the Regional Network of National Focal Institutions Against Trafficking in Persons Plus, Trafficking in Persons 2018-2028 Plan of Action, Fund for Support to Victims of Trafficking in Persons, and the Strategic Framework for Strengthening Child Protection Systems and its Strategic Action Plan. Partnership and training under the Interpol's West Africa Police Information System proved effective.

Peace and security

The Special Rapporteur reiterates the importance of women leaders in peacebuilding efforts, as evidenced in local initiatives such as Palava Peace Huts, which have been used not only for community-level conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding but also for delivering training activities for women. The Special Rapporteur notes that these initiatives should be mainstreamed in policymaking spaces, including in relation to the newly established Office of the War and Economic Crimes Court, and should be fully resourced to strengthen the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

The Special Rapporteur also welcomes the Government's National Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security and a related initiative to develop its first National Action Plan on Youth, Peace and Security in close consultation with youth leaders. She notes the importance of providing sustained financial support and capacity building towards the initiative, including through the Peacebuilding Fund.

Conclusion

The Special Rapporteur welcomes the willingness of Government to strengthen action to combat all forms of trafficking and highlights areas for immediate action, with continuing international support:

- Prioritisation of the rights of victims, access to assistance and protection, including safe homes, emergency shelters and long-term assistance measures must be ensured, particularly in rural and hard to reach areas and at border crossings.
- Increase resources, budget allocation and support to child protection and social protection services, and programmes of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, to effectively prevent trafficking for sexual exploitation, and to ensure provision of long-term assistance and protection measures.
- Increased budget allocation to combat all forms of trafficking in persons is urgently required.
- Action to prevent trafficking, particularly of children for purposes of sexual exploitation, should be integrated into child protection programming and planning.
- Assistance and protection services for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation should be integrated into existing SGBV responses and programmes, with additional budget allocations and resources.
- Continued action to combat corruption is required to strengthen the independence and effectiveness of law enforcement entities across all sectors.
- Strengthening the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law across all counties is critical to combating impunity for the serious crime and serious human rights violation of trafficking, and to ensuring accountability.

- Measures to prevent trafficking, particularly for purposes of sexual exploitation, including through community engagement, radio and social media, need to be increased.
- Information on child rights, risks of sexual exploitation, positive relationships and gender equality, should be integrated into school curricula, complementing plans to combat sexual violence against children in schools, particularly affecting girls.
- The capacity and independence of labour commissions and inspectorates should be strengthened, with additional resources and staffing.
- Information on risks of trafficking, should be provided in indigenous languages as well as child-friendly materials and easy-to-read and accessible formats for persons with disabilities. The national hotline for trafficking victims could be used as one of entry points for protection and should operate 24/7 as a practical measure to facilitate access to services and protection.
- Measures to prevent trafficking and ensure accountability for trafficking for forced labour and child labour in high-risk sectors, including fisheries, domestic work, agriculture and illicit mining are urgently required.
- Access to justice for victims of trafficking must be strengthened particularly in rural areas, with expanded witness and victim protection, and measures to ensure trauma-informed, gender and child-sensitive proceedings.
- Action to strengthen effective investigations, to combat widespread impunity for trafficking in persons is urgently required. Additional resources, staffing and logistics support to reach rural areas and to ensure accountability is necessary. Strengthened capacity to investigate technologies used in trafficking, particularly cross-border, is required.
- Impunity and limited investigations of child trafficking for sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude must be addressed.
- Measures to strengthen the capacity of health care workers to identify victims of trafficking, and persons at risk of trafficking should be taken, with referral pathways to protection services established. In particular, training and support to health care actors at border crossings, should be provided, and additional resources.
- UN agencies, and international development partners, should include anti-trafficking measures, prioritising the rights of victims and survivors, and prevention, in programming.