

Project Title: Reducing the Risk of Sexual Violence in Mali

Supervising Organisation: Advocacy Project

Host and Partner Organisation: Sini Sanuman

Introduction

In 2012 Mali was hit by a deep security crisis when the MNLA rebels from the Tuareg ethnic minority began their struggle for an independent northern Mali under the name of Azawad. Although this was not the first time Mali fought a Tuareg rebellion, it was the most violent since independence. Islamist and Arab groups began fighting alongside the MNLA and the capital, Bamako, was hit by a violent coup d'état. Amongst the chaos women were purposely targeted: rebels and Islamists raped women, forced young girls to get married and used widespread gender-based violence. The radical Islamist groups in Northern Mali enforced Sharia law, which is particularly harsh on women, sometimes not even allowing them to step out of their own homes, and punishing crimes with public floggings and stoning. Sini Sanuman and the Advocacy Project launched a project of reintegration, both social and economic, for women survivors of these acts of violence, particularly aimed at the recuperation of war rape survivors. This project was funded by a section of the German Foreign Ministry, for a trial six months. Sini Sanuman opened two centres, one in Bamako and one in Bourem, a town in the region of Gao, one of the worst hit by the rebellion. These centres accommodate a total of 60 women who can benefit from lodging, meals, psychological attention, and skills training in soap-making, clothes-making and embroidery, activities that are very popular in Malian culture.

Here is a story from one of the project beneficiaries in Northern Mali:

« I was alone at home with my mum that Thursday around noon when two rebels showed up at our door with guns. They were shouting “where are the men”. My mum replied saying that we were alone, and that my father had passed away. She then asked what they wanted, and one of the rebels pointed at me and said: “that one, that one is what we want”. My mother replied in kind saying “she’s my daughter, leave her alone, she has done nothing wrong”. One of the rebels said in the Tamasheq language “take the girl”, then they began hitting my mum. I began crying, and my mum was crying too, telling them to leave me alone, that I’m all that she has left, and that I’m already an orphan. They took me in the shed in the courtyard by force and of them jumped on me, tore my clothes and began having sex with me; when he was done the other one did the same thing. I cried until I lost my voice. No one was around to come to my rescue and I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I was hurting badly and I was bleeding – my mum cleaned me up, then I spent one week locked indoors, crying. I don’t know what to do now. »

My role

My role working alongside the Advocacy Project and Sini Sanuman was to support the national NGO and facilitate their capacity building, making sure that the project and the project accounting ran smoothly and to produce information material to advertise the programme abroad. To this end, I worked closely with the project coordinator and the accountant at Sini Sanuman to ensure a smooth project implementation. I also helped Sini

Sanuman secure substantial funding from UNICEF to build their capacity and ensure continuity. In my time in Mali I produced [online blogs](#) and [photographs](#) to promote the organisation and the programme.

It is largely thanks to the supporters of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation that I was able to travel to Mali at the beginning of June to begin my fellowship with the Advocacy Project. Their support was invaluable in that it gave me the chance to launch this important project alongside my Malian colleagues. Through this project and with the help of JJCF these women were offered the chance to regain their confidence in the company of other women and become autonomous once again.

Objectives of the project and of my fellowship:

1. Open two centres of reintegration in Bamako and Bourem.
2. Provide skills training for 60 women at the centres and market their products locally and internationally.
3. Produce an advocacy quilt with embroidery done by the women at the centre
4. Provide psychological training for 60 women at the centres.
5. Hold community meetings and workshops on issues of gender-based violence to raise awareness about the issue.
6. Help Sini Sanuman with project accounting and management.
7. Liaise between the Advocacy Project and Sini Sanuman.
8. Help Sini Sanuman maintain their relationship with donors and the German Embassy in Bamako.
9. Produce good quality photographs and blogs to promote the programme abroad.

Results:

Two centres were successfully located, rented and opened. One centre in Bamako and one centre in Bourem were opened in August and occupied by Sini Sanuman staff in less than a week.



Vincent Diakit , director of the Bourem centre, at the Bourem centre



Women and Alpha Boubeye, Project Coordinator, at the Bamako centre

The women learned how to make soap, how to produce clothes and they also learned embroidery in their time at the centres. The skills that they have acquired will help them become more independent financially but will also help them regain confidence in themselves. Through skills training, women became closer to being socially and economically reintegrated. In addition to that, I helped Sini Sanuman and the centre directors come up with ways to market the products that the women were producing at the centres to generate some income for them. In Bamako, we began selling soap amongst the women and in local markets, we produced embroidered cloth that can be sold as decoration and promoted the clothes at a big event organised by the German Embassy of Bamako. In Bourem, where the production was slower due to the harsher conditions and security concerns, the team began selling soap locally as well, and the women will likely continue their clothes production past the end of the six-month project.



Clothes-making training in Bamako



Embroidery training in Bamako



Soap production in Bamako



Zaliha Maiga, animator in Bourem, with soap from Bourem (on a visit to Bamako)



Embroidery training from Bourem¹

As well as being a popular activity in Mali, embroidery allowed the women at the centres to create small embroidered squares for the Advocacy Project. The Advocacy Project's "signature product" are advocacy quilts; these quilts have been displayed all over the world at exhibitions, including the UN. The idea is to tell the women's stories through this quilt. Women at the centres were able to express themselves through embroidery. Although the women have already produced the squares, the quilt is in the process of being produced in the US now with the squares I brought back to the US. The women created some powerful designs, some of which are pictured below.

¹ The photos of Zaliha Maiga were taken by Iain Guest on his evaluation visit to Mali



Top left: a woman runs away from her aggressor. Top right: a woman is about to be flogged in accordance to Sharia law. Bottom: a man is about to be executed by a rebel.



Alongside skills training, the women benefitted from each other's company in the centres, which greatly helped them with recovery and recuperation after their difficult experiences. Both centres had an in-house psychologist who offered psychological support to any woman who requested it. Women from outside the centres would also come consult the psychologist, under advice from Sini Sanuman's community outreach agents (animators). On average a psychologist received ten visits a week, from women who needed support. Some women were still traumatised by their own experiences or by what they had witnessed, some others were being beaten by their companions. In Bamako the psychologist also acted as de-facto centre director.



Mahamadou Sylla, Bamako psychologist, with a woman from the centre



Adijatou Almeimoune, Bourem psychologist

Sini Sanuman hired ten community outreach agents, or « animators » to hold community meetings as a prevention strategy for sexual and gender-based violence. These animators held approximately 22 workshops, or animation meetings, each month, in different neighborhoods of Bamako and Bourem. In one month, these meetings could touch an average of 3,000 people (combining Bamako and Bourem); the workshops were aimed at the education and “sensitization” of the local community to issues of gender, gender-based violence, rape, forced marriage, and other forms of sexual violence. In late October a case of Ebola Virus Disease was discovered in Bamako, and Sini Sanuman took advantage of the animators’ influence to inform the population on prevention measure; Ebola became another topic of conversation. Through these animations or community meetings, animators were able to educate the population (prevention) as well as potentially identify cases of sexual and gender-based violence to refer to psychosocial, medical and legal services (response). In order to do so animators had to be trusted by local chiefs, and the local population. This came with time. Animators often had one-on-one meetings with families or individuals who were seeking support after their experience. In this way, animators were able to identify survivors of different types of violence, follow-up with them, and offer the services of the project.



Fanta Keita (left) and Aissatou Touré (right), two animators, holding an animation meeting touching on the subject of rape



Internally displaced women from Northern Mali attending the animation meeting

In my role as Peace Fellow in Mali, I primarily assisted the Project Coordinator with his management of the project, both in terms of resource allocation as well as personnel management. We worked very closely on all aspects of coordination, including reporting. I also worked closely with the accountant to ensure that the project did not go over budget, and that Sini Sanuman followed the donor's accounting procedures correctly.

As Peace Fellow, I liaised with the Advocacy Project, keeping them informed of the activities carried out by Sini Sanuman, and assisting the Advocacy Project's Director Iain Guest on his evaluation trip to Mali. In order to build Sini Sanuman's capacity I also built and maintained relations with the German Embassy in Bamako as well as facilitating communication with the donors (translating emails from English into French and vice-versa, reporting to the donors).



From left to right: Tata, clothes-making trainer, me, Iain Guest and Oumou, embroidery trainer, at the Bamako market during Iain Guest's evaluation trip to Mali



From left to right: Siaka Traoré, Sini Sanuman Director, Alpha Boubeye, Mahamadou Sylla, Mariam Seck, animator, and Josef Hinterseher, German Embassy's attaché for human rights, at Sini Sanuman's centre in Bamako



Sini Sanuman staff, me, Josef Hinterseher and women from the centre at the Christmas marked in Bamako, selling the women's products. Both Josef and I are wearing clothes made by the women of the Bamako centre.

Josef Hinterseher, a representative of the German Embassy in Bamako, came to visit Sini Sanuman's centre in Bamako and supported the NGO at an event organized by the Embassy (a Christmas market). Sini Sanuman's presence at the Christmas market increased Sini Sanuman's visibility amongst the local community as well as the expat community of Bamako. By the end of the day the soap sold out, other products sold well, and the women made over \$70 profit. The stand attracted considerable interest from many.

Concluding remarks:

The first six months of the projects are now over, and the two centres have temporarily closed. Sini Sanuman and the Advocacy Project will be submitting, with my help, a new proposal to the donors to continue for another two years.

As for me, I am back in the US. Sini Sanuman were kind enough to let a stranger into their offices, to let me help with a whole new programme and they opened their doors to me. Sure, this was not without its ups and downs and its challenges, but those are also part of the journey. For the first time, I was confronted with stories experiences that I had only read about it books and articles, stories of rape and sexual violence, the faces of the survivors, their inner strength, their struggles. This project, that I am fortunate to be part of, has the potential to have a real impact, and indeed already has.

All of this would not have been possible without the support of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation. My experience has meant the world to me, it has marked me both professionally and personally. Mali is a wonderful country full of wonderful people. Much like many wonderful countries, it has been scarred by violence and conflict, and it is with the help of people like JJFC's supporters that Mali and its people can find their way back. Thank you, merci, *initié*. From me, Sini Sanuman, and Mali.



The Sini Sanuman team