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Sierra Leone

Getting reparations right for survivors of sexual violence

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Summary

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Six years after the end of the conflict in Sierra Leone, little has been done to ensure that the survivors of sexual violence receive justice, acknowledgement of their suffering or reparations which would help them to rebuild their lives. All parties to the 11-year-long war were responsible for abuses, including rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and other crimes of sexual violence against an estimated quarter of a million women and girls.

For the victims of these crimes, sexual violence was not a single event but a violation which has continued. Having been systematically targeted during the war, their physical and psychological wounds have been compounded by stigmatization and discrimination in the years since hostilities ended.

They have employed many strategies to survive, both during the conflict and in the years that have followed. Many survivors felt too ashamed of their experiences of sexual violence to return to their own towns and villages; others live in silence, unable to share their painful memories out of fear that they will be rejected by family members and lose their economic security. In addition, because many of the women and girls are identified as former 'rebel wives', they are discriminated against, isolated and excluded from their communities. As a result they have difficulty obtaining food, shelter, work and healthcare; they are effectively prevented from reintegrating into society.

The desire of these women and girls for justice and reparations is simply to enable them to become economically independent – to provide for themselves and their children and begin to re-establish their lives free from fear, stigma and discrimination.

The Sierra Leone government has not addressed the physical and psychological effects of the crimes that have been committed against so many women and girls. Neither has it provided justice, recognition of the crimes, or effective rehabilitation programmes, without which the survivors cannot even begin to rebuild their lives and those of their children.

If reparations for women and girls in Sierra Leone are to tackle the complex social and individual effects of sexual abuse, they must be part of a wider strategy to prevent future

violence, address the deep-seated discrimination against women, promote equality and improve women's status.

Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has recommended specific measures for ensuring that victims of sexual abuse receive reparations which would enable them to begin to address the damage that has been done to them. The survivors themselves need to be active participants in establishing a reparations programme that genuinely meets their needs.

This report examines the social and individual impact of sexual violence, and documents the continuing suffering that results from discrimination, ostracism, and marginalisation of survivors and the failure to acknowledge the crimes that have been committed.

It proposes specific recommendations to the government of Sierra Leone, that it should carry out in consultation and, where possible, with the support and assistance of civil society, international donors and agencies. These recommendations include:

- public acknowledgement of the suffering of women and girls in Sierra Leone;
- implementation of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on legal, social and economic reforms in order to eradicate discrimination against women and to ensure justice;
- a comprehensive, inclusive, effective and accountable reparations programme.

There is a long road ahead for Sierra Leone's victims of sexual violence. A meaningful reparations programme, which genuinely involves the survivors of these crimes, can help restore their dignity so they can use their proven survival skills to take an active role in moving on from these terrible experiences.

This report summarizes a 36 page document (13,500 words): Sierra Leone: Getting reparations right for survivors of sexual violence (AI Index: AFR 51/005/2007 issued by Amnesty International on 1 November 2007. Anyone wishing to obtain further details or to take action on this issue should consult the full document. An extensive range of our materials on this and other subjects is available at www.amnesty.org. Amnesty International news releases can be received by email: www.amnesty.org/email/email_updates.html.