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Rape Survivors Struggle as Women Again Bear the Brunt of Conflict in Mali

(This bulletin does not use real names)



Recovery is a communal activity at the Gao center

psychosocial support and training from [Sini Sanuman](#), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP), at a center here in Gao. Their ordeal carries echoes of 2012, when Tuareg rebels linked up with jihadists and unleashed terror across northern Mali. Thousands of women were raped, forced into marriage and beaten.

The 2012 crisis led to a French military intervention, elections, a peace process and the deployment of a large UN peace-keeping mission (MINUSMA). But this has not been enough to curb the current wave of violence against women, which has included a mass flogging. Rape

Gao, northeast Mali: Mariam tells her story with dignity, pausing to pull the checkered scarf over her face when it becomes unbearable. Mariam, 21, was visiting the village of Berrah when four armed men stopped the bus and robbed the passengers. They then took turns to rape her before leaving her bleeding and unconscious. Mariam has since avoided public transport and only recently begun to speak to men again.

Mariam is one of 30 survivors of sexual violence who receive

attacks on public transport in northeast Mali have become "routine," in the words of one worried UN official.



Aboubacarine Hama counsels rape survivors

None of this is a surprise to Aissata, 19, one of several survivors who spoke to AP recently at the Sini Sanuman center on condition of anonymity. Aissata was picked up by six armed men during the occupation of Gao in 2012, gang-raped and forced into marriage at gunpoint.

Aissata escaped after two months, but found herself pregnant and now views her daughter with a mixture of affection and fear. "Every time I look at her, I remember," she says. "But I love her!" It took Aissata four years to share her experience with the psychologist from Sini Sanuman.

Awa, 21, faces what Aissata went through in 2012 and is fearful at the prospect. Awa was offered a ride to a friend's wedding in Gao earlier this year and raped. After finding out that she was pregnant, Awa hid from the world. It took months for her to attend a local woman's meeting, where she learned about Sini Sanuman's center from an outreach worker.

Aboubacarine Hama, the Sini Sanuman psychologist, has spent many hours coaxing Awa out of her silence and says she now "tells us more than she tells her parents." His goal is to reconcile Awa with her family and ensure that she gives birth at home "without adding to her trauma." In meantime, Awa tries to disguise her pregnancy with a loose dress and shawl.

None of the survivors can identify their attackers, which makes it hard to know whether they are using rape as a deliberate strategy. The jihadist groups have vowed to impose sharia'a on the north and placed a bounty on foreign visitors to Gao. Some attacks appear to be the work of Tuareg bandits who are supposed to be part of the peace process.



Embroidery offers therapy and a means of expression

Displaced women are particularly vulnerable. Gao has become a way-station for migrants from West Africa who hope to reach Libya and cross the Mediterranean - and this leaves them at the mercy of traffickers. But there are also women like Fatimata, 21, who flee violence in their villages. After Fatimata arrived in Gao she found a job cleaning for a family. The husband raped her when they were alone and threatened to kill her if she spoke out.

Leila, 21, another survivor, is one of five women at the center who have suffered domestic abuse. She married a Malian Army officer in 2014 after Gao was liberated but he announced after a week that he already had a wife and child. Leila endured three years of beating before she entered the Sini Sanuman program in July, still carrying the scars and missing much of her hair.

Leila's marriage cannot be saved, but Mr Hama the psychologist is confident that the four other victims of domestic abuse can be reconciled with their husbands. The key moment for all survivors, he says, comes when they feel confident enough to describe their ordeal ("*declarer*"). But it can take months to get there.

As important as psychosocial counseling may be, the women are also fortified by the friendship of the other survivors at the center, and the confidence that comes from learning a skill and [selling their own products, particularly soap](#). Sini Sanuman offers training in embroidery, soap-making and tailoring and expects to sell over 30,000 bars of *Sini Savon* this year. In a good week Fatimata earns 2,200 CFA (\$4). Soap is her sole source of income.



Soap is the only source of income for many survivors

Sini Sanuman's program has been supported since 2014 by the [German Federal Foreign Office](#) through [Zivik](#) in Berlin, and by the Foreign Ministry of Liechtenstein.

UNICEF has provided sewing machines and soap equipment to help survivors work at home when their training ends in December. This could be particularly important for unmarried women with infants, like Awa, who will not want to be seen outside the house.

As well as repairing individual lives, the program is trying to challenge the ideology of violence against women that helps to drive the current attacks. "Women are agents of peace," said

Sekou Traore, who heads the program for UN Women in northern Mali. "Our job is to help them organize, defend their rights and become economically active."

* [Click here](#) to donate to the soap-makers of Mali - and thank you!

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