

Survivors of War Rape Struggle to Survive in Mali's Capital

(This bulletin may contain disturbing language)

Bamako, Mali: Fatima (below) covers her face and sobs as she faces the prospect of leaving the bare room where she lives with her six children in Mali's capital. This will be Fatima's fourth move since she was raped by Tuareg rebels and driven from her home in the north last year. It may not be the last. She had no money, no husband, and no extended family to support her.



Fatima, right, was raped by Tuareg rebels during the war in 2012. She is comforted by Aminata Sissoko, one of ten animators from the Malian organization Sisi Sanuman who reach out to survivors of war rape

Fatima was one of several survivors of sexual violence who met with The Advocacy Project (AP) during a recent AP mission in Mali. According to the translator, it was hard for Fatima to know what was more traumatic - the memory of her assault, the disappearance of her husband, or her descent into poverty. The misery was simply too much for her to bear.

Last year's war in Mali created a vast pool of suffering, and as in other conflicts sexual violence is particularly hard to treat. The challenge starts with locating survivors. Sini Sanuman ("Healthy Tomorrow"), a new AP partner organization, has referred 221 survivors to services but feels that many more women are reluctant to come forward.

"The numbers are certainly an under-estimate," agreed Lamine Traore, from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). "Mali is an Islamic country where sexual issues are taboo and deeply private. Rape survivors feel that they have shamed themselves and their families." In addition, he said, many survivors have declined to seek treatment at health centers because of the cost.

Specialists have no doubt that the rapes were part of a strategy. The rebellion was launched in January 2012 by fighters from the Tuareg tribe, which has long been an uneasy partner in Mali's democracy. After taking the town of Gao in April, they systematically sought out women, apparently intent on terrorizing and expelling civilians.

When four rebels came to Fatima's house, she told them she was menstruating. Ignoring her pleas, the four men raped her in front of her children. She fled the next morning. Another refugee, Mariam, recalled how rebels raped her 16 year-old daughter and then attacked her. She was pregnant at the time and lost the fetus. Her daughter was impregnated by her assailant and gave birth to a stillborn baby. "We all cried together," said Mariam sadly.

Echoing other rape survivors, Fatima and Mariam said they had been attacked by "white-skinned men," suggesting that the Tuareg rapes were ethnically motivated.

A second, but equally methodical, form of sexual violence was practiced by three armed Islamist groups which took over the rebellion and imposed a harsh regime on the north. Women were forced into marriage, shared between men, and flogged for riding motorcycles or refusing to cover up.



All of this has contributed to a major humanitarian crisis. A [UN report in August](#) estimated that 175,282 Malians have fled to neighboring countries, while 342,033 were displaced within Mali itself. Unlike other emergencies, none of the displaced live in IDP camps. Instead they depend on the charity of relatives, like Mariam, or scrape by like Fatima, placing a massive burden on Malians. Lamine Traore from the UNFPA, who himself comes from the north, has supported 45 displaced family members.

Fighting in the north has stopped since the French intervention in January of this year, but many Malians feel that the Islamists simply buried their arms and are waiting out the departure of the French. The Tuareg have suspended their rebellion and joined the government side, but without enthusiasm. As a result of the uncertainty, only about 11,000 Malians have returned home to the north, according to UN sources.

The task of supporting those who remain has fallen largely to Malian groups like Sini Sanuman, which has been enlisted by UNICEF to identify rape survivors and refer them to courts and hospitals. The group [previously worked on genital cutting](#).



Sini Sanuman's team in Bamako, with president Siaka Traore (front and center) and program coordinator Alpha Boubeye (right)

Although its current focus is on the emergency, Sini Sanuman hopes to open a center in Bamako where women can learn skills that will provide them with an income, such as sewing, soap-making, and gardening. When women start returning in large numbers, the group hopes to follow the example of SOSFED, [AP's partner in the eastern Congo](#), and use small development to reduce the exposure of women to rape in villages.

Sini Sanuman is sharing the plan with allies in Mali, while AP is seeking funding abroad. "We look forward to a strong partnership," said Siaka Traore, the founder and president of Sini Sanuman.

* Read the UN's [assessment of human rights in Mali](#) following the war in the north.

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