

# Mental Health, Humanitarian Intervention, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Liberia

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The violence of the Liberian civil war was widely recognized as being particularly devastating for civilian populations, leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands, the commission of numerous atrocities, and the pervasive presence of violence throughout many regions of the country. In the eight years following the conclusion of the civil war, a vast humanitarian effort has been underway to rebuild Liberia – including rebuilding the state and security sectors, promoting democratization, providing health and human services, and creating employment opportunities. However, the status of mental health in West Africa’s post-conflict reconstructions is questionable. Neither medicine nor social service, neither human right nor security matter, and therefore neither fish nor fowl, newly reconstituted state entities and international humanitarian organizations aren’t quite sure how to deal with the unique challenges posed by the mental health sector’s specific needs.

In my research, which is currently being developed into a book entitled *Healing the World: Trauma Healing, Humanitarianism, and Psychosocial Intervention in Liberia*, I examine how healing the trauma of the Liberian civil war became a proxy form of humanitarian intervention that came to substitute for much-needed psychiatric services throughout the country. In my research, I studied the varieties of forms of psychosocial assistance, locally experienced traumas, and national and international mental health policies in order to observe how specific forms of health governance were made available in sectors designated “high priority,” while issues like psychiatry and mental health languished on the back burner for years at a time. Throughout my research, I study how humanitarian organizations used psychosocial interventions, alongside other techniques like public media, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, and human rights trainings to sway the Liberian population to reject war and accept peace. I question



how these interventions came to substitute for much-needed mental health care; and relatedly, how local understandings of mental health, illness, trauma, and insanity were integrated or neglected in contemporary humanitarian practice.

A new trajectory of my research follows gender-based violence interventions in conflict and post-conflict settings across Africa. In this new project, I examine local ethnohistories of gender-based violence, and uncover culturally encoded forms of gender-protection in spaces that are currently dominated by violence and conflict. This research, which began in Liberia but quickly expanded to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, challenges global conventions regarding the role of “culture” and “tradition” in promoting gender violence; and advances an alternative theoretical framework for thinking about the patternings of gender-based

violence, and the utility of the globalized forms of gender-based violence intervention that we find recurring in African conflicts today.

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