

Ebola: Effect on women and girls in Liberia

The deadliest Ebola outbreak on record has quickly spread across west Africa over the past few months, moving rapidly from Guinea into Liberia, Sierra Leone, and eventually Nigeria, with at least 2,127 suspected cases. First identified in March 2014, the virus has claimed the lives of 1,145 men, women and children, leaving governments and healthcare providers struggling to contain this relentless virus and avoid a globalized epidemic.

The Ebola crisis has escalated quickly in Liberia and has led to the widespread collapse of the healthcare system, and chaos in affected communities. Families lack protective supplies and the bodies of victims remain uncollected in the streets in both remote villages and the capital of Monrovia. Facing limited resources and a growing fear of "outsiders," health care workers struggle to persuade infected individuals and their families to remain in hospitals and clinics, while terrified patients break out of treatment centres that lack medicine, gloves, and clean water.

As in many public health emergencies, adolescent girls and young women are among the most marginalized and at-risk during this crisis. Research demonstrates that girls' and women's poor social and economic status

further limits their access to healthcare services and information. Yet, it is women and girls who are traditionally responsible for caring for sick relatives and neighbours, and consequently bear the brunt of the Ebola epidemic. With even fewer resources than health clinics, they feed, wash and also clean the vomit and fluids of Ebola victims. Without gloves, goggles or masks, these caretakers are vulnerable to contracting Ebola themselves. Lacking information and basic supplies, women and girls are continuously put at higher risk than men and boys.

In the face of this national disaster, the Let Girls Lead (LGL) network of organizations in Liberia is working to save families from Ebola. Let Girls Lead's partners are educating communities about preventing Ebola, and packaging and distributing free sanitary kits and supplies to help families remain healthy. Many LGL graduates live in areas directly affected by the virus, including one region that is facing food shortages due to a community-wide Ebola quarantine instituted by the Liberian government. Focusing on prevention, the LGL network aims to help reduce the number of Ebola cases, especially among women and girls, by raising awareness on how the virus is contracted and how people can

protect themselves and their families.

LGL country representative Aisha Cooper Bruce shares that "in our traditional setting, women are the ones who deliver babies, prepare bodies for burials, and reach out to community members and families when they are sick. If women agree to turn over these functions to the healthcare workers, I believe that the number of Ebola cases will drop significantly." Aisha and her partners are conducting outreach with networks of female elders to educate communities on proper sanitation, and to convince women and girls to accept help from healthcare professionals.

Let Girls Lead is mobilizing support and funding to purchase sanitary kits, and to raise awareness about how to fight Ebola. Educating communities and distributing preventative sanitary gear is crucial to ending the Ebola epidemic in west Africa.

To learn more about the crisis and how to join the fight against Ebola in Liberia, please visit www.letgirlslead.org.

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