



## Survivors of War Rape in Mali Find Solace in Soap and Sewing

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Mariam still carries the scars from when she was slashed and raped by Islamic militants during the occupation of northern Mali in 2012. Mariam's two nieces were also raped in front of her eyes, and died. Her husband disappeared. After fleeing to Bamako, Mariam lives with her young son and struggles to make ends meet by washing clothes.



**Target of aggression: women attend an outreach meeting by Sini Sanuman animators in Bamako.**

Even so, Mariam's mind was on other things when she met a visiting team from The Advocacy Project (AP) in Bamako recently. Mariam was making soap - and enjoying it.

Mariam is one of 60 survivors of sexual violence who are recovering at centers in Bamako and the northern town of Bourem. The program is managed by Sini Sanuman, a leading Malian advocate for women's rights and AP, with funding from the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations in Berlin.

The goal is to help survivors of war rape recover their confidence by learning skills - an approach that has been tested in the Congo and

praised by the United Nations, but never attempted in Mali until now.

It seems to be working. El Haj Mouhamadou Sylla, the center psychologist, said that Mariam is the first to arrive and the last to leave the Bamako center every day. Mariam herself says that it helps to be with other women: "We understand each other so well."

The program comes at a critical time for Mali. Peace talks began in Algiers in July between the Malian government and armed groups (excluding the Islamists). But security has deteriorated sharply in recent weeks following several deadly attacks on UN peace-keepers. Meanwhile, the UN estimates that 2.5 million Malians need protection. Northern towns like Bourem, which was stripped clean by Islamic militants in 2012, are struggling to recover, while 127,000 displaced Malians still live with families in Bamako. The current outbreak of Ebola has created new uncertainty and fear.



**Zaliha Maiga, an animator from the northern town of Bourem, with soap samples made at the Bourem center**

Sini Sanuman's support for rape survivors begins with "animators" who work in communities and identify vulnerable women like Mariam. The women are then referred to a center, where they receive food and training in soap-making, embroidery and making clothes.

Soap is particularly popular, because it is quickly made and widely used. The centers produce a fragrant hand soap that is made from the oil of a local fruit, known as *karite*, or shea butter (photo). The Bamako center is now selling as much soap as it can produce - much to the delight of trainer Sissako Aisata Toure.

The women are also taking a crash course in tailoring and producing embroidered panels for an advocacy quilt which describe their ordeal in 2012. Several wept as they explained their designs. Mr El Haj Mouhamadou Sylla, the psychologist, described the act of embroidering as a "form of resistance and also very therapeutic."

Sini Sanuman's program is an undoubted success, it also makes heavy demands on staff and beneficiaries alike. Zaliha Maiga, an animator from Bourem, said that three of the women who attend the Bourem training have to cross four rivers to reach the center every day. Conditions are also tough for the Sini Sanuman team, she said. There is no running water or electrical lighting. Bread runs out at 10.00 am. The days are boiling hot and the nights are cold.

But there is also a sense that by restoring the confidence of women, Zaliha and her colleagues are helping to prevent a repeat of the horror of 2012. "If Sini Sanuman did not exist, it would have to be invented" said Abdou Zoualla Toure, a representative of the Mayor of Bourem who made the long trip south recently to meet with AP.

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**Embroidery as therapy: producing panels for an advocacy quilt at the Bamako center.**

AP has deployed a Peace Fellow, Giorgia Nicatore, to help Sini Sanuman manage the program. Giorgia has taken a semester off from Georgetown University, where she is studying conflict resolution, and is recording the experience through photos and a series of powerful blogs.

- [Read Giorgia's blogs](#)
- [View Giorgia's photos](#)

***We are grateful to Humanity United for supporting our fellowship program and to the Peace and Collaborative Development Network (PCDN) for re-posting our blogs and bulletins.***

