

SMALL SMALL THING

THE OLIVIA ZINNAH STORY

A Film By: Jessica Vale & Nika Offenbac

"...riveting and infuriating all at once"
- LA Weekly



Awards & Screenings

| | |
|----------------|--|
| April 2013 | Palm Beach Intl Film Festival, Palm Beach, FL World Premiere |
| April 2013 | Dallas Intl Film Festival, Dallas, TX Special Mention, Best Documentary Feature |
| June 2013 | Encounters Film Festival, South Africa Selected scenes screened in the Filmmakers Against Women Abuse program. |
| September 2013 | Tri-Continental Human Rights Film Festival, South Africa Montreal Intl Black Film Festival, Montreal, Canada Winner, Best Feature Documentary First Glance Film Festival, Philadelphia, PA Winner: Best Feature Documentary Baghdad International Film Festival, Baghdad, Iraq Winner: Best Human Rights Documentary |
| October 2013 | Balinale International Film Festival Kansas Intl Film Festival, Kansas, MO Winner: Best Feature Documentary Warsaw Intl Film Festival |
| November 2013 | Bronze Lens Film Festival, Atlanta, GA Winner: Best International Documentary |
| February 2014 | Open Your Eyes HUman Rights Film Festival, Sierra Leone Pan African Film Festival, Los Angeles, CA Winner: Special Jury Award Best Documentary Toronto Intl Black Film Festival |
| March 2014 | Portland Oregon Women's Film Festival (POWfest) Luxor African Film Festival Rated SR New York Film Festival Winner: Vanya Exerjian Award for Stopping Violence Against Women Winner: Women Film Critics Circle Award Winner: Grand Jury Prize Best Feature Film |
| June 2014 | Waterfront Film Festival, Michigan |

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Synopsis

'My administration shall empower Liberian women in all areas of our national life, We will support and increase the writ of laws that restore their dignity and deal drastically with crimes that dehumanize them. We will enforce, without fear or favor, the law against rape recently passed.'

- Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (2005)

In December 2012 Olivia Zinnah, age 12, died of septic shock from a bowel obstruction. Her death was a result of complications from surgeries intended to repair the extensive injuries she sustained when she was raped at the age of seven. This is her story.

Small Small Thing begins at JFK Hospital in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, and urban center of this West African country. Olivia Zinnah is 9 years old, severely malnourished and handicapped. Her condition is life threatening. Believing her injuries to be the result of witchcraft, Olivia's mother had been hiding her in their village for years.

The doctors conclude her condition is the result of a brutal rape that took place when Olivia was 7 years old. When pressured to reveal her rapist, Olivia names her cousin.

This diagnosis has severe consequences. Originally from deep in the Liberian jungle, Olivia and her mother are shunned from their tribe for seeking outside help. They are left stranded in Monrovia at the mercy of President Sirleaf's government, facing the most difficult decision of all. What price are they willing to pay for justice?

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The Filmmakers



Jessica Vale (Director, Writer, Producer):

Jessica Vale is an accomplished non-fiction film producer and editor, working in the business for over a decade. Originally from New Hope, Pennsylvania, Jess graduated from Temple University. Her credits include work for CBS News, National Geographic, Discovery Channel, History Channel, The Weinstein Co., and more. When she's not deep in the documentary world, Jess spends her time as a musician and artist. In 2005 and 2007, her singles appeared on the Billboard charts. Jessica's work has been featured in publications around the world such as the front page of the Times London art section, Wired Magazine, the Associated Press, Philadelphia Inquirer, and the NY Daily News.



Nika Offenbac (Producer, Director of Photography):

Currently based between NY and LA, Nika Offenbac is a veteran new media director and producer with over 9 years industry experience. She began her career in design and visual effects, winning an ADC Young Gun for her motion work. Her projects include feature and short films, music videos & a wide range of interactive, digital, and experiential projects. Her short films have screened internationally at The Lincoln Center, The Independent Film Channel, The Kunsthaus Graz (Austria), The Museum of Popular Art (Rome) The LACMA, and are included in the permanent collection of the San Francisco MOMA. Her work has appeared in Res Magazine, IDN, Repellent Magazine, & Stash Magazine. In 2011, she was featured in the documentary "Press Pause Play" discussing the future of digital media.



Barnie Jones (Co-Producer):

Barnie is a proud mother and native Liberian living and working in New York as a senior wholesaler for Chase Bank. She became involved in Small Small Thing while working for a visiting medical team in Liberia. Barnie recently starred as an actress in her first feature film, "Murder in the Cassava Patch," which premiered in spring 2012.

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Production Notes

In January 2009, Director Jessica Vale was in Liberia with Mount Sinai Hospital directing a different documentary about the challenges US surgeons face in third world countries. In the middle of shooting, Mount Sinai deemed the film too controversial and put it on hold indefinitely. Monrovia was unsafe at the time, and Jessica was unable to leave JFK Hospital without armed security. Instead she ended up spending time in the women's fistula ward, where 9 year old Olivia Zinnah had recently arrived as a patient.

Olivia had received a colostomy bag due to a severe fistula caused by rape. Her surgeons were visiting husband/wife team Ann Marie and Peter Dottino of New York.

Jess was quickly taken by her story and learned Olivia's case was not isolated. With the help of Co-Producer Bernie Jones, they launched their own investigation into why JFK Hospital was receiving so many child rape victims. Despite extensive interviews with the Temple of Justice and a trip to Monrovia Central Prison, there were more questions than answers when they returned to New York.

Back in the US, Jess explained the story to fellow producer and director of photography Nika Offenbac, and asked her to join in a return trip to Liberia in August 2009.

In July 2009, right before their departure, we discovered that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the UNFPA had ordered more surgery on Olivia. Something had gone wrong and Olivia was in even worse condition. Ann Marie and Peter Dottino were contacted, and returned to Liberia to help Olivia again. This new development highlighted the urgency of the situation.

With a very limited budget, and donated camera gear, Jessica and Nika headed to Liberia. Given that Monrovia was still unsafe, they enlisted the help of under cover police officer Louis Johnson and local radio journalist Dannetha Sampson.

Over the next six weeks Jessica and Nika conducted an extensive investigation into Olivia's story and her case. They continued the line of questioning Bernie and Jess had started months earlier, meeting and interviewing various health and government officials. They also returned to Olivia's village, Todee, the scene of the original crime, and spoke with Olivia's tribe. Realizing Olivia's story was not unique they headed even further into the bush trying to find clues as to why so many young girls were being raped.

In 2011 CNN aired a segment about Olivia Zinnah. It was made clear that no surgery was to be done on Olivia until she reached the age of 16.

In January 2012 an additional segment of Small Small Thing was filmed by Carielle Doe in Liberia. Olivia had recently been adopted by Dr Wilhelmina Jallah, and was attending school. She appeared to be a happy, healthy 11 year old. Her colostomy had been reversed, though the fistula had not entirely healed. It was unclear who approved the surgery. Her mother Bindu had returned to their village in Todee and dropped all charges against the accused rapist, Olivia's cousin John.

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Production Notes

December 2012, Olivia is rushed to JFK Hospital with a bowel obstruction. Dr Jallah is unable to get approval for emergency surgery. Olivia's US doctors are contacted and they inform Dr Jallah that Olivia will not survive without surgery. By the time surgery is approved, it is too late. A new colostomy bag is given, but Olivia dies a few days later from septic shock.

Jessica Vale and Nika Offenbac were contacted about Olivia's death right away. They sent over money to pay for Olivia's funeral. It has been reported in the press that the funeral was paid for by President Sirleaf's Ministry of Gender. It is unclear what happened to Vale and Offenbac's money.

The Ministry of Gender has also taken credit in the press for the successful surgeries done on Olivia Zinnah since 2009, despite the fact that was Ann Marie and Peter Dottino who diagnosed Olivia and performed the operations. The Ministry has not acknowledged the botched surgery they ordered in 2009.

Small Small Thing was re-edited in January 2013 to reflect the developments surrounding Olivia's death. An interview with Leymah Gbowee was filmed in February 2013, as Gbowee has been deeply affected by Olivia's story. Vale and Offenbac incorporated the interview into the closing credits of Small Small Thing.

Director Statement :

After 4 hard years back and forth to Liberia, we completed Small Small Thing in September 2012. Just 3 months later the subject of our film, Olivia Zinnah (aged 12), died of complications from rape injuries sustained when she was 7 years old.

Olivia was a beautiful little girl, full of hope and laughter, despite having lived most of her life in a hospital with a colostomy bag.

Her death came as we were booking our wrap party and submitting to festivals worldwide. The heartbreak may never entirely heal, but we can use Small Small Thing to keep her story alive.

With the release of Small Small Thing, we hope we can pressure Liberians to bring Olivia's accused rapist to trial, and also shed light on yet another country with an epidemic of gender based violence. President Ellen Sirleaf may have won on a pro-woman platform, but she is letting the women of her country down.

-Jessica Vale

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Remembering Olivia

By

Ambassador M. Nathaniel Barnes

January 5, 2013

Everything happens for a reason...even evil things. A beautiful smile; warm, infectious eyes; a personality that made you embrace her with love, Olivia was brave beyond her years facing her terrible dilemma with super human courage. How could something so evil befall such innocence? Who knows? Perhaps her life, though short and tragic, was intended to provide us with valuable lessons.

The lesson of love: love comes in all colors, shapes and sizes and from unexpected directions; love can exist without strings attached.

The lesson of endurance and perseverance: that one so small and inexperienced could carry the burden of pain, isolation and humiliation with subtle dignity and joy.

The lesson of compassion and a call to action: that those who stand aside in the face of such evil and do nothing are as guilty as those who perpetrate the evil.

Yes, her life was a lesson...many lessons. I pray that those whose lives she touched learn these lessons well.

Thank you, Olivia, my Hero. Rest in Peace.

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Olivia Zinnah, JFK Hospital, Monrovia Liberia , 2009
photo by Nika Offenbac

SELECTED PRESS

The New York Times

By ANITA GATES JUNE 5, 2014



Olivia Zinnah, who was 7 when she was raped by a cousin in Liberia. Nika Offenbac/7

Looking for a villain in Jessica Vale's documentary? There's competition. Obviously, in "[Small Small Thing: The Olivia Zinnah Story](#)," about a 7-year-old rape victim in Liberia, there is the man who attacked her so brutally that her genitals were mangled and covered in scar tissue. He was a 20-year-old cousin. She was left with a fistula requiring numerous surgeries to repair, if it could be fixed at all.

But there are so many others. Olivia's father leaves. Her grandfather, a tribal chief, sides with the rapist. Even her mother doubts her ("If I had been there, I would know.") and does the wrong thing. A driver declares her "useless, useless." Some women who work at the hospital seem compassionate, but others reveal hard hearts. Like many women in the film, they are horrifyingly cavalier about the male culture that endorses this behavior. Raping a child, we are told, is considered a good-luck move.

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"They do it for ritual purpose," a gender-violence specialist says. "To get money, to get a job."

Looking into Olivia's huge brown eyes, full of hope despite everything, and then into so many adults' cold, dead ones (and the camera does, bravely and pointedly) is appalling. There is no gore here, and no on-screen violence, but this is in every way a horror movie. With a devastating ending.

A version of this review appears in print on June 6, 2014, on page C6 of the New York edition with the headline: Small Small Thing: The Olivia Zinnah Story. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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There are Many Reasons to See the Very Difficult *Small Small Thing*

By Daphne Howland Wednesday, Jun 4 2014

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During work on a documentary about foreign doctors at Liberia's ramshackle John F. Kennedy Hospital, another story caught the attention of *Small Small Thing* writer-director Jessica Vale: a nine-year-old girl, emaciated and steeped in her own feces because of damage to her genitals and gastrointestinal system caused by a rape.

Vale is an efficient journalist, packing in facts and riveting interviews about the legacy of Liberia's wars, the leftover brutality of its enlistment of child warriors, now grown to live their own fractured lives, and a portrait of Olivia and those who tried to care for her.

Olivia's mother is trapped. In the bush, her family's leader denies her daughter's rape happened, yet she's comfortable there. Life in Monrovia is daunting, despite the many people, including law enforcement and hospital workers, trying to help. Vale gives us the opportunity to meet the Liberian doctors, safehouse case workers, and others, mostly women, who manage to give Olivia reasons to eat, study, and smile, despite their almost total lack of resources.

There are many reasons to see this very difficult film, not least to face the grim realities in Liberia, and to wonder what more could be done to save lives and preserve the human spirit when it is so clearly yearning to burn bright given any small small chance.

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Palm Beach International Film Festival: Mini reviews!

by Leslie Gray Streeter, Palm Beach Post

Small Small Thing (2013): My husband learned that this documentary was about child rape in Liberia, decided it was a little heavy for a Sunday afternoon, and went to see the "G.I. Joe" sequel instead. And it's true that Jessica Vale's moving work is not always easy to watch. But it should be required, but it makes you angry enough to want to do something. Vale and producer Nika Offenbac follow Olivia Zinnah, who they meet recovering in a Liberian hospital after being raped by a relative. Grim, unbelievably brutal stuff, to be sure, but Vale manages to present a brief history lesson of the country's founding, its idealism and colonialism, its child soldiers who rise from their own victimhood to turn their anger and stolen childhood on others, and the thwarted promises of political intervention. Olivia's fate is spelled out in the film's promotional material, but I won't spill it here, because you'll want to meet her and be riveted by her story, and the journey of her countrymen and women, on your own.

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A Big Task for a "Small Small Thing"

Posted: 09/30/2013 2:41 pm

There is something about her eyes. Big, round saucers brimming with innocence that can see right through you. A dark scar runs down her cheek, a permanent tear for a girl who has a lot to cry about but instead smiles.

"She draws you in," said filmmaker Jessica Vale. "Her eyes pierce through your soul."

In 2009, Vale went to Monrovia, Liberia to film a documentary on U.S. surgeons in post-war countries. When she was unable to film due to disclosure reasons, Vale found herself in a hospital with only the remnants of a story. Then, she met nine-year old Olivia.

Olivia Zinnah, a young girl who was raped when she was seven years old, is the subject of Vale's documentary "Small Small Thing."

"When I first met her she was in a really, really sad state, really malnourished. They had just given her the colostomy bag," Vale recalled.

Olivia was born and raised in Todee, Liberia, a small village outside the country's capital, Monrovia. Her mother, Bendu had kept her daughter in hiding for two years after she became ill, believing Olivia was cursed. A family friend convinced Bendu to take Olivia to the hospital, where doctors discovered that the child had internal injuries, the result of being raped two years prior by a cousin who was in his 20s.

After hearing Olivia's story Vale knew she had to take action. She headed back to New York where she utilized more than a decade worth of connections in the film industry for donated film equipment. She also contacted director, filmmaker and friend Nika Offenbac who jumped on board.

"As a film maker and as a professional freelancer," said Nika. "I had the time and resources to help put an end to what was going on by making people aware of it. Child rape was just not something I could sit by and let happen."

Back in Liberia, Vale and Offenbac shadow Olivia and her mother, Bendu for two months. Bendu was pressured by police to press charges against her cousin at the risk of losing her support system; her village. The taboo and stigma attached to rape left Bendu exiled and torn between two worlds.



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"Before they see the film, a

lot of people don't

understand how a mother can be torn about this," she says "A lot of the film is devoted to Bendu's decision on whether or not to go back to her village or stay with Olivia. She doesn't have any education, she doesn't read or write. All she knows is how to farm and live with her family."

The documentary lends a voice to a side rarely heard in cases like these, the men. Due to decades of civil war, rape was the predominant method of intimidation demanded of child-soldiers. Now grown men, unemployed with little to no education or opportunities, they are left with haunting memories.

"The war stopped and then what? There really has been no education and no therapy," said Vale. "One of the guys in the film tells us that he has flashbacks on a regular basis and that he beats his wife. He doesn't have an outlet. I think that that's a large part of it."

Though her alleged rapist was arrested, he was released with hundreds of other rapists due to overcrowding and lack of evidence. One of the key people involved in unraveling the truth behind Olivia's story was Liberian, Bernie Jones who served as a translator, cultural bridge or as some say a "fixer." Jones lost her father, grandfather and uncle in the war. When she met Olivia in the Monrovia's JFK hospital she saw herself.

"I could've been Olivia," said Jones. "I was affected by the war but I always tell people I was very blessed."

When the Liberian administration heard about Olivia's case several surgeons were sent and different surgeries performed, despite previous advice to wait until she matured. Her case began to gain a lot of attention due to ties between the family friend that admitted Olivia and the Liberian administration. Young Olivia soon became a guinea pig.

"Olivia had way too many surgeries done on her, many of them were botched," said Vale. "We interviewed a lot of the Ministry of Gender, unfortunately it does come across that it wasn't the most coordinated effort."

After her last surgery resulted in a bowel obstruction, Olivia passed away at age 14. Vale was back in New York, working on the post-production of the film when she heard the news.

"It completely changed everything," she said. "Not only did we spend a few weeks trying to emotionally grasp what was going on we had to go back and change certain aspects of the film."

Now with an ending dedicated to Olivia, Vale plans on partnering with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Holistic Education Advocating for Leadership (HEAL), founded by Liberian Mawata Kamara a foundation that aims to increase DNA technology in Liberia.

The UN presence in Liberia has been actively using Olivia's case to push for a new agenda about violence against women. However, Vale has found herself fact-checking both the UN and Liberian media when it comes to Olivia's story.

"I'm really happy they're taking it seriously enough to start presenting the story and the issues," she says. "But I want to see them do more."

The filmmakers demanded a statement from President Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, who was elected in 2006 promising her administration would empower Liberian women, however rape is still the number one crime, many of the victims being children. For months their request was unanswered.

Recently however, President Sirleaf launched the Anti-Rape campaign. According President Johnson, 60 percent of rape victims are children between ages 5 and 13.

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In a statement at the campaign's launch President Johnson stated:

"Sadly, with all of these responses, with all of these mechanisms in place, the heinous crime of rape continues to claim the lives of children - our country's future leaders. We listened to those kids. Let me cite a few: we lost Sarah Mulbah, age 8, on July 31, 2012; Comfort Maname, age 13, on September 13, 2012; Massa Flomo, age 10; Olivia Zinne Gbanjah who, in 2007, at age 7, was raped in Todee, by her Uncle Joseph Nupolu who was never arrested, and who finally died - may he go to hell - on December 18, 2012"

Despite mistakenly listing Olivia's uncle as the culprit this is the first time President Johnson has made a statement in Olivia's behalf. Thus far, Small Small Thing has garnered the "Best Feature Documentary" Award for the 2013 Dallas International Film Festival, a Palm Beach International Film Festival Selection, and invites to film festivals that range from South Africa to Warsaw, Poland. They also won an award for Best Documentary at the Montreal International Black Film Festival.

"It hurts me that Olivia is not here anymore," says Jones. "But she's going to speak a little louder from the grave."



Find out more about the film at :smallsmallthing.com

Follow Sofiya Ballin on Twitter: www.twitter.com/@sofiyaballin

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Olivia Zinnah, Subject Of Upcoming Child Rape Documentary, Dies

11

NEWS BY **TAMBAY A. OBENSON**
JANUARY 8, 2013 6:21 PM
11 COMMENTS

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Sad to report on the death of **Olivia Zinnah**, the young girl who is at the center of an upcoming feature documentary I profiled in August, 2012 - titled *Small Small Thing* - directed by **Jessica Vale**.

The film, 3+ years in the making, is complete, and has been submitted to several film festivals, and should world premiere some time this spring.

It tells the story of a mother and daughter in Liberia, who find themselves fighting tradition, when it is discovered that the 9-year-old had been brutally raped 2 years prior.

The film begins with the discovery of a nine year old girl in the hospital, severely malnourished and handicapped. Believing the cause of her injuries to be witchcraft, the village elders (and her mother) hide the girl for 2 years as her condition worsens. A visiting medical team draws the conclusion that she was brutally raped. The film follows the journey over the course of the next 9 months, as the life of this little girl and her mother, shunned from their village for seeking outside help.

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Olivia Zinnah, Subject Of Upcoming Child Rape Documentary, Dies | Shadow and Act

I received notification this afternoon from director Jessica Vale, alerting me to Olivia Zinnah's passing on December 20, as a result of the long-term complications of the brutal rape she suffered at age 7.

She was 13 at the time of her death.

The unfortunate further details from the email I received follow:

Vale discovered Olivia at JFK Memorial Hospital in January 2009 along with a visiting husband-and-wife OBGYN team from New York City – Ann Marie Beddoe and Peter Dottino. Olivia was suffering from a severe fistula, infections and malnutrition. She was gravely ill and her condition had been deteriorating for two years. Liberian surgeons initially attempted to fix the fistula but botched the surgery. Her mother, Bindu, did not originally seek medical attention for the girl because their remote tribal village diagnosed her as a victim of “witchcraft.” After two years, Olivia was brought to JFK where Dr. Wilhelmina Jallah, head of OBGYN, determined Olivia's injuries were a result of rape. At that time, Olivia named her cousin John as her attacker, who was in his twenties at the time of the incident. The family and John denied the accusations, shunning Olivia and Bindu from their village, forcing them to live at the hospital. American surgeons operated on Olivia, saving her life. They gave her a colostomy bag and determined the fistula was so severe it could not be fixed until she was 16 years old and her body had matured. Olivia and Bindu were then sent to live at a safe home for rape victims [...]. In December 2012, Olivia was rushed to JFK with a bowel obstruction. Dr. Jallah was unable to get approval for emergency surgery. Olivia's condition worsened and U.S. doctors insisted Olivia receive an operation to save her life. Days later, Olivia finally undergoes a colostomy surgery, but it was too late. She died two days later at 13.

In a statement, Vale said:

“I hope the release of ‘Smallsmall Thing’ will pressure the Liberian government to find Olivia's accused rapist and bring him to trial... Olivia was Liberian, but her voice is global. How many times, in how many countries does this have to happen for people to pay attention?”

According to UN statistics in 2012, rape is still the #1 crime in Liberia, despite President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's efforts (and Nobel Peace Prize); the majority of the victims are said to be children - some as young as 2 years old.

Small Small Thing is the result of investigations by the filmmakers, revealing what they call “*an intricate web of corruption, adventure and hope.*”

There's a lot more to this story, so feel free to visit the project's website [HERE](#).

As noted, the film has been submitted to festivals all over the world, and will debut on the festival circuit this year.

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What's Happening Now

Olivia Zinna, Subject of Child Rape Documentary, Dead at 13

THE LIBERIAN GIRL'S ASSAULT BECAME THE SUBJECT OF A FILM DETERMINED TO INCREASE AWARENESS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS ACROSS THE GLOBE



By **MICHAEL ARCEAUX**
Writer



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The subject of a new documentary entitled *Small Small Thing* has tragically died—leaving the rest of us to make sure that the culture responsible for her passing be dealt a fatal blow.

Olivia Zinnah of Monrovia, Liberia, was seven when she was brutally raped in her native country. On December 20, 2012, she died from the long-term systemic complications spurred by her sexual assault. She was only 13. While the alleged rape of 11-school girls at a state-run boarding school in a remote part of India drew [headlines internationally](#), not as much attention has been given to Zinnah's horrific story. The documentary, produced by Take My Picture, LLC, chronicles the physical and emotional struggles that came as a result of her rape.

The film also makes note of the problems plaguing areas across the world in which young girls are victimized, but often left without proper care as their abuse goes unreported.

According to reports, three years after Zinnah's 2005 rape in a rural area outside of Monrovia, she had only received traditional healing—described as including “herbs and sorcery.” She was not taken to the doctor, nor were police called. However, once her uncle Lawrence Samael visited the family in 2008 and witnessed the terrible state she was in and the poor treatment she received, he reported the crime and named the suspect—a family member—to the police.

She was then taken to Monrovia for medical attention and the Ministry of Gender was contacted. Gender Minister Julia Duncan Cassell explained to journalists, “We did everything we could to save her.”

In their 2011 report, Doctors Without Borders [reported](#) that 92 percent of females treated for rape in its Liberia facilities were under 18. A separate DWB study published in November said that of about 1,500 females treated in Monrovia clinics in 2008 and 2009 after rape, four out of 10 were younger than 12 and one in 10 were younger than 5. “Half the survivors were children aged 13 years or younger and included infants and toddlers,” the report revealed.

Liberia's country's Gender Ministry did make efforts to draw attention to Zinnah's death, though her passing initially was limited to coverage in local

www.ebony.com/news-views/olivia-zinna-subject-of-child-rape-documentary-dead-at-13-2013#axz2IdTqaSkj

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Olivia Zinna, Subject of Child Rape Documentary, Dead at 13 - News & Views - EBONY

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media. Zinnah died of an infection in a Monrovia hospital a week before Christmas, making her the fourth girl last year to succumb to rape-related injuries in the West African nation.

On her death, *Small Small Things* director and producer [Jessica Vale said](#): "I hope the release of *Small Small Thing* will pressure the Liberian government to find Olivia's accused rapist and bring him to trial. Olivia was Liberian, but her voice is global. How many times, in how many countries does this have to happen for people to pay attention?"

Liberian U.N. Ambassador Nathaniel Barnes echoed Vale's sentiments: "Olivia was brave beyond her years facing her terrible dilemma with super-human courage. Perhaps her life, though short and tragic, was intended to provide us with valuable lessons."

Small Small Thing [has been submitted](#) to numerous festivals and should be making its premiere later this spring. A petition has been started to get a statement on Olivia Zinnah's death from Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. You can add your signature [here](#).

For more information about *Small Small Thing*, you can visit the [film's official website](#) and [Facebook page](#).



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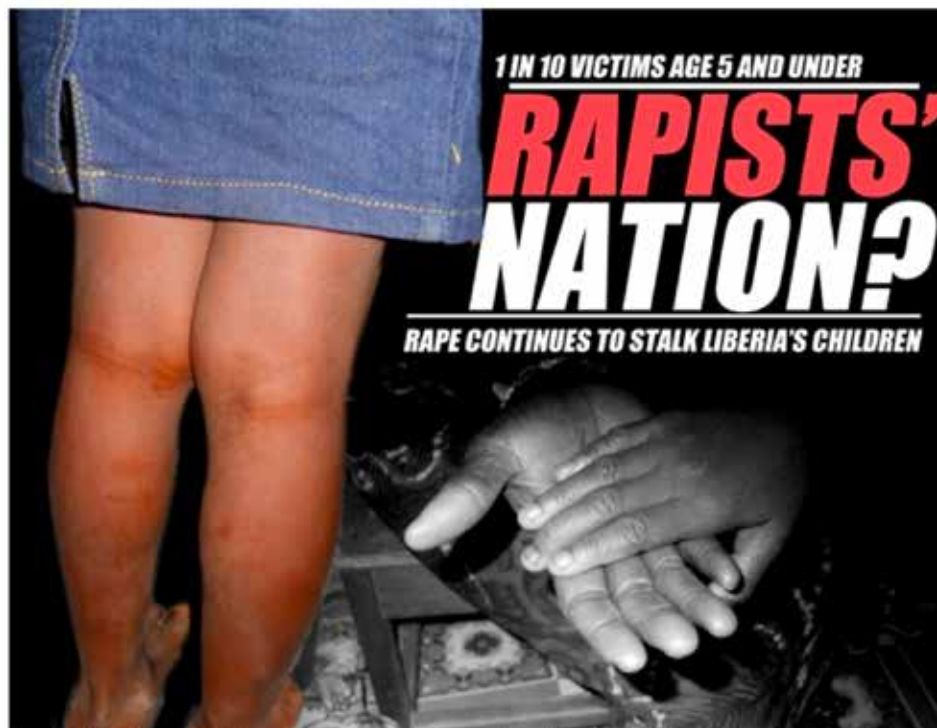
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Written by New Narratives Fellow, Tecee Boley, tecee.boleyn@frontpageafricaonline.com

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"The boy is my neighbor's son," says the grandmother. "We eat and play together. I have boys children too so when they came to me begging I agreed not to go to court. Besides, that court thing can waste time and money. I just want my little girl to be all right." - A Grandmother to rape victim

Monrovia - Decontee, 14, sits with her father in a small examination room at the Duport Road Sexual Gender Based Violence Clinic. Tears roll down the cheeks of both father and daughter as the head nurse Elizabeth Kekula presses her palm to the girl's back and holds the father's hand.

Decontee aborted her first child because she was raped by her next door neighbor's son. The father puts his hands over knees in an effort to stop trembling of anger. The father recounts the story of the rape because his daughter can't stop crying. He says the perpetrator threatened his daughter.

"He told her he was going to kill her if she told anyone," he says. "So she kept the torn-up clothes. He is my next-door neighbor's son who is above 20 year-old."

As unlikely as it may seem Decontee is lucky. At least she is still alive. Another 14-year-old rape victim Olivia Zinnah was buried on Dec. 22 after suffering years of pain and surgeries following a rape by her own uncle when she was just 7.

These 14 year-olds are just two of many Liberian girls who lose their lives, will not be able to get pregnant or will suffer lifelong physical and mental injuries because of rape. The statistics are staggering.

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Half of survivors are kids

Doctors Without Borders (DWB) reported in 2011 that 92 percent of females treated for rape in its Liberia facilities were under 18. A DWB study published in November said that of about 1,500 females treated in Monrovia clinics in 2008 and 2009 after rape, four out of 10 were younger than 12.

One in 10 was younger than 5. "Half of the survivors were children aged 13 years or younger and included infants and toddlers," according to the report.

But shockingly only a small number of these cases ever make it to court. The Women and Children protection section of the Liberian National Police received 917 cases in 2012 but only 200 went to court. Out of 487 cases reported at the Sexual Gender based Violence Clinic run by a NGO called Touching Humanity In Need of Kindness (THINK) in 2012 only 4 were taken to court.

Olivia died of an infection in a Monrovia Hospital a week before Christmas. She was the fourth girl known to have died in Monrovia because of rape-related injuries in 2012 but experts say the number for the whole country is likely much, much higher. Most cases are never reported. Girls across the country are likely dying from untreated injuries caused by rape.

Gender Minister Julia Duncan Cassel and her team brought this case to light. It is also the subject of an international film to be released in the next couple of months. The minister says she mourns the death of Olivia today because according to her not much attention was given her death in the local media.

"The case is in the Supreme Court. The case is still there even though we heard the perpetrator is out. There are so many Olivias out there, if we don't bring this case to light who knows how many others are dying from similar situations."

According to Decontee's father, she was raped one evening while going home. The accused perpetrator, who cannot be named in case because it would risk the prosecution case at trial, called her in his room and locked the door. The father only got to know when he discovered that she was pregnant.

'Very Broken Justice System'

"She wants to kill herself, so I have to stay with her all the time until things are settled," he says."

Getting things settled in Decontee's case depends on Liberia's very broken justice system. Just getting the perpetrator arrested can take months, before he even goes to trial.

In Decontee's case the police told the father they have to complete lengthy investigations before arresting the accused rapist. It's something the grieving father cannot understand.

"When they asked me this morning to come back to the clinic for the pregnancy test results I just broke down and started crying again," he says.

"My daughter's life is at stake; the boy is walking free in the community."

"Since December I have been running to the police station up to now they have done nothing. They have the spoiled clothes



Many families prefer, as Patience's grandmother did, not to pursue the case at all.

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and my baby's statement. What are they waiting for to do their job?" he asks.

In the same clinic 9 year-old Patience walks like a cripple. She was raped by a 12 year-old boy two weeks ago. "

"Patience's case illustrates one of the big challenges faced by prosecutors in Liberia's justice system. Patience's grandmother, like Olivia's family, chose not to go to the police but instead to settle the case, "the family way."

"The boy is my neighbor's son," says the grandmother. "We eat and play together. I have boys children too so when they came to me begging I agreed not to go to court. Besides, that court thing can waste time and money. I just want my little girl to be all right."

But Patience cannot forget about it. According to Madam Kekula, she has infections in her reproductive organ as result of injuries of the rape and may have to come at the clinic for over one month.

It will take some time to assess the full physical and mental impact on Patience but experts say she will likely live with this attack one way or another for the rest of her life.

'Our Major Challenge'

Indeed the court justice process takes a lot of time. Prosecutors in Liberia have no access to DNA testing and other forensic techniques that allow them to prove the perpetrator is guilty. It is often her word against his.

Testifying against an older man, a family member who has possibly threatened you, is a very difficult thing for many young girls. There is also a huge stigma that the girl will have to live with. The further the family takes the case the more people will know.

Many families prefer, as Patience's grandmother did, not to pursue the case at all.

"Honestly that is our major challenge," says Vera Mendy, head of the Women and Children Protection Section at the Liberian National Police. "We make follow up in the communities."

"But sometimes the family relocates the victim. And we can't get them through to the number they leave at the police station. We have also had situations where the community leaders and churches and mosques in some communities want to settle cases at their level."



Olivia died of an infection in a Monrovia Hospital a week before Christmas. She was the fourth girl known to have died in Monrovia because of rape-related injuries in 2012 but experts say the number for the whole country is likely much, much higher. Most cases are never reported. Girls across the country are likely dying from untreated injuries caused by rape.

Minister Duncan- Cassel also blames a lack of education among Liberians as to how the court system works. "Some of the reason we are finding from our own study is that a lot of our people are not educated to the importance of reporting these case."

Just one court is responsible for all cases of sexual offenses. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf created the court in 2008 with the goal of speeding up prosecution of rape cases. According to Vera Mendy, it has not had that effect. She says the court should be reformed.

Father getting exhausted

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Doctors Without Borders (DWB) reported in 2011 that 92 percent of females treated for rape in its Liberia facilities were under 18.

still suffering his presence."

Tecee Boley is a fellow of New Narratives, a project supporting leading independent media in Africa. See more at www.newnarratives.org

NOTE TO THE READER: The names of victims in this story are withheld to protect their identity except for Olivia Zinnah who died due to injuries sustained as a result of rape.

"We think that the court should be reformed just as the police was. Because we have had many cases that were investigated, case file prepared and sent to court; but the term of court is very slow."

"In Montserrado we only one court for sexual Gender Based Violence with one sitting judge, and they have many cases."

The court's slow pace has contributed to the reluctance many families feel to pursue a long, painful court case that will expose their daughters to more suffering. For many a financial settlement with the perpetrator's family is small consolation but they believe it is the only consolation they will ever get.

Back at the clinic Patience's grandmother smiles bitterly as she says she knows that her action of compromise is wrong. "What can I do?" she asks.

"My hands are tied. I know what happened was bad. I thing made her sick, her skin was really hot and she was walking some kinda way. But I can't carry that woman to court."

At the same time Decontee's father who wants to go court is getting exhausted at the slow pace at the system.

"Every time I see him I feel like doing something to him," he says.

"But I can't take the law in my hands. I went to the police because I respect them. My daughter suffered the pains of abortion and she is

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In Liberia, rape has become a standard procedure, used as a tool of oppression and to instill fear. From 1989 to 2003, the Liberian civil war used mass rape as an element of warfare, affecting 3 out of 4 young girls and women. Although the war ended, the rape epidemic still continues in Liberia and has shattered the social norms of the community. Even after almost 8 years, women continue to live in fear and continue to be victims of rape.

According to Liberia's Ministry of Justice, 40% of those raped are shockingly under the age of 12. It wasn't until recently that these rapes were reported, however, seeking justice has never meant that justice is actually served. Olivia, now 11, was raped at the age of 6. Her and her mother are boldly pressing charges, causing them to be outcasts within their home village. The severity of Olivia's fistula, a tear in the vaginal/anal area, has left her feeling stigmatized and unfortunately may not be surgically fixed until she is 16.

30% of cases for fistula treatment in Liberian hospitals are trauma from rape. Liberia is in desperate need of change, reports of rape, or lack thereof, has become far too common. Although Liberia is working to combat gender violence, the number of children raped post-war conflict remains overwhelming.

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Young Girls ages 5-15 at a safe home for victims of sexual assault, Monrovia Liberia , 2009
photo by Nika Offenbac

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