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Communities and Companionship Boost Rape Survivors in Mali

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Community support and the companionship of other survivors may be the best way to help victims of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) regain their confidence and re-enter society, according to a new report on Mali from The Advocacy Project (AP).



The 38-page report, [Empowering Survivors Of Sexual Violence In Mali Through Community Support](#), reviews the work of Sini Sanuman ("Healthy

Tomorrow") a leading Malian advocate for women. Between 2014 and 2017, *Sini Sanuman* offered counseling and training to 645 GBV survivors at four centers in Mali. AP provided technical support through three AP Peace Fellows and the program was funded by the foreign ministries of Germany and Liechtenstein.

The report comes after a year in which violence against women in Mali rose to levels not seen since the rebellion in 2012, when Tuareg fighters and extremists used sexual violence to terrorize women and communities across the north. Last year, according to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), agencies in Mali responded to 2,882 cases of GBV - more even than in 2012.

More than half of the 210 women treated by *Sini Sanuman* in 2017 were raped, and several were impregnated by their attackers, causing enormous distress to the victims and their families. Some were so traumatized that they waited years before seeking help.

One woman, who gave birth to a child after being raped multiple times in the northern town of Gao in 2012, told AP that she still views her daughter with a mixture of affection and fear. "Every time I look at her, I remember (that she was born from violence)" she said. "But I love her."

UNFPA blames most of the 2017 violence on the conflict, which worsened in after four extremist groups joined forces and expanded their campaign to central Mali. Twice as many peacekeepers and Malian soldiers died as in 2016. By March of this year only 22% of government officials were at their posts in the north and center of the country.



This exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. Malnutrition reached 10% in some conflict areas, and over 30,000 Malians were displaced by fighting, most of them women. Fifty-four of the 120 women who received assistance from *Sini Sanuman* in Bamako last year had fled from the north. Many now live precariously in the capital, cut off from their families and with food reserves dwindling.

Sini Sanuman's response, as described in the report, has been to build a supportive community for vulnerable women. This starts with outreach sessions (*animations*) in slums, at which skilled communicators advise women on how to avoid violence. GBV survivors are invited to enroll at one of the four centers in Bamako and the northern towns of Gao and Bourem.

The centers enable *Sini Sanuman* to offer trauma counseling, medical care (funded by UNICEF) and cooked meals. The women are also taught to express themselves through embroidery, which is therapeutic. Most important, however, is the companionship of other survivors who have suffered a similar ordeal.

In parallel with the counseling, *Sini Sanuman* trains survivors to produce soap and clothes. The report explains how training began in 2014 as an experiment and now generates serious money. Trainees sold 34,576 bars of soap (*Sini Savon*) in 2017 for \$9,724, and also produced and sold clothes for festivals.

In an effort to help survivors re-enter society, *Sini Sanuman* has also invested in several women's cooperatives which agree to employ trainees once they leave the centers. This novel approach - another benefit of *Sini Sanuman's* extensive network of community contacts - is described as a success by the report, although it also advises *Sini Sanuman* to partner with other NGOs that have specialist knowledge of women's business.

In concluding its review, the report notes that Malian NGOs are carrying more of the humanitarian burden, as international aid workers face growing threats in the north. *Sini Sanuman* suggests they are up to the challenge. Between 2014 and 2017, the organization managed over \$600,000 of western aid money and met the demanding requirements of the German Foreign Ministry. This capacity, combined with its human and

social capital, makes *Sini Sanuman* an excellent partner and good investment for future donors.

At the same time, says the report, international agencies and donor governments could do much more for GBV survivors in Mali. This should start with increased funding for the protection of women, which fell well below UN targets in 2017.



The report also urges donors to take the initiative in strengthening community-based solutions, as recommended recently by [Pramila Patten, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict](#). Ms. Patten herself, says the report, is particularly well placed to advocate for local organizations which act on her ideas.

The report ends by recommending that international aid workers and diplomats meet in person with GBV survivors whenever possible. "Such meetings are uplifting for the survivors and visitors alike. The women who provided information for this report are a reminder that the struggle against sexual and gender-based violence can be inspiring as well as deeply distressing."

- [Download the report here](#)
- To talk with the author email iain@advocacynet.org or skype ([iain.guest](#))
- [Read more about Sini Sanuman's work](#)
- Read the blogs of Peace Fellows who worked at Sini Sanuman: [Giorgia](#) (2014), [Refilwe](#) (2015) and [Rose](#) (2016)
- [Donate to Sini Sanuman's soap-making project!](#)

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