

Establishing services in post-conflict Sierra Leone

by Amie-Tejan Kellah

During Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war – which ended in 2001 – there was a high incidence of sexual assault against women and young girls.¹ Return of peace has not meant that women and girls are safe from sexual assault.

Years of conflict have weakened the rule of law and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) have few opportunities to access appropriate services. As survivors are often blamed and stigmatised, women and girls are hesitant to come forward to seek assistance and/or denounce their assailants.

Sexual assault is a criminal offence in Sierra Leone but many cases are still handled by traditional community authorities. Sanctions they impose are generally more harmful to survivors than perpetrators – such as forcing the survivor to marry their assailant. In many instances, women cannot report incidences of sexual assault to police without first receiving consent from the local chief.

IRC has partnered with the Government of Sierra Leone to establish three Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARC) – locally referred to as 'Rainbo' centres. One is in the capital, Freetown; the others are in provincial capitals, Kinema and Kono. Each centre offers free medical,

psychosocial and legal support. From March 2003 to September 2005, the Centres provided services for 1,769 survivors of sexual assault – 75% of whom had been raped.

Singled out by UNHCR in 2004 as one of seven 'best practice' GBV programmes worldwide, the SARC project has taken a multi-disciplinary approach to sexual assault. Since no single agency or organisation has the mandate or the capacity to address GBV alone, SARC has worked with a range of government and non-government stakeholders. Partnership with the branch of the Sierra Leonean police charged with investigating domestic, sexual and physical violence against women and children has led to a huge increase in referrals.

Each Rainbo Centre is closely connected to a government hospital and provides free and confidential counselling, forensic medical examination and treatment, transport, food, clothes and legal advocacy. In order to ensure that all female survivors have the option of

being seen by female doctors, the SARC project trained eight female doctors to conduct all preliminary medical consultations and to prescribe treatment for clients at the Freetown centre. Since female doctors are not available in the provinces, the project trained two health ministry doctors to work alongside Rainbo Centre midwives.

The SARC project, in conjunction with partner agencies, also works to educate the community on accessing services at the Centres on the consequences of sexual assault and on advocacy. IRC conducts regular capacity-building trainings with partner agencies on topics including clinical management of rape and communications skills in working with survivors. SARC's medical, psychosocial and legal services will eventually be transferred to the control of the Sierra Leonean government.

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1. Human Rights Watch (2003) report *We'll Kill You if You Cry: Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict* estimates that as many as 257,000 Sierra Leonean women and girls were raped during the civil war. <http://hrw.org/reports/2003/sierraleone/>