Liberian women caught up in international drug trade

Fabine Kwiah

INTRO: Drug trafficking and drug use is on the rise in Liberia according to a new report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The problem is fueled by the influx of drugs into the region by South American drug cartels who see this as an easy route to get their products to Europe. More and more Liberians, particularly women, are getting caught up in the trade. In collaboration between New Narratives and Radio Veritas, Fabine Kwiah reports.

AMBI: Busy street in downtown Monrovia.

(You could do this as a standup.)

Here in the heart of downtown Monrovia, zinc shacks crowd a narrow street behind the building that once housed the defense ministry. It’s the middle of the day but the area is busy with haggard-looking people dressed in worn clothes. I’m in one of Monrovia’s many drug ghettos.

AMBI: Sounds from a video club.

I’m led a short walk away to a cramped room covered in football posters where men sip beer and watch TV. Sitting on a wooded bench is 31-year-old Patience. She sells heroin. (what does it look like? Can you say, “little balls of white powder in plastic wrap?”

Patience is … (describe her. Is she an addict too?)

She says she does it simply to survive. (Does she have an education? Does she have children? A husband? Any other options for making money?) She has been pushing drugs for a year and half. She was introduced to the trade through a friend she met during the war. (Tell us the story of how she first began pushing and/or using.)

PATIENCE CLIP 1: AFTER THE WAR, THERE WAS NOTHING TO DO. // (another clip? This clip repeats what she said earlier.)

Drug enforcement authorities in the US are making it harder for South American sellers to push their products through America. Poverty and corruption in West Africa make it a much easier target. As more drugs enter in the country en route to Asia and Europe, they leave a legacy of pushers and users.

Only fifteen percent of Liberians have formal employment, according to a 2011 U.S. State Department report. Patience’s reasons for getting into the trade show why it’s so enticing to many.

PATIENCE CLIP 2: I DID THIS WORK BECAUSE I DON’T WANT TO BE A PROSTITUTE OR WANT TO STEAL. NO JOBS IN THE COUNTRY. THE DRUGS GIVE ME FAST MONEY. Good clip.

\*\*Fade out patience scene.

NUTGRAPH: But for many women prostitution and drug use go hand in hand. Women sellers are a big(?) part of the trade here. (All this is true of men too – why is it particularly appealing for women?). Many women have turned to prostitution to survive. Experts say prostitution often turn to drugs to help them deal with the job. (?>?)

AMBI: VIDEO CLUB

Here in this shop in the bustling capital, people come to relax after a hard day’s work. Among them is twenty-eight-year old Gladys. A yellow Michael Jackson sleeveless blouse hangs on her gaunt frame. She says she’s been using heroin since 2005. She resorts to prostitution to pay for her daily fix.

GLADYS CLIP 1: I FEEL FINE WHEN I TAKE THE DRUGS. BUT WHEN I DON’T TAKE IT, IT MAKES ME FEEL COLD. I GO OUT AT NIGHT AND PROSTITUTE TO GET MONEY TO BUY DRUGS. Great work Fabine!

\*\*(We need more about the toll the drug has taken on Gladys. How sick is she? How dependent is she? Does she have kids? Has she hurt people? Does she know people who have overdosed? Does she fear dying?)

The U.S. State Department says most of Liberia’s illicit drugs are smuggled from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Nigeria. But the report also points to Liberia becoming a significant transit point for drugs en route to other countries.

Liberian security has had some very notable success. A South American drug cartel called national security advisor and presidential son, ?? Sirleaf in 2007 offering a $1.4m bribe to use Liberia as a transit point. It was a deal no other West African leaders are thought to have turned down. Sirleaf called US authorities and helped intercept one hundred million dollars’ worth of cocaine. 9 members of the cartel, including several West Africans, went to jail in the US.

But cartels have found other Liberians willing to take their bribes.

AMBI: SOUNDS OF A BUSY YARD.

Here a few kilometers from the seat of the Liberian government is a discreet, two-story building painted white. This is the head quarters of Liberia’s drug enforcement authorities (??). People move around the compound. Under a shady tree sits a security expert we will call Bobby. He asks that his name be withheld to protect his identity ?. Bobby says many drugs are being traded here.

BOBBY (DURATION?) CLIP: SOME DRUG THAT ARE PREVALENT IN OUR SOCIETY . WE HAVE NARCOTIC DRUGS LIKE MARIJUNA, COCAINE, ITALIAN WHITE ARE PREVALENT.

The rise is drug trafficking here comes as

Liberia’s security forces struggle to recover from the war.

BOBBY CLIP (DURATION?): PEOPLE TRIED TO USE LIBERIA AS A TRANSIT POINT BECAUSE THEY HAVE FOUND OUT THAT THE SECURITY SITUATION HAS A WHOLE LOT OF LAPSES. TO ENTER INTO LIBERIA WITH DRUGS IS EASY. EASY IN A SENSE THAT THERE IS NO SECURITY TO CONTAIN THE SITUATION.

With few drug crime convictions, apprehended traffickers are often released on bail.

The drug expert says drug possession is a bailable offense and few are seriously punished.

CLIP: (DON’T HAVE CLIP REPEAT THE SCRIPT) THE LAWS ARE NOT STRONG. WHEN THEY ARE BAIL, THEY GO OUT AND DO THE SAME.

FADE OUT AMBI

Liberia’s drug enforcement agency is woefully outmatched by the resources of the cartels.

LIBERIA’S DRUG ENFORCEMENT AGENCY IS AN AUTONOMOUS BRANCH OF THE Drug Enforcement Agency IN AMERICA. (really??!!) THE AGENCY RELIES ON just THREE CARS AND 22 MOTORBIKES TO COVER THE entire COUNTRY. THERE IS A SMALL TRANSNATIONAL CRIME UNIT FUNDED BY THE UN OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME AND BASED AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS THAT WAS FOUNDED TWO MONTHS AGO. THE U.S. IS PLANNING TO ESTABLISH A SPECIAL-CRIMES UNIT IN THE COUNTRY TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF TRAFFICKING, ACCORDING TO VANDA FELBAB-BROWN, A DRUG TRADE EXPERT AT THE WASHINGTON, D.C.-BASED BROOKINGS INSTITUTION who spoke to me by phone.

She says several factors in the region have made West Africa particularly vulnerable to drug traffickers.

CLIP:THERE IS A LONG HISTORY OF DRUG USE IN IN WEST AFRICA INCLUDING LIBERIA WHERE MANY OF THE CHILD SOLDIERS INCLUDING COMBATANTS DURING THE CIVIL WAR USE DRUGS BEFORE THEY COMBAT.

With at least fifty tons of cocaine transiting West Africa annually on its way to Europe, Liberia has the potential to become a lucrative transit point.

CLIP: THE TRAFFIC IS INCREASING AND CONTINUETO HAVE A CHANCE TO INCREASE, IN OTHER PARTS OF AFRICA IT IS MINIMAL.

While President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is publicly committed to combating organized crime, corruption is rampant. Police and civil servants’ salaries are low. In the past there have been successful bribes of government officials for access to airports or seaports to traffic drugs. Again, Vanda Felbab-Brown.

CLIP: I WILL BE SURPRISED IF LIBERIA CLEANS UP THE ENTIRE POLICE; MILITARY, FINANCIAL SECTOR BANKING THAT HAS A DEEP HISTORY OF PARTICIPATING IN CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE.

In the meantime, Liberian women will continue to participate in the drug trade. Here’s Bobby.

CLIP: GIRLS THAT ARE INVOLVED IN PROSTITUTION SERIOUSLY GET INVOLVED INTO DRUGS. IT’S NOT EASY TO LEAVE IT. YOU FIND OUT THAT YOU GET ADDICTED TO THE EXTENT THAT THEY SELL THEIR ASSETS.

AMBI: VIDEO CLUB up 2-3 sec., down to run under scene

Here in a tiny drinking spot sits Massa, a drug pusher (age? Description?), stares quietly at customers murmuring. Dressed in a striped blouse and fade jeans, she explains that she comes here to look for customers.

CLIP: I GO AND TELL THEM THAT I HAVE THE DRUGS. WE DON”T SIT ONE PLACE. WE GO AND USE SIGNS TO LET THEM KNOW THAT I AM AROUND. I SELL TWO TO THREE HUNDRED UNITED STATES DOLLARS A DAY. IT’S A RISKY GAME AND WE ARE ALWAYS RUNNING FROM THE COPS.

AMBI: Sounds of air cooled office.

Here at the headquarters of the Liberia National Police, spokesman George Bardue sits in his air cooled office, smartly dressed in police attire displaying ranks.

(you’re obscuring these two issues here. Stick to the women issue or the overall issue. It’s confusing as is.)

 There were 143 drug-related arrests in the first six months of the year. That’s double the total number in 2009. Bardue says police are making the arrests but they can’t keep the perpetrators behind bars.

CLIP: THERE’S NO SPECIFIC PENALTY WHEN ONE IS SENT TO JAIL. THE DRUG OFFENSE IS BAILABLE IN LIBERIA AND ONE CAN COME OUT…

WE ARE RESOLUTE IN CRACKING DOWN ON DRUGS ESPECIALLY WITH THE DEALING AND USAGE OF DRUGS.

The heroin addict Gladys says she would abandon the cycle of drugs if she were offered help to get off it. But there are only a handful of drug-rehabilitation programs in the country, help for Gladys is unlikely.

CLIP:I WANT TO TAKE TREATMENT AND I AM APPEALING TO THE NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS TO COME TO OUR AID TO HELP US STOP USING DRUGS. WE ARE WAITING.

Women like Gladys are likely to keep waiting. For now all signs are that Liberia’s drug problem will only grow. For New Narratives and Radio Veritas, I’m Fabine Kwiah.