



A guide to Liberian cultural and social norms

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Introduction

The following social and cultural information has been produced for front-line agency staff involved in the UK Resettlement Programme. It provides a thumbnail sketch of Liberian cultural norms and the consequent likely expectations of the client group. It is designed to help staff prepare for the arrival of Liberian refugees.

The information is based on interviews the author conducted with representatives of UK-based Liberian refugee community organisations and Sierra Leonean nationals living in the UK, as well as on more specific client group information provided by the Home Office, the International Rescue Committee, and others.

Many of the Liberian refugees on the resettlement programme will have spent up to ten years in refugee camps in Sierra Leone and Guinea. The children may never have lived in Liberia. This may have had an impact on social practices and structures. Reference has been made to specific situations in camps where possible, but readers should note that much of the following information is based on anecdotal evidence and should not be treated as authoritative.

This information is not based on direct contact between the author and the Liberian refugees to be resettled in the UK. Readers should therefore not assume that refugees on the Resettlement Programme will perfectly conform to the information given.

Map showing Liberia in relation to other West African countries



Map: ReliefWeb (18 October 2000)

Background

Liberia has endured two violent civil wars in the last 15 years: the first from 1989-1997, the second from 1999-2003. More than 200,000 people are estimated to have been killed since 1989, while more than a million people were forced into exile as refugees. Thousands of others have been displaced. The capital, Monrovia, a city with a capacity for 300,000 residents, now harbours more than one million people.

The wars have destroyed private and public properties, and forced young people out of school. The health system collapsed completely and because of poor sanitation, many people died of diarrhoea, cholera and other curable diseases. In its report, *Fight Against HIV/AIDS*, UNDP described the estimated HIV prevalence rate of 8.2% as “very conservative” and forecast an “exponential situation”. Many people have been forced to live in squalor and humiliation. In order to survive during the war, people lived on whatever they could find and this experience will have an impact on their lives for many years to come.

The personal experiences of Liberians who survived include rape, prostitution, public humiliation (such as being beaten in front of children and family members), witnessing the murder of family members and friends, loss of property and dignity, and psychological trauma, as well as, for some, the experience of perpetrating violence themselves. For those who took part in brutalities and killings, there will be long-term psychological effects.

Prior to the renewed hostilities of June, July and August 2003 (known in Liberia as World War I, World War II and World War III), UNICEF estimated that there were about 15,000 children involved in the conflict as either child soldiers or sex slaves to combatants. Assessments by UNICEF in June 2003 identified an escalation in the forced recruitment of children and the levels of rape and sexual violence. UNICEF estimated some fighting groups to be comprised of up to 70 per cent children with up to 80 per cent of these armed.

Many Liberian refugees have spent up to ten years and in some cases most of their adult lives in refugee camps.

Liberian views of other countries are heavily influenced by historic links to the United States of America. Originally established by freed black slaves from North America in 1822, the country became independent on 26 July 1847 with its flag and constitution modelled after that of the USA. Some Liberians may contrast the country they are living in to their image of the USA.

Family structure

Households

Liberian people rarely live alone. They are more likely to live with members of their immediate and extended family. The number of people living in a typical household varies according to the family's income. The more they can earn, the larger the household will be. There is an average of four to five children per family and in some rural areas, where it is common for men to take on more than one wife, there will be significantly more.

Families tend to build their own houses. In villages, these are made of mud and zinc sheeting, and are normally always on one level. The cheapest costs around £1,000. Buildings in the refugee camps will be similar to this. In urban areas, houses are not dissimilar to the UK, and depend on the wealth of the family.

Many of the refugees on the resettlement programme will have been sleeping in one room on large mats on the floor. They may not be used to beds or separate rooms.

Role of women

Women are expected to handle all childcare and household duties. The kitchen is solely a female domain, and men are encouraged not to enter. Although men are still expected to provide a family's income, in urban areas especially, it is becoming more normal for women to go out to work. Women's access to formal education is increasing, but female literacy rates are still significantly lower than that of men.

Role of men

Family roles are quite traditional in Liberia, with men still expected to be the main breadwinners (a source of contention with unemployment levels both in camps and in Liberia itself very high). Men are also expected to make all the major family decisions, as well as providing sufficient financial resources for the children's education. It is perhaps because of these responsibilities that many men consider themselves to be the 'boss' of the household. Attitudes are changing, but the majority of men do not consider women to be equal to men.

Children and childcare

The average number of children per family is four or five. In rural areas, this may be more with the incentive of more children meaning a bigger workforce. If a man takes more than one wife he is likely to have more children. Women, and often older siblings, look after children.

It is considered normal for children to be disciplined by people from outside the family group. The community is seen as the 'broader' family. This gives anyone the right to challenge a child's misbehaviour. Punishing children physically is considered acceptable. Beating and whipping are standard punishments for serious misdemeanours.

Liberian refugees on the resettlement programme should be made aware that physical discipline is considered unacceptable in the UK.

Elderly

The elderly (usually a person aged 40 and over) are very highly respected in Liberia. They can be likened to personal guides, always on hand to offer advice and support. If there is a dispute in a family or community, it is always the elderly who provide advice towards resolution. When no longer able to look after themselves, elderly people are always cared for by their families. Old people's homes are unheard of in Liberia. Liberian people already living in the UK seem shocked by the disregard the younger generation shows towards the elderly.

Marriage

The average age Liberians tend to get married can vary considerably and depends on how well they are educated, whether they live in the city or the country, and their personal circumstances. In Liberia, it is legal to marry from the age of 18, but it is common for women to be 'reserved' before that age, and then marry when they turn 18. Couples tend not to live together before marriage. It is also frowned upon to engage in sexual activity prior to marriage. However, not all men expect women to be virgin brides (a seemingly recent development). Children live with their parents until they are financially independent and move out when they get married.

In rural areas, it is not unusual for women to marry as young as 14 or 15, after they have finished school. It is also common for men to take more than one wife, depending on how many wives they can support. Traditionally, men pay dowries to the parents of their fiancée.

It is not unusual for women to suffer domestic violence in their marriage. Divorce is very uncommon so women can become trapped in abusive relationships. Women's rights groups are emerging slowly in Liberia.

Homosexuality is both illegal and considered 'non-existent' in Liberia. A person involved in a homosexual relationship may be shunned for bringing shame to their family and community.

Religion, language and ethnicity

Religion

Christianity is the dominant religion, representing around 40 per cent of Liberia's population. Muslims represent 20 per cent and the remaining 40 per cent are animist. Christianity is strong in Liberia. The Bible's teachings are more closely adhered to than in the UK, and churches are often packed to full on Sundays. Children must respect their parents' religion until they become self-sufficient and leave home. Shops are normally closed on Sundays as preparations are made for church. Liberians are therefore not used to working on Sundays.

Language

English is Liberia's official language and the main language spoken in urban areas. Other spoken languages are Mel, Kwa and Mande. American English is taught in all schools due to Liberia's historical relationship to the US. Liberians tend to speak very fast and have developed a colloquial version of English similar to Creole or Patois of merging words together: 'come on, let's go', for example, will become 'come le go'. There are various types of regional dialects found in different areas of Liberia.

Liberian refugees resettled in the UK are likely to have suffered from a lack of schooling in the camps. Their standard of English is basic. It is unlikely that they will be able to read very much, although they will be familiar with pictorial information. Of the client group currently in Sierra Leone, the majority speak Krio, a kind of Pidgin English. Some of the younger refugees will not speak any Liberian languages.

Ethnicity

Liberia has 18 ethnic groups. The largest ethnic groups are the Kpelle (20%) and Bassa (16%). Ethnic tensions do exist in Liberia and have been amplified by the Civil War. Muslims and non-Muslim groups have experienced conflict, particularly between the Lormas and the Mandingos. Tensions also exist between the Krahn tribes and the Gio and Mano tribes. Yet after fifteen years of war, many Liberians wish to put the past behind them and live in peace.

Food

Staple diet

Rice is the staple food in Liberia. A typical meal will have rice with fish or meat, and a sauce. Protein favourites include all types of meat and fish, especially crab and prawns.

Typical carbohydrates

- Potatoes
- Yam (big root, like a potato but stronger)
- Eddoes (coco yams)
- Cassava (a root that can be ground into flour, the flowers and leaves can also be eaten)
- Farina (a type of flour, can be mixed with water to make a porridge)
- Couscous
- Plantain (a green, fibrous, savoury banana)
- Sweet potato
- Fufu (sticky, equivalent of mashed potato, made with yams/plantain, to scoop up sauce)

Other popular foods

- Palm butter (made from palm oil, which is from palm nuts)
- Beans
- Potato leaves (green leafy vegetable, like spinach)
- Platto (green leafy vegetable)
- Peas
- Peanuts
- Bananas, citrus fruit, pineapple, coconut
- Okra (small green pointy vegetable)
- Bitter balls (like croquettes, beef mince balls, spices and breadcrumbs)
- Onions
- Aubergines

Seasoning includes ginger (or *gari* when it's pickled), chilli peppers, and magi cubes.

Muslims, as in the UK, do not eat pork. African and Caribbean shops in the UK stock most of the ingredients needed to make good, fresh Liberian food.

Cooking

In both rural and urban areas, food is often cooked in pots on charcoal or firewood. Only a minority of people from urban areas may have experience of using gas or electric cookers. Single men are unlikely to be used to cooking for themselves. Kitchen utensils are largely the same as the UK. Most fish and meat is smoked, as there are no refrigerators. None of the clients are expected to have experience with modern domestic appliances such as kettles, toasters, cookers, and fridges.

Drinks

The Muslim population generally does not drink alcohol, and Liberians generally drink less alcohol than people do in the UK. Popular soft drinks are water, various fruit juices, coke, Fanta and coconut milk. Alcoholic drinks include beer, Guinness and spirits. Specialist drinks include 'Club' beer (a locally brewed beer), cane juice (spirit made from sugar cane) and palm wine.

Supermarkets

People, certainly in rural areas, are much more used to shopping in open markets. Liberians from urban areas may be familiar with shopping in supermarkets.

Health

People in Liberia pay for their own medical costs. There are non-governmental organisations that run clinics, which provide cheap medical treatment for the sick, but these were not widespread. Many people seek natural remedies before approaching a doctor.

Physical

Liberians are generally very physically fit because of hard domestic work and agricultural labour.

Mental

Mental illness is seen as a sign of weakness in Liberia and is rarely discussed as it is considered shameful. Due to a lack of medical facilities in Sierra Leone and Guinea, refugees on the programme will have received no counselling before their arrival in the UK. Many individuals, however, will be used to telling people, in part at least, what has happened to them.

Sexual

There is little knowledge of family planning and contraception in rural areas, although some services are offered in cities. HIV/AIDS is prevalent in Liberia. The Family Planning Association has clinics and field workers who visit communities to teach the importance of contraception. Radio and television stations often broadcast programmes about HIV, AIDS and other STDs to raise awareness.

According to Amnesty International, between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of women have undergone genital circumcision. The practice is only carried out in some parts of the country and not by all ethnic groups. Those who practice it believe girls have to undergo circumcision as a rite of passage to become a woman. It is also believed to make a woman much cleaner and to reduce sexual appetite, which will ensure fidelity. Many women have suffered trauma after circumcision as it is often carried out using force by an untrained surgeon in unhygienic conditions. It is thought that the incidence of this practice may have fallen sharply due to the civil wars.

Dental care

Toothbrushes and toothpaste are widely used in Liberia, although most people have never visited a dentist. Older people may use more traditional methods to look after their teeth. Dental health is generally good because sweets are not as widely consumed in Liberia as in the UK.

Opticians

Opticians only really exist in the city, and most people generally cannot afford to visit them or buy glasses. Cataracts are a common problem because people do not wear sunglasses in bright sunshine.

Smoking

Very few Liberians smoke.

Money and employment

Before the war, the currency in Liberia was the US dollar. It is currently the Liberian dollar, thus the change has made people used to the concept of exchange rates. The client group should also be used to budgeting, although their situation with regard to money in refugee camps is unknown. The price of goods in the UK is likely to come as a shock to the Liberian refugees resettled in the UK.

Spending priorities are likely to be food and clothes. All Liberians living in the UK are very keen to send money back to Africa to ease poverty at home. This could also become a priority for the Liberian refugees on the programme once they become settled and start to earn money.

Welfare benefits

There is no effective benefit system in Liberia. National social security and welfare systems do exist but there are reports of corrupt officials diverting funds for personal use. Hence, people tend to ask their friends and families for assistance in case of hardship. Credit unions (called 'Susu') are popular, whereby people contribute money into a collective account on a daily or monthly basis. The money saved is distributed at the end of month or year with any interest generated over the period.

Employment

The majority of work, particularly in rural areas, is domestic or agriculturally based. Some people in urban areas have office experience. Many of the refugees on the programme have survived at subsistence level by, for example, petty trading or washing clothes for people. Some have taught themselves trades such as hairdressing, tie-dye, batik making and babysitting but few have any formal training or qualifications. If they had specific jobs when in Liberia, they would have been unlikely to find similar work whilst living in the refugee camps.

Education

Starting school does not depend necessarily on age but opportunity. Formal state education begins at ages four to five, but due to the lack of schools, this is normally significantly later, usually when children are around nine or ten. In rural areas, boys are likely to attend a more informal school that teaches essential community skills such as typical farming methods and local remedies. Similarly, many young women, depending on their ethnicity, attend 'Sande Society' schools where they will be taught basic childcare, cooking and household duties. In many cases, knowledge is passed on informally by parents to their children.

The education system has been disrupted by on-going conflict. Over the past fourteen years, young people often could not go to school simply because there were none to go to. Illiteracy is therefore a major problem. Some of the younger refugees on the programme will have received basic education in the refugee camps.

The following is a description of the school system within Liberia.

Under 5s

Kindergarten schools and nurseries are available in the cities. In villages, the mother, elder siblings or extended family members will care for children until they have the opportunity to go to school.

Over 5s

Children should start school when they are four or five years old, but there is often no school for them to attend within travelling distance. Commonly, if this is the case, children will live with a relative who lives closer to school.

The refugees on the programme are likely to have had their schooling interrupted due to war and lack of funding. Many children will still be at primary school level with little or no reading ability.

Adult education

There are four universities in Liberia and several vocational training institutes. Candidates are required to sit entrance exams and pay the required fees. Popular university courses include politics, accounting, management, economics, agriculture and engineering. Law school is a popular choice for students after university. Carpentry, masonry, sewing and mechanics are the most subscribed to courses at vocational institutions.

Leisure

Music

Liberian and African music is popular, as is Hip hop, R&B, reggae, calypso, jazz, country and western and gospel music.

Games

Adults play football, basketball, volleyball, table tennis, handball, checkers, scrabbles, chess, and pool. Children enjoy playing baseball, hopscotch, Ludo, marbles and hide and seek. Other games include 'nine foot' (pronounced 'nan fo'), a rhythm game played mainly by girls, and 'blade', which involves hiding a bangle in a tray of sand for others to find.

Going out

People like going to see football matches and volleyball and basketball games, going to bars, the beach, dancing and the cinema.

Television

Television is popular in Monrovia, but people in rural areas have had little access to television mainly because of the war. Children born in Liberia after the 1989 civil conflict may never have seen a television, although they would have had opportunity to watch television in refugee camps.

Radio

Radio is very popular in Liberia. There are five main stations, most of which are short wave so they can be accessed countrywide.

Telephone

Phones are not widely available in Liberia, particularly in rural areas. Because of their scarcity you have to prearrange a time and location for incoming calls. The postal system is not functioning, which puts added pressure on the need to contact people by phone.

Newspapers and magazines

There are local dailies from Liberia published on the Internet at <http://www.allafrica.com/liberia>, and <http://www.theperspective.org>. There are many other magazines and a wide range of information about Liberia available on the Internet. *Focus on Africa* magazine is popular amongst Liberian communities in the UK and is available in specialist shops.

Books

Many refugees on the programme, because of the lack of schooling, may have difficulty with reading.

Driving

Liberians drive on the right-hand side of the road, the opposite to the UK. A larger proportion of men than women drives. As with all nationalities, the refugees on the programme will have to retake their tests after a year of being in the UK.

Washing and cleaning

Personal

People take baths regularly and clean their teeth daily. Deodorant use is normal. Wooded areas make do for toilets in villages and toilet roll is only used in urban areas. In rural areas, non-Muslims use leaves and Muslims tend to use water. Again, in cities, women use sanitary pads and tampons, but women in the villages are more likely to use cloths. Mirrors are available in every household, as Liberians like to take pride in their appearance.

Laundry

Very few Liberians have access to washing machines, even in the cities. Clothes are washed by hand or by using a washboard. In villages, clothes are taken to the rivers and washed by hand.

Clothing

Some Liberians may know that outside Africa, the seasons and sunlight hours are different and that they will need different clothes to keep warm. They are, however, unlikely to have experienced the cold, so this may come as a shock. Young Liberians are very proud of their appearance. Clothes that are in reasonable condition and make the individuals feel good about themselves are very valuable.

Further information

US Department of State

- Background Note: Liberia
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6618.htm>
- Country Reports on Human Rights Practices
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18211.htm>

Home Office, Immigration and Nationality Directorate

- Country Information Policy Unit – Liberia Country Report
<http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/default.asp?PageId=4379>

Amnesty International

- AI Report 2003
<http://web.amnesty.org/report2003/lbr-summary-eng>

Human Rights Watch

- Information by country: Africa: Liberia
<http://www.hrw.org/doc?t=africa&c=liberi>

The Guardian

- Special Report: Conflict in West Africa – War in Liberia
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/westafrica/story/0,13764,1008084,00.html>

For further information on female circumcision:

Amnesty International report on female genital mutilation
<http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm1.htm>

For further information on HIV/AIDS in Liberia:

United Nations Development Programme report, *Fight Against HIV/AIDS*
<http://mirror.undp.org/liberia/aidshiv.pdf>

For up to date news and general information about refugees in West Africa see the website for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (www.unhcr.ch).

Liberian refugee community organisations

Liberians In Britain Encouraging Reconciliation Internationally And Nationally (L.I.B.E.R.I.A.N)

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