

International Alert.



HUMAN SECURITY IN THE MANO RIVER UNION

Empowering women to counter gender-based
violence in border communities

Richard Reeve

May 2010

Understanding conflict. Building peace.

About International Alert

International Alert is an independent peacebuilding organisation that has worked for over 20 years to lay the foundations for lasting peace and security in communities affected by violent conflict. Our multifaceted approach focuses both in and across various regions; aiming to shape policies and practices that affect peacebuilding; and helping build skills and capacity through training.

Our field work is based in Africa, South Asia, the South Caucasus, Latin America, Lebanon and the Philippines. Our thematic projects work at local, regional and international levels, focusing on cross-cutting issues critical to building sustainable peace. These include business and economy, gender, governance, aid, security and justice. We are one of the world's leading peacebuilding NGOs with more than 125 staff based in London and our 13 field offices. To learn more, visit www.international-alert.org.

© International Alert 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

Layout by D. R. Ink, info@d-r-ink.com

Front cover image: © Sando Moore

Human security in the Mano River Union

Empowering women to counter gender-based violence
in border communities

Author profile

Richard Reeve

Richard Reeve is Security Manager with International Alert's Peacebuilding Issues Programme. He has researched, written and taught on security and justice issues and peace support interventions in West Africa since 2001. Prior to joining International Alert in 2009, he worked with the War Studies Department at King's College London, Chatham House Africa Programme, Jane's Information Group and a local conflict resolution NGO in Georgia. He has also worked with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union.

Acknowledgements

This report was researched and authored by Richard Reeve with support from Jackson W. Speare, Dr Makony Donzo and Alicia Kamara and logistic support from Kemo Keita. International Alert would like to thank Sidiki Camara, Aminata Keita, Rev N. Sanford Todd Sr, Amos Gbenyan and all the project animators and partner organisations for on-the-ground facilitation and support, as well as all those in the target communities who contributed to the research, without whose invaluable knowledge and support this report would not have been possible. Many thanks also to Julia Weiner and Aurélien Tobie for their valuable assistance with the production of the French version of this report.

Finally, International Alert would like to thank the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its donor for this work. This report is the responsibility of Alert and does not necessarily reflect the view of any of its donors.

Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Prevalence of SGBV in the target regions	8
Types of SGBV	10
3. Raising awareness and transforming knowledge, attitudes and practices	12
Animators	12
Community radio stations	16
Influencing the regional context	17
4. Security and legal redress mechanisms	18
Liberia	18
Sierra Leone	18
Guinea	19
5. Access to justice	20
Liberia	20
Sierra Leone	20
Guinea	21
Barriers to accessing justice	22
6. Conclusions and recommendations	23

Executive summary

Sexual and gender-based violence in the MRU

- Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has been one of the major legacies of the 14-year (1989-2003) regional conflict in the Mano River Union (MRU) countries: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Thousands of women and girls as well as many men and boys suffered the physical and psychological trauma of rape and sexual violence during the war, while displaced from their homes or after resettling in communities bereft of formal security and justice provisions. Despite post-war restoration of police and judicial presence and passage of legislation protecting women's rights, few perpetrators have been prosecuted successfully and a culture of impunity has persisted. Traditional social structures have often tolerated domestic violence and traditional practices harmful to girls in particular. Relative to men, women have had limited opportunities for empowerment through education, economic advancement and inheritance.
- In response to the huge post-war challenges to the security of women and girls, in 2008 International Alert and its partners designed a tri-country initiative to reduce threats to personal security and to challenge the culture of impunity around SGBV. This has targeted war-affected communities in nine border areas, including five in Liberia and two each in Sierra Leone and Guinea. These range from isolated forest towns to major urban centres. The aim has been to empower communities to lobby for more comprehensive and gender-sensitive reporting of SGBV, for more inclusive and gender-sensitive security and justice responses, and for a coherent sub-regional response to violence in border communities.
- The Human Security in the MRU Project has developed culturally- and linguistically-specific programming for a network of community radio stations to challenge local knowledge, attitudes and practices concerning SGBV in order to reduce perpetration and the stigmatisation of survivors. It has developed a network of "animators" in the nine communities, providing information, counselling and advocacy to men and women in order to guide them through prevention and redress actions. Customary authorities, including chiefs, elders and heads of female societies, have been influenced and trained as frontline justice providers as well as opinion formers. In the process, International Alert has learned much about the challenges of accessing justice, formal and informal, and promoting and protecting rights in the three countries and the ways in which SGBV affects men as well as women.

Providing security and accessing justice

- Sierra Leone has made considerable progress in peacebuilding since its war ended in early 2002, but its constitutional structure means that the national government has a very limited presence outside of Freetown, where chiefs and local court chairmen exercise considerable formal and informal authority over political and judicial functions. Despite the passing of gender laws in 2007 and the establishment of dedicated Family Support Units by the police, the under-resourced courts are overwhelmed with sexual and domestic violence cases. Project animators have worked to influence chiefs, traditional court chairmen and religious leaders to increase knowledge and change attitudes concerning SGBV and to curb the harmful effects of some traditional practices.
- Liberia's post-war reconstruction has prioritised the re-establishment of statutory courts and policing despite crippling financial and logistic constraints and the reliance of most of the rural population on customary institutions. Issues of jurisdiction, particularly over criminal

cases, between the parallel statutory and customary legal systems remain unresolved and there is no formal training and little accountability for chiefs in justice provision. Project animators have worked to raise awareness of Liberia's revised protection legislation and the means by which SGBV victims can access formal justice, shepherding survivors through the court system to secure redress.

- In Guinea the experience with SGBV is different than in Sierra Leone and Liberia; while there has not been a major domestic armed conflict in Guinea, its southern Forest Region was greatly exposed to the conflict in neighbouring countries and continues to experience sporadic localised inter-communal violence. Chiefs have considerable power and influence, although this is not recognised in law. Civil society is weakly developed and there has been comparatively little activism by the state and international actors to challenge behaviour and impunity around SGBV, of which the security forces have been frequent perpetrators. Project animators have confronted a more unstable political context since 2008, but have succeeded in raising awareness of sexual and domestic violence and appropriate redress mechanisms.

Recommendations

Democratisation and demilitarisation in Guinea, decentralisation in Liberia and economic consolidation in Sierra Leone present opportunities for improving practice that challenges impunity and combats SGBV in 2011 and beyond. Supported where appropriate by international partners, the governments of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, civil society and local authorities should build upon progress made in recent years by working to:

- Harmonise laws and legal processes between statutory and customary justice providers to embed legislation that promotes and protects the security and rights of women and children;
- Ensure that national laws governing sexual and domestic violence include men as well as women as potential victims of criminal acts;
- Provide adequate resources, including training, salaries and physical infrastructure, for the full functioning of professional circuit/district and/or magistrates courts in all parts of the country;
- Build capacity and awareness among police and medical professionals on the collection and handling of evidence necessary to secure prosecutions for rape and other forms of SGBV;
- Support the work of community advocates or paralegals trained and resourced to shepherd survivors of SGBV through the justice system;
- Train and sensitise chiefs, court chairmen and other customary justice providers in relevant gender legislation, working with them to define their role and responsibilities within an integrated justice system;
- Challenge harmful traditional practices that undermine the security, social status or psychological wellbeing of women and girls, including early, forced or informal marriage, early or forced initiation and female genital mutilation (FGM);
- Promote educational and economic opportunities for women and girls as well as their equal participation in political institutions at all levels; and
- Strengthen the capacities of national and local media to raise awareness and challenge harmful practices and impunity, including through training of female journalists and in gender-sensitive reporting.

1. Introduction

In early 2008, International Alert and its partner organisations in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone launched a new sub-regional initiative funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and intended to empower citizens to challenge actual and perceived threats to human security and personal safety experienced by vulnerable groups, especially women and girls, in the war-affected area where the original three member states of the Mano River Union (MRU) converge.¹

Between 1989 and 2003, these three countries experienced a catastrophic series of interlinked wars that straddled the boundaries of the MRU, killing up to 300,000 people and displacing several million, hundreds of thousands of them fleeing as refugees to neighbouring MRU states. One of the legacies of these sub-regional wars and displacements has been a culture of impunity surrounding sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Rape was used as a weapon of war to humiliate captured populations as well as a means to gratify the tens of thousands of mainly young male combatants and some of those who controlled the camps. Such behaviour appears to have become institutionalised and anecdotal evidence suggests sexual violence against women may actually have intensified in the immediate aftermath of war, as formerly displaced populations returned from camps to mainly rural communities devoid of formal justice and security provisions, and with little memory of living in peace and security. Untold, thousands of women and girls, but also many men and boys, live with the psychological and sometimes physical or human legacy of SGBV across the sub-region.

Such behaviour has not existed in isolation. In parallel to sexual violence, there is a legacy of domestic violence and disempowerment of women that is embedded in many patriarchal cultures, not just in West Africa. Women are frequently treated as chattels of their husbands or fathers, traded into marriage, often at a very young age, or subject to violent punishment. They are also often deprived of access to education, justice or political decision-making, even while providing the bulk of labour for agriculture as well as child-rearing and domestic duties. The protection or intervention offered by the state has typically been minimal both before and after armed conflict, while custom tends to subordinate rather than empower women to improve their own human security.

In response to these post-war challenges, International Alert and its partners designed a tri-country initiative to reduce threats to personal security, especially threats to women and girls, and to challenge the culture of impunity around SGBV. The aim has been to empower communities to lobby for more comprehensive and gender-sensitive reporting of SGBV, for more inclusive and gender-sensitive security and justice responses, and for a coherent sub-regional response to violence in border communities. The project has developed culturally- and linguistically-specific programming for a network of community radio stations along the borders of the three countries in order to promote a transformative dialogue that challenges local knowledge, attitudes and practices around SGBV to reduce perpetration and the stigmatisation of survivors. It has also developed a network of “animators” in nine war-affected communities who provide information, counselling and advocacy to men and women in order to guide them through prevention and redress actions, including access to statutory security and justice systems.

This report aims to capture the experiences of the project over two and a half years in the context of work in three interlinked but quite specific country contexts. It looks at the extent of SGBV

¹ Côte d'Ivoire officially joined the MRU in May 2008 and also has a recent history of violent conflict, partly influenced by the Liberian situation. It was not included in this project as formulated in 2007.

and domestic violence as experienced in the target communities, details the challenges and best practices of project staff in their attempts to raise awareness and change attitudes and practices, and analyses the particular challenges of providing security and accessing justice (statutory or customary) in the various target communities. It concludes with a series of recommendations for the improved provision of security and justice for women, girls and other vulnerable groups within the MRU.

International Alert's partner organisations

In addition to work with community radio stations, International Alert's work on security for women and girls in the MRU has benefitted from partnerships with a wide range of organisations that support the animators and the development of campaign materials and broadcasting. The genesis of the project drew on experiences shared by organisations such as the Foundation for International Dignity (FIND), American Refugee Committee (ARC), Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL), Liberian Women's Institute (LWI), Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) and Female Journalists of Liberia (FEJAL). The main implementation partners are:

Corps Guinéen pour la Paix et le Développement (CGPD) is an NGO dedicated to involving young Guineans in the socio-economic development of the country and in peacebuilding.

Femmes pour le Développement Intégré et la Promotion Humaine (FEDIPHU) is a Guinean women's NGO dedicated to protecting and improving the socio-economic situation of women, youth and children in rural areas of the Forest Region.

Flomo Theatre Productions is a Liberian drama company that specialises in community theatre and radio drama productions to promote cultures of peace and development.

Liberian Women's Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC) is an initiative to promote the empowerment of female journalists and reporting on issues of importance to women.

Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) is a Sierra Leonean NGO working to empower civil society, especially youth and women, and to build a culture of peace.

Press Union of Liberia (PUL) is the main body representing Liberian journalists.

Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) is a network of women's organisations in Liberia that were active in the struggle for peace during the war and for women's rights and societal peace since the war.

2. Prevalence of SGBV in the target regions

Liberia is often identified as having experienced among the world's highest incidences of sexual violence against women, with the areas of the country most affected by armed conflict – counties adjacent to Guinea and Sierra Leone² – perceived to have suffered the worst during and perhaps after the war. Studies by International Rescue Committee, conducted in refugee camps in Sierra Leone in 2003, suggested that 73 percent of female residents there had been sexually abused prior to fleeing Liberia.³ World Health Organisation (WHO) SGBV assessments conducted in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps and health centres in 2004 and 2005 concluded that 80-82 percent of women surveyed had experienced SGBV during or immediately after the conflict.⁴ Other studies point to comparably high incidences of sexual violence experienced by female ex-combatants. While these studies and figures can be criticised for sampling bias and an overly broad definition of what constitutes sexual violence, their findings are indicative of an extraordinarily broad experience of SGBV, especially among the displaced and combat-associated.⁵ Similarly atrocious levels of sexual violence against women and girls were recorded in Sierra Leone during its 11-year conflict, in the war zone, among the huge displaced population and among those recruited or pressed into combatant forces. Exposure to sexual violence by women and men, both as victims and perpetrators, has traumatised a large sector of the population and deeply affected familial and gender identities, roles and relations.

In southern Guinea, where there has been limited displacement and occupation by armed factions, the situation has been somewhat different, though the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees in camps brought the Liberian and Sierra Leonean experience into the country. Just as in these neighbours, where the vast majority of recorded rapes and sexual assaults were committed by combatant forces, Guinea's security forces have an extremely negative reputation for violence against women. Most notably, on 28th September 2009, security forces in Conakry made systematic use of gang rape to suppress an opposition protest. At least 109 women were documented as raped, sexually assaulted or subjected to sexual slavery in an event that has been referred to the International Criminal Court for constituting crimes against humanity.⁶ Foremost among the perpetrators were allegedly recent recruits from southern Guinea and northern Liberia.⁷ SGBV by the security forces and militia has also been recorded in southern Guinea, amid a national culture of nearly complete impunity for these uniformed men. Unlike post-war Sierra Leone (since 2002) and Liberia (since 2004), no meaningful process of security sector reform (SSR) or professionalisation had begun in Guinea at the time of project implementation.

SGBV is not merely manifested in times of armed conflict or perpetrated by men with guns. In the target region of the MRU borderlands, the armed conflict dramatically upset social and gender relations, while the peace, repatriation and return facilitated attempts to restore the social status

2 The three Liberian counties on which this project focused – Bong, Lofa and Gbarpolu – reported the highest total numbers of wartime violations (not only SGBV) of any counties outside of Monrovia/Montserrado to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Together they accounted for one-third of all recorded victims and violations. Republic of Liberia, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2009). *Volume II: Consolidated final report*. Monrovia, Liberia. p.257. Available at http://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final/volume-two_layout-1.pdf.

3 Cited in J. Ward and M. Marsh (2006). *Sexual violence against women and girls in war and its aftermath: Realities, responses and required resources*. UNFPA Briefing Paper. Brussels.

4 M. C. Omanyondo (2005). *Sexual gender-based violence and health facilities needs assessment (Lofa, Nimba, Grand Gedeh and Grand Bassa counties)*. World Health Organisation (WHO).

5 A more comprehensive national study from 2008 produced figures stating that about one in six Liberian women had suffered sexual violence during the war. See: K. Johnson et al (2008). 'Association of combatant status and sexual violence with health and mental health outcomes in post-conflict Liberia', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 300, No. 6, pp.676-690.

6 UN Security Council (2009). *Letter dated 18 December 2009 addressed to the President of the Security Council by the Secretary-General*. Annex: 'Report of the International Commission of Inquiry mandated to establish the facts and circumstances of the events of 28th September 2009 in Guinea'. Doc S/2009/693. Available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2009/693.

7 Ibid. p.13.

quo ante. Thus roles and responsibilities within communities have often changed radically as youth, empowered with weapons and spoils of war, have challenged chiefs, elders and local officials for power and influence. War has upset economic roles by destroying infrastructure, farms and businesses while rehabilitation and reintegration schemes may have redistributed employment and resources to ex-combatants. In northern Liberia and eastern Sierra Leone in particular there was a time lag between the return of displaced populations and the restoration of a state police and judicial presence. This vacuum nurtured the culture of impunity developed during the war and perpetuated through unaccountable access to weapons and violence. Anecdotal evidence suggests that SGBV in Liberia actually worsened in the years after 2003 as displaced and ex-combatants returned to their communities.

The other side of SGBV is domestic violence and sexual violence within the family, traditionally a taboo subject for public discussion or prosecution in all three countries. Wartime humiliation, post-war economic frustration and attempts to reassert “traditional” gender roles within the family and clan may have exacerbated tendencies to such violence and encouraged family abandonment and non-support of children by husbands and fathers. National laws are gradually catching up with these abuses, but attitudes are often harder to change, particularly where customary practices, however physically or psychologically damaging, are concerned.

Taboo issues: addressing female genital mutilation

One issue that animators have found difficult to confront in their work on improving the security of girls is female genital mutilation (FGM) or cutting (FGC). Often referred to as a “harmful traditional practice”, FGM varies between tribes, but is a form of violence specifically targeting girls (although boys are also circumcised in comparable ceremonies) and is perpetrated exclusively by older women, often from their own families.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, FGM is not specifically illegal, although deaths resulting from it are occasionally prosecuted. In Guinea it is illegal under article 305 of the Penal Code. However, perpetrators are rarely if ever prosecuted and the rate of girls subjected to FGM is estimated at 96 percent, higher than in Sierra Leone (90 percent) and northern Liberia.⁸ FGM is usually regulated and performed by women’s secret societies most commonly called “Sande” or “Bundu”, which are responsible for initiating youths into adult society in most rural areas. Many animators are keen to preserve traditions in their communities and most agree that directly challenging the Sande or Poro (the male equivalent) would be detrimental to the good relations they have built up with elders and communities.

Outside Guinea, talking about FGM in front of men and especially over the radio remains a taboo. However, female animators in Liberia and Sierra Leone have been able to confront the issue quietly within their communities by approaching the female elders who lead the Sande societies. Rather than condemn outright a practice that retains considerable importance in rural society, animators have worked to convince other women that genital cutting should either be consensual when the girl has reached the age to decide for herself to join Sande, or be merely symbolic. Attitudes are changing in line with other traditional practices such as forced marriage. Whereas initiation used to entail several years of “bush education”, the norm is now for just a few months and animators have been successful in persuading the societies to hold initiations during school holidays. Some communities, especially in southern Guinea but also in Kongba, Liberia, have decided to reject the practice of FGM altogether.

⁸ UK Border Agency (2008). *Female genital mutilation: Country of origin information report*. London, UK: Home Office. Estimates and their original sources vary. Liberia is estimated at 60 percent prevalence but the north is known to have a higher prevalence than the national average.

Types of SGBV

Since there is no standard definition of what constitutes SGBV, it was crucial for International Alert to gain an understanding of what security and violence meant to women in the target region. Prior to designing its Human Security Project, International Alert undertook a survey of needs relating to security and justice for women and girls in the three countries in early 2008 and submitted this to a validation exercise with local partners. Project staff, partner organisations and community animators also compared experiences and needs at a regional meeting in Nzérékoré, Guinea in April 2010. Stakeholders captured the sub-regional challenge to women and girls' security as having three facets: prevalence of SGBV, broadly defined; subordinate economic, legal and social status of women; and lack of capacity or will in the justice and security sectors to provide protection and redress.

Types of SGBV identified by local activists and community animators included:

- Rape, sexual abuse and molestation;
- Domestic abuse and violence – wife- and child-beating, verbal abuse;
- Prostitution and sexual exploitation;
- Sexual harassment;
- Human and child trafficking;
- Teenage pregnancy without consent;
- Early and forced marriage;
- Family abandonment and lack of child support by husbands; and
- Female genital mutilation and initiation to secret societies without consent.

The context of female subordination was noted as including:

- Illiteracy and lack or denial of education to girls;
- Lack of economic opportunity, especially paid labour, for women;
- Low social status within the family/household, clan and tribe;
- Absence or denial of legal rights to inheritance; and
- Lack of control over civil status – formalised marriage and divorce.

Such factors are generally exacerbated by the extreme poverty, physical isolation and rural character of most of the target communities. Lack of capacity and will in the provision of security and justice affects both the statutory and customary systems and is discussed below.

Men as victims: domestic and sexual violence in Liberia

The focus of International Alert's work with the nine communities in the MRU has been on empowering and protecting women and girls, but SGBV is by no means confined to women as victims and men as perpetrators. Though the subject is something of a taboo for open discussion, men are often the target of sexual violence (usually but not exclusively perpetrated by other men) and domestic abuse by their spouse or female relatives. During radio broadcasts and community discussions, animators have frequently been asked 'Can men be the victims of gender-based violence?' and 'Can women perpetrate abuse of men?' Trainings of judicial workers also asked participants to disaggregate the types of SGBV experienced by men and women. Unlike violence against women, knowledge, attitudes and practices around violence against men by women had not been openly addressed or challenged previously. Stigma attached to men as victims of SGBV is greater than that of female survivors and there appears to be very little reporting of the problem or remedial practice.

In the first systematic comparative study of male and female experiences of sexual violence during the Liberian war, a team of US and Liberian researchers used random sampling to identify and interview 1,666 Liberian adults across the country during May 2008.⁹ Their results demonstrated that while women identifying themselves as both ex-combatants and non-combatants were more likely to have suffered sexual violence than men in equivalent roles, men were overall more likely (19.2 percent) to have suffered sexual violence than women (16.3 percent). This was because a much greater proportion of male respondents identified themselves as ex-combatants,¹⁰ a category four or five times more likely to suffer sexual violence than non-combatants for both men and women. Almost one-third of male ex-combatants reported being victims of sexual violence, overwhelmingly perpetrated by other combatants.

Despite this apparently high prevalence of Liberian men living as survivors of SGBV, the subject is very little researched and discussed even within families and communities. The psychological impact is likely to be intense and to have important ramifications for gender roles and violence within post-war Liberian society.

⁹ K. Johnson et al (2008). Op. cit. Breakdowns of statistics by county or district are not provided.

¹⁰ Ibid. The authors suggest that one-third of all combatants in Liberia were female, thus women and girls were active participants in the conflict. Official disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) statistics, based on a more restrictive definition of combatant, show 24.4 percent of disarmed and demobilised ex-combatants were women and girls.

3. Raising awareness and transforming knowledge, attitudes and practices

The central aim of the initiative has been to raise awareness of the scope and extent of gender-based violence in the target communities and to initiate a dialogue at the local level that transforms attitudes and practices towards reduction and eventual elimination of violence and abuse between men and women and adults and children. A dual strategy has been employed utilising tailored programming in vernacular languages broadcast over a network of community radio stations, and the training and deployment of teams of “animators” in each of the communities in order to challenge impunity and advise and empower local people to promote their own security and access to justice. Finally, the experiences and challenges of the various communities are used to inform advocacy of the relevant national governments and regional organisations to encourage them to support more effective security and justice provision.

Animators

Engagement with the nine target communities is the function of animators recruited locally by International Alert and its partners. Animators reside in the community and are well known for their work on gender advocacy, either through the media (local radio), through legal advocacy or as professionals and religious leaders.

In Liberia there are two animators per community, usually one female and one male, and typically one radio presenter and one professional. In communities like Zorzor, where the population is mixed Loma and Mandingo, one animator comes from each ethnic or religious community. In Sierra Leone and Guinea, there are four or five animators per community, reflecting the larger size of these mainly urban centres.

The animators’ background as well as local and national context has influenced the ways in which the communities have received them. In Sierra Leone, where customary administration is strongest, the project has incorporated community elders with strong connections to chiefly families that administer justice. In Soro Gbema, a local imam is one of the animators; in Voinjama, Liberia a Methodist minister is an animator and works closely with the local Mandingo chief and imam. In Guinea, where the initial emphasis is upon awareness-raising, there is both a greater role for youth as animators and a greater emphasis on coordination of activities with the regional, prefecture and city authorities.

Many animators in Liberia have had to overcome initial scepticism, especially among men, about the idea of female empowerment, which many people felt was part of a western campaign to promote individual rights without communal responsibilities or to encourage women to be insolent and disrespectful. Thus, engagement with men in the community has been as important as work with women. In Vahun and other communities, animators have promoted the message that a culture of domestic peace is not only about husbands not beating their wives, but also about wives not verbally or physically abusing their husbands. The issue of domestic abuse against men has been raised for the first time and begun to lose some of its stigma as both men and women approach animators for advice and information. In Zorzor a project animator from the Mandingo community has worked with the mosque to trace women’s rights in the Koran and to distinguish between Islamic teachings and harmful traditional practices.

Animators have had some freedom to define the means they use to raise awareness and change attitudes and practices in their communities. Most have worked significantly with community

radio on public information programmes and phone-in shows on particular issues related to gender-based violence. Many have organised “clinics” or “roadshows”, advertised by radio, in which they visit outlying communities on market day to educate locals and distribute messages. Some have used respected fora such as the mosque, church or councils of elders to share their message. All have worked subtly within their communities to influence their friends, family, chiefs and community leaders on the importance of ending violence or discrimination against women and girls.

Getting started with awareness-raising in southern Guinea

Because it is not generally considered a post-conflict country, Guinea represents a very different context for combating SGBV and working on peacebuilding in general compared to Sierra Leone and Liberia. Local and international NGOs have not had the same access to international funding for reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes, even in areas devastated by the conflict in 2000-01. Although southern Guinea is the most exposed region to NGO activism, many international NGOs and UN agencies have left along with the repatriated Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees. Concerns about governance and corruption under President Lansana Conté and the military-based regime that succeeded him have led many donors to suspend non-humanitarian aid. Indeed, the idea of civil society is still quite weak in rural Guinea, even though the state presence there is increasingly constrained, and there is a culture of coordinating activities very closely with local administration. Thus, even in southern Guinea there are few civil society groups working on advocacy regarding SGBV and the public information billboards that characterise towns and highways across the border in Liberia are rarely seen.

Unlike in Liberia, project animators have begun their work on this project by targeting women, girls and men in large urban communities. These are the communities in which locals, refugees and officials (administrative, customary and military) are most concentrated and therefore where the initial awareness-raising message is likely to have greatest impact. Animators have used unconventional locations for their local awareness campaigns. In addition to using community radio, working directly with local authorities and organising meetings or workshops with established groups like women’s NGOs, animators have gone directly to public locations in the community where women congregate and converse together: markets and beauty parlours, for example. The former provides a large network of women, mobile and relatively experienced in cross-border activities, but also among the most exposed to violence or discrimination. The latter provide informal audiences of women without presupposing activism in community-based organisations and are good dissemination centres for behaviour-changing messages to influence a wide range of women.

Community profiles

Since 2008, International Alert and its partners have worked with nine communities in northern Liberia (five), southeastern Sierra Leone (two) and southern Guinea (two) to empower local women and girls to improve their own security. Communities were chosen on the basis of proximity to community radio stations, contiguity to international borders or exposure to trans-frontier factors such as trade, forced migration or the spread of armed conflict, and to include a broad range of border cultures and languages. Target communities are diverse, ranging from three large towns to isolated forest or mining districts, and have experienced different challenges for promoting human security. All are fragile and bear the physical and psychological scars of armed violence during 1990-2003 and the impunity that followed; at least two have experienced deadly violence since 2008.

Guinea

In Guinea, the project has worked in two prefectures close to the Liberian and Sierra Leonean borders. Whereas Guinea is usually not seen as a post-conflict country, the southern Forest Region, in which both prefectures are situated, has a history of violence and displacement comparable to its two neighbours.

Guéckédou – At the point where Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone converge, Guéckédou is the most war-affected prefecture in Guinea, suffering a direct assault from its two neighbours in 2000-01 as well as hosting tens of thousands of refugees. With a population estimated at over 150,000, it is the largest city in the Kissi-speaking zone that spans the three countries. Once rivalling Nzérékoré, its trading economy has not yet recovered from the war devastation.

Nzérékoré – With an estimated population of 250,000, Nzérékoré is Guinea's second city and the largest town in southern Guinea. It was long home to the largest concentration of refugees from Liberia as well as some from Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. It is also the major sub-regional marketplace and heavily garrisoned with troops. The local population is mainly Guerzé (Kpelle) and Malinké (Mandingo), joined by many migrants from across the sub-region. Ethnic or religious violence has been sporadic in the city, most recently in February 2010, inflamed by tensions within the Guinean military since it seized power in December 2008, the arming of militias in 2000-01 and the mass influx of refugees in 1990-2003.

Liberia

In Liberia, the project has included five communities in proximity to the frontiers of Guinea (three) and Sierra Leone (two). These were among the worst affected communities during and after the war and include both remote rural districts and urban trading and service centres.

Jorwah, Bong County – Jorwah is a small town on the Guinean border in northeast Bong County. The surrounding Panta district has a population of around 17,000, overwhelmingly from the Kpelle ethnic group, which also dominates across the Guinean border, where many local women trade. Formerly a district capital on a good road close to the model farm of President Tolbert (1971-80), Jorwah was destroyed and deserted during the war and now has no formal administrative presence and only rudimentary agriculture. There are very few local services and the road connections to the rest of Liberia are very difficult, even in the dry season.

Kongba, Gbarpolu County – Kongba is a remote district of about 15,000 inhabitants in the rainforested hills of northwest Gbarpolu County, close to the Sierra Leone border. The population includes Gola and Mende as well as many Liberian and Sierra Leonean migrants attracted by the prospects of

alluvial diamond mining in the nearby rivers. The pre-war road through Kongba connecting Lofa County to Monrovia is virtually impassable. There is a limited state presence.

Vahun, Lofa County – Vahun is perhaps the most isolated district in northern Liberia. With the closure of the forestry road via Kongba, the district is now only accessible from Kolahun via a road too rough and steep for most vehicles even in the dry season. Connections to adjacent Sierra Leone are much easier. As the launching pad for the Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) first assault on Sierra Leone, Vahun was overwhelmed by the conflict in both countries. After hosting thousands of Sierra Leonean refugees in the later 1990s, almost the entire Mende-speaking community of 17,000 spent 2000-04 in Sierra Leone; most goods still come across the border and leones circulate alongside Liberian dollars. Vahun hosts a district administration and has a tiny police, immigration and magisterial presence, but has to largely look after itself.

Voinjama, Lofa County – With a population of about 26,000, Voinjama is the capital of Lofa County and the sixth largest town in Liberia. Located very close to the Guinea border, it was the headquarters of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) insurgent force during its 2000-03 campaign, when most of the population was displaced. Basic services, buildings and trade have barely been restored since the war. Voinjama has among the most ethnically and religiously diverse populations in Liberia, including large numbers of Guineans. Tensions between Muslims and Christians in the town flared into deadly violence in February 2010.

Zorzor, Lofa County – Zorzor was once Lofa County's main trading centre on the Liberia-Guinea frontier, but was wholly destroyed during the 2000-03 campaign. Its diverse population is now about 6,000, mainly Loma and Mandingo, serving a district of 40,000. Some trade has returned, but the town remains badly damaged.

Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone the project has included two contrasting chiefdoms in which the Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) was already working with community leaders. One is a large, urban constituency; the other is less populous and rural.

Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District – Kakua is the chiefdom in which the city of Bo is located. With a population of around 200,000, Bo is Sierra Leone's second largest city and the commercial centre of the Mende ethnic group as well as home to migrants from many other regions and from Liberia. The population is thus ethnically and religiously mixed, including many wartime or post-war migrants. During the run-up to the 2007 elections it was the scene of close and occasionally violent rivalry between political supporters of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC). The population of Kakua, excluding the city of Bo, is about 30,000.

Soro Gbema Chiefdom, Pujehun District – Soro Gbema is a relatively small rural chiefdom in southeast Sierra Leone, directly adjacent to the Liberian border and the main highway crossing point at Bo Waterside. Most of the population of 32,000 is Mende and Muslim, with some Vai, Gola and other groups. It was very much exposed to refugee movements during the Liberian conflict and has now become an important transport centre between Bo and Monrovia. Soro Gbema was the scene of violent clashes between supporters of the SLPP and the All People's Congress before the March 2009 local council by-elections.

Community radio stations

Radio is the primary media across the MRU, where there is only TV reception and newspaper distribution in the largest towns. In most target communities, animators work as presenters in local radio stations, which also broadcast specially made drama and public information programming designed to increase knowledge and change attitudes and practices. Four of the eight radio stations utilised (in Jorwah, Kongba, Vahun and Voinjama) are part of International Alert's Liberia Media Project network of community radio stations. All carry factual and discussion programming, dramas and jingles developed with the project's media and drama partners and often presented by the local animators. Dramas scripted by Flomo Theatre Company are bespoke, based on gender security issues raised by the focus communities, designed to stimulate discussion and translated into four vernacular languages – Kissi, Kpelle/Kpélélé, Mandingo/Maninka and Mende. Flomo has also presented its theatre productions directly to the communities in Liberian English and French.

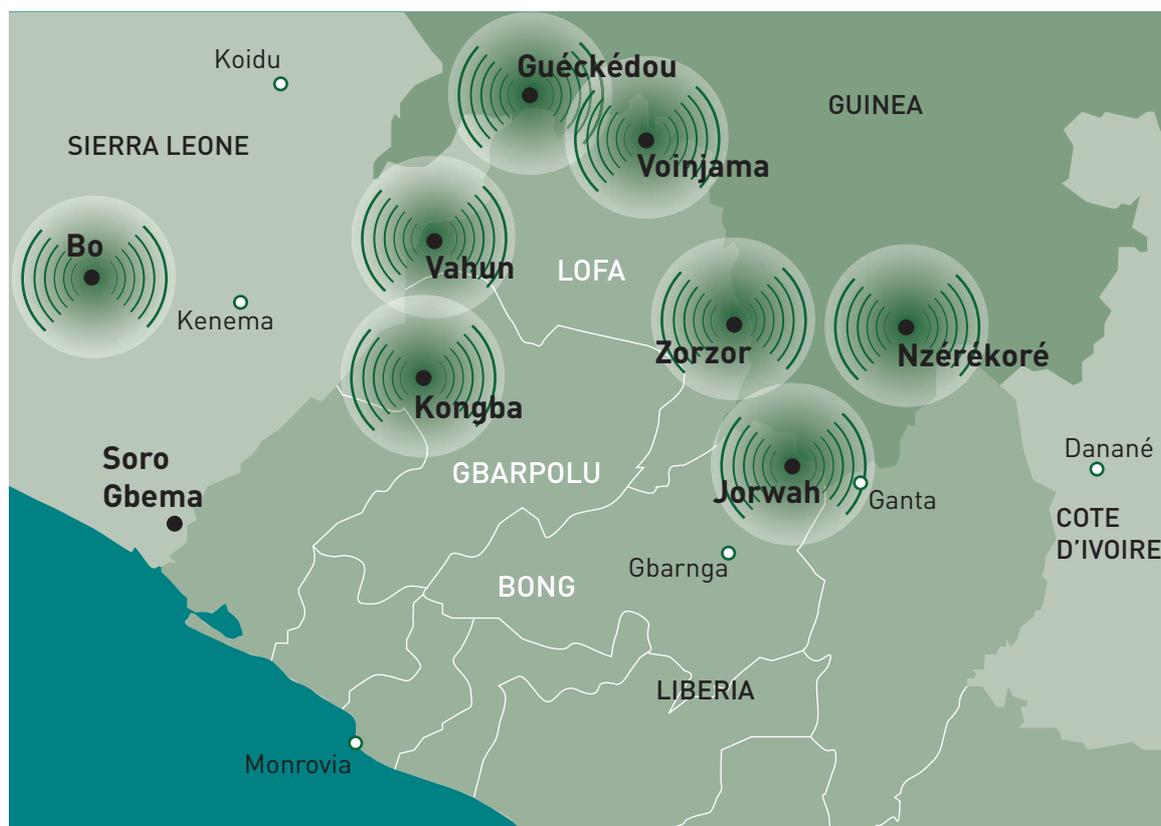
These radio stations are community owned and managed, often the sole source of media information to communities out of range of national radio. For example, located on the Liberia-Guinea border, Jorwah Community Radio broadcasts to both countries in Kpelle and English and can be received in Guinea's Yomou prefecture. With forests and hills impeding Jorwah's reception of mobile telecom signals and national radio, the community radio is often the community's only relay to the Liberian authorities or UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) several hours drive away. Most Liberian local radio stations relay national programming from stations like UNMIL Radio or Star Radio and sometimes their reporters are called upon to provide local correspondents for the national networks. Guinean and Sierra Leonean stations may carry content from the state broadcasting corporation.

All the radio stations used in this project broadcast in vernacular languages and, except in Bo, are received in two or three countries [see map opposite]. The main languages are Kissi, Kpelle/Kpélélé, Krio, Loma/Toma, Mandingo/Maninka and Mende as well as English and French.

Radio station	Location	Broadcast languages	Transmission radius
Radio Jorwah	Jorwah, Liberia	English, Kpelle	70 km – Liberia and Guinea
Radio Kungbor	Kongba, Liberia	English, Gola, Mende, Vai	80 km – Liberia and Sierra Leone
Voice of Vahun	Vahun, Liberia	English, Gbandi, Kissi, Mende	80 km – Liberia and Sierra Leone
Radio Kintoma	Voinjama, Liberia	English, French, Loma, Mandingo	200 km – Liberia and Guinea
Radio Life	Zorzor, Liberia	Belle, English, French, Fula, Kpelle, Loma, Mandingo	100+ km – Liberia and Guinea
Radio Rurale	Guéckédou, Guinea	English, French, Kissi, Maninka	100 km – Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone
Zaly FM Liberté	Nzérékoré, Guinea	English, French, Kpélélé, Maninka	150 km – Guinea and Liberia
Radio Kiss	Bo, Sierra Leone	English, Krio, Mende	100+ km – Sierra Leone

Soro Gbema does not have its own radio station but relies on the Cape Mount Radio in Sinje across the Liberian border for some programming. This can only be received in parts of the chiefdom within 8 km of the border.

Map of radio stations



In addition, the project has built local capacity by using the Liberia Women's Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC) and Female Journalists of Liberia (FEJAL) to provide training to animators and female journalists in Liberia in gender-sensitive reporting and programming and the coverage of SGBV issues.

Influencing the regional context

Two years into the project, animators from all nine communities came together in Nzérékoré to share and compare their experiences and to develop advocacy messages for communities and policymakers in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the wider region based on the messages they were already sharing with chiefs, elders, magistrates, government officials, security forces and ordinary women and men in their communities. Such local-level advocacy is already explicitly international, since the target communities are in border areas and use methods and media that deliberately disseminate information and advice across borders. Thus, Liberian radio stations broadcast in a common vernacular language, attracting phone-ins from Guinea and Sierra Leone, and animators target cross-border women traders.

Project staff from International Alert based in Conakry, Freetown and Monrovia have shared these experiences of local-level challenges, opportunities and successes in promoting security of women and girls with their contacts in national women's networks, parliaments and respective ministries of gender, interior and justice. This publication is further intended to capture and communicate the findings of the project in terms of both challenges and best practice.

4. Security and legal redress mechanisms

All three countries have been active since 2005 in enacting legislation aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls, and Liberia and Sierra Leone have developed specialised protection units for women and children as part of their SSR processes. Promoting awareness of these laws and promoting cooperation and dialogue between law enforcers and political and justice officials has been a key role of the project.

Liberia

Liberia has taken the lead regionally in promoting women's rights and has a very active Ministry of Gender and Development, with representatives in each county and some districts. It has enacted new gender laws (e.g. the Rape Law and Inheritance Law) and policy frameworks (e.g. the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 National Action Plan and a policy on gender-based violence). However, these are technical and legalistic interventions that rely upon a very weak base of knowledge and expertise for implementation. Animators have worked to raise awareness of these new laws, including among traditional men and women leaders, in some of the most remote areas of the country.

Since 2005 the Liberia National Police (LNP) has established Women and Children Protection Units (WCPUs) in most of its larger police stations, typically in county seats such as Voinjama, to deal with sexual and domestic violence and exploitation issues. However, most of the communities in the project are too isolated from WCPUs to make use of them, even if they are aware of them, and there is rarely a safe house for victims. The LNP has so far fallen well short of its recruitment target of 20 percent female officers, especially in up-country areas, despite offering incentives. Lofa and especially Bong counties have among the lowest police-to-civilian ratios in Liberia and barely any vehicles, meaning that their presence ordinarily does not extend beyond a few towns. Community experience of policing is thus very different in rural and urban areas. Jorwah, for example, is at least a one-and-a-half hour drive from the nearest police post and locals report never having seen a police officer visit the town.

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone passed three so-called "Gender Acts" in June 2007: the Domestic Violence Act, the Devolution of Estate Act and the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act. These seek to regulate differences between statutory, customary and Islamic law practiced in Sierra Leone and curtail traditional practices harmful to women. A National Action Plan on implementing UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 on Women, Peace and Security has also been approved. However, due to the strength of chiefs and traditional institutions, national laws are variably implemented outside of Freetown and sometimes depend on the passing of by-laws by local authorities.

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) first established its Family Support Units (FSUs) in 2000 and now has 26 across the country. In 2005 the SLP was contracted by the UN to help train and establish equivalent protection units within the new Liberian police. The SLP is a much larger force than the LNP and has a greater presence on the ground, though it suffers comparably from lack of logistics outside towns. In addition, there are "chiefdom police" serving the local courts under customary law. Since the vast majority of rural Sierra Leoneans are believed to access customary legal institutions first and foremost, and the SLP must refer crimes to the formal courts, many

victims are likely to be reticent about going to the FSU. In towns at least, the SLP has attempted to engage communities and women's groups proactively through Local Police Partnership Boards and community policing initiatives.

Guinea

Guinea's penal code was revised in 2006 and now incorporates laws specifically against domestic violence/beatings (articles 295-304), female genital mutilation (FGM) (article 305), rape (article 321), forced and early marriage (article 331) and family abandonment (articles 353-355). Compared to Liberia and Sierra Leone, where local and international NGOs are very active in disseminating gender laws, there is relatively little public awareness of women's rights and procedures for seeking healthcare and redress in cases of assault.

The Guinean police – divided into the Police Nationale and the Gendarmerie – does not have a dedicated family or women and children protection unit, but *Comités Locaux de Protection des Femmes et des Enfants* (Local Committees for the Protection of Women and Children, or CLEFS) have theoretically been established. Women are supposed to report sexual violence crimes through their family and village or quarter Mediation Committee in a relatively complex and time-consuming process. This highlights the current need for a local advocate to accompany survivors through the Guinean justice system if it is to be successful. Like the army, the paramilitary gendarmerie has difficult relations with the population and especially with women. A safe house in Nzérékoré has been established by a local NGO for the protection of women and minor victims of abuse.

5. Access to justice

Despite differing historical and constitutional legacies, all three countries contain both statutory and customary legal redress mechanisms of varying power and influence. In none of the project communities do the state and its formal justice institutions have the capacity to meet local needs. Indeed, for many citizens and victims, the idea of pursuing public retributive justice is shameful or undesirable. Traditional courts, usually overseen by chiefs or their representatives, fill the gap and offer restorative justice at the community level. An important part of the project has been training and pursuing local-level advocacy with the customary and religious authorities to sensitise them to the needs and rights of women and girls, and to the laws and redress mechanisms that need to be observed as part of ending impunity for SGBV. The aim has been to promote a more integrated approach between diverse stakeholders, facilitating both justice for survivors and a deterrent for perpetrators.

Liberia

Liberia has parallel legal systems that are barely coordinated, reflecting the historic lack of interest among urban coastal elites with administering the “tribal” population of the hinterland. A statutory legal system rooted in US common law and under the Ministry of Justice has criminal jurisdiction over the entire territory, though in practice it is little accessed outside of towns. A customary system operates under the Ministry of Interior, with village/quarter, clan and district chiefs directly administering justice according to the uncodified traditions of their tribe.

Circuit courts with at least one judge and county attorney (prosecutor) have been established in all 15 county seats. Magisterial courts exist in most districts, though most lack trained and salaried magistrates, clerks or solicitors and secure premises. The customary system has no formal court houses, legal professionals or bailiffs, but relies on respect for the rule of elders, almost always men. There have been no formal chieftaincy elections since the 1980s. Both the statute book and Hinterland Regulations supposed to guide the customary law were partially lost in the civil war and there is considerable confusion over the jurisdiction of customary, magisterial and circuit courts in both criminal and civil law. Ministry of Justice officials insist that the customary law has no jurisdiction over criminal matters, though many chiefs believe minor criminal matters are their responsibility.

For most Liberians, especially from outside the towns, the formal justice system remains out of reach. It is slow, inefficient and widely viewed as expensive or corrupt, as there is no legal aid or victim support funding unless an international NGO or the UN is available to provide an advocate or paralegal to shepherd a case through a long process. Community animators from this project have provided some such support for victims of SGBV who would otherwise depend upon the intervention of chiefs or elders, in contravention of state law.

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone’s legal system very much reflects the legacy of division between urban “colony” and rural “protectorate” under the indirect administration of chiefs, who remain the paramount actors in politics as well as justice outside of Freetown. Virtually the entire judiciary resides in Freetown, with only a single circuit court and 12 magistrates courts (one per district, with the

population exceeding 500,000 in the case of Bo), with a handful of magistrates and one judge roving between them. The judicial burden thus falls heavily upon “local courts” staffed by court chairmen appointed by elected paramount chiefs, often from the same family and without formal training. These courts administer customary law (including Islamic law as appropriate) according to the dominant ethnic group of each of the 149 chiefdoms.

Unlike in Liberia and Guinea, the customary courts have jurisdiction for criminal matters where the punishable sentence does not exceed six months, including minor/non-aggravated SGBV cases. They can refer cases upwards to the magisterial courts, although local courts report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs rather than the Ministry of Justice and their own sentencing is not subject to judicial review. There are no solicitors in local courts and less than one for every magisterial court. While customary courts have no jurisdiction to try rape or serious sexual assault cases, the reality in most chiefdoms is that the population has no contact with the statutory legal system and may suffer social stigma for refusing to let chiefs settle matters according to restorative principles. The reality is that local and village or section courts are asked and required to resolve serious SGBV cases as well as ruling on civil law matters such as inheritance and marriage/divorce. Female court staff are extremely rare and there is little harmonisation between the statute book and rights commitments and the traditional law practiced by most chiefs and chairmen.

As a result, Sierra Leone’s formal record of prosecuting perpetrators of SGBV is dire, despite its efforts to pass new legislation to protect women and girls. According to figures cited by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in February 2010, of 927 reported cases of sexual abuse and 1,543 cases of domestic violence reported nationwide during 2009, not one conviction had been secured and only one case dismissed. The vast majority were under investigation or awaiting trial, due to overwhelmed police and judicial resources; 13 percent of sexual abuse claimants had withdrawn their cases or settled out of court. Project animators in Kakua and Soro Gbema chiefdoms have been trained by the NMJD to work as paralegals in an attempt to guide victims of SGBV through the local and statutory courts.

Guinea

Unlike Liberia and Sierra Leone, Guinea has a unified and codified legal system based on French civil law and administered by a hierarchy of judges according to the territorial divisions of the country. Chieftaincies were officially abolished in 1957 and customary law is not recognised by the constitution, although the latter has been suspended since the coup of December 2008.

In reality, the state and formal justice system do not have the resources to meet the needs of the population for justice and are considerably distrusted. At the local level, chiefs, elders and imams still exist and exert substantial influence over the administration of informal justice, including over criminal matters and personal law such as inheritance, marriage, divorce and child custody. Guinean administrators rely on the traditional authorities to fill the governance and judicial vacuum. Mediation Committees exist within each village or quarter to formalise and mediate the state’s interaction with what might otherwise be considered institutions of customary authority. Indeed, the view among activists in the region is that southern Guinea actually has among the strongest and least accountable chiefdoms in the MRU and that Guinean society is more conservative and taboo-bound than its post-war neighbours.

Training customary justice providers in Sierra Leone

During 2009 International Alert organised joint trainings in each of the three project countries for security and justice providers from the formal and customary systems in order to share experiences, raise awareness, coordinate practice and develop networks of advocates or counsellors to shepherd victims of SGBV through legal redress mechanisms.

In Sierra Leone, where the customary courts have the greatest formal power, a two-day workshop was organised with NMJD in Bo in August 2009. This brought representatives from five communities in Kakua and Soro Gbema chiefdoms together with representatives from target communities in Lofa County, Liberia. Each community provided one chief or elder, one local court official, one SLP officer and one paralegal. Similar trainings were held in Gbarnga, Liberia and Nzérékoré, Guinea with slightly different compositions of concerned personnel depending on the social and legal structures of the country.

For most participants, this was the first time that customary and statutory authorities had been trained/sensitised together, resulting in a much greater awareness of mutual roles and responsibilities within a value-chain approach to security and justice. Sierra Leonean animators have received training as paralegals, enabling them to shepherd SGBV victims through redress processes, and some of the animators in Liberia and Guinea also have long experience as legal advocates within their communities. The chairman of the local court in Kakua conceded that before the training he had little knowledge of gender laws and commitments, but now understood how they related to traditional concepts of women's rights and protection. He has become an important advocate of women and girls' rights to his colleagues and relatives who serve as chiefs and court chairmen in the district.

Barriers to accessing justice

Project staff, animators and other stakeholders have identified lack of capacity and will in the provision of justice by both formal and customary institutions as one of the main ongoing challenges to ensuring the security of women and girls in the MRU. Specific barriers to accessing justice in the project communities include:

- Physical distance from and impracticality of transport to formal courts (magisterial and circuit), including lack of provision for transporting witnesses to court;
- Insufficient numbers, training and pay of judiciary and legal professionals in the formal courts, leading to absenteeism, lack of professionalism and corruption;
- Compromising of court cases by survivors and their families, either through frustration, lack of money or community/familial pressure to abandon divisive, retributive justice;
- Inadequate reporting of medical evidence for rape survivors, especially due to lack of appropriately trained medical personnel;
- Inadequate police training and resourcing in criminal investigation and handling of evidence;
- Impunity of elites, including those well connected politically and chiefly families whose relatives control the customary courts;
- Harmful cultural practices, traditional subordination of women and the influence of secret societies on customary courts, since chiefs and court chairmen are invariably men and rely on membership of Poro societies for power in the community;
- Prevalence of illiteracy and poverty among women, reinforcing their low status and undermining their knowledge of their rights and ability to seek justice independently;
- Inadequate dissemination of new gender laws empowering women and criminalising domestic and sexual violence, especially in rural areas;
- Lack of by-laws embedding women's rights in local customary law was felt to be a particular problem in Sierra Leone; and
- Flight of perpetrators across international frontiers was felt to be a particular problem in Guinea.

Animators and project staff have worked hard to overcome these barriers, whether by acting as advocates for SGBV survivors through legal processes, by training and sensitising chiefs, judicial and medical personnel, or by using radio and discussion groups to raise awareness of laws and to challenge entrenched discrimination.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Seven years on from the last major peace agreement, the former conflict zones of the MRU have made significant but variable progress in addressing the prevalence and impact of SGBV. A raft of gender legislation has been passed in each country and, in Liberia and Sierra Leone at least, formal courts have been re-established, policing reforms have introduced family protection units, and a myriad of civil society and community-based organisations have worked tirelessly to raise awareness and challenge harmful attitudes and practices.

However, tremendous challenges continue to be posed to the security of women and girls of the region, especially those living in remote or rural areas where the presence of state security and justice institutions remains weak to non-existent. In all three countries, violence against women has deep roots in secretive, male-dominated society and some harmful traditional practices. Experience over nearly two decades of violent conflict and displacement has both exacerbated exposure to and intensity of SGBV, and led communities and women to challenge attitudes and practices towards women.

Since 2008, the Human Security Project has promoted innovative methodologies and media to empower members of nine communities in the borderlands of the three countries to counter threats to the security of women and girls. A network of animators has been established and trained within their own communities to improve knowledge, challenge attitudes and practices, raise awareness of rights and shepherd victims of SGBV through legal redress mechanisms. Dramas and challenging programming have been developed through vernacular language community radio stations broadcasting across borders. Customary and formal service providers have been trained and sensitised towards addressing women's security and justice needs and begun to cooperate more closely together to meet these needs. Advocacy has been pursued with local, national and international stakeholders to share the challenges of securing women and girls and some of the best practices developed through the course of the project.

Despite progress made in the target communities, experience has shown the three countries to be at quite different stages and there is much work to be done in challenging women's subordinate social, legal and economic position as well as the legacy of violence against men. Compared to Sierra Leone and Liberia, Guinea is at a relatively early stage in challenging impunity and combating SGBV; civil society and community organisations remain very weak. The former two countries have made great progress in raising awareness and challenging harmful practices, but their dual legal systems and the neglect of customary institutions in justice and security system reform has overburdened their courts with cases and expectations.

Looking to 2011 and beyond, democratisation and demilitarisation in Guinea, decentralisation in Liberia and economic consolidation in Sierra Leone present opportunities for improving practice that challenges impunity and combats SGBV. Supported where appropriate by international partners, the governments of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, civil society and local authorities, should build upon progress made in recent years by working to:

- Harmonise laws and legal processes between statutory and customary justice providers to embed legislation that promotes and protects the security and rights of women and children;

- Ensure that national laws governing sexual and domestic violence include men as well as women as potential victims of criminal acts;
- Provide adequate resources, including training, salaries and physical infrastructure, for the full functioning of professional circuit/district and/or magistrates courts in all parts of the country;
- Build capacity and awareness among police and medical professionals on the collection and handling of evidence necessary to secure prosecutions for rape and other forms of SGBV;
- Support the work of community advocates or paralegals trained and resourced to shepherd survivors of SGBV through the justice system;
- Train and sensitise chiefs, court chairmen and other customary justice providers in relevant gender legislation, working with them to define their role and responsibilities within an integrated justice system;
- Challenge harmful traditional practices that undermine the security, social status or psychological wellbeing of women and girls, including early, forced or informal marriage, early or forced initiation and FGM;
- Promote educational and economic opportunities for women and girls as well as their equal participation in political institutions at all levels; and
- Strengthen the capacities of national and local media to raise awareness and challenge harmful practices and impunity, including through training of female journalists and in gender-sensitive reporting.

International Alert.

346 Clapham Road, London SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800, Fax +44 (0)20 7627 6900, Email general@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org

ISBN: 978-1-906677-84-8