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Sierra Leone: Double victimisation

Some women are punished for suffering domestic violence

Women in rural Sierra Leone face discrimination and violence at the hands of the men in their homes and communities. When they try to access justice to address such abuses, they are often faced with further abuse and violence as a result of local chiefs exceeding their authority and imposing punishments against women.

“I had five children with my former husband who died in the war and now one with my new husband. Since we have been together my new husband has been neglecting the children and all he wants is sex. I don’t want to have sex because I am a new mother and I am tired. I really did not know what to do. My family is not around as most died in the war and everyone else in the community, including the Chief, is advising me to just sit tight. They warned me not to go to the police about my husband raping me.”

- A woman in Makeni town, Bombali district.

In rural Sierra Leone, where 80% of the population live, only customary law is recognized. Sierra Leonean customary law forms part of the common law and is largely unwritten. Customary law allows men to chastise their wives under certain circumstances. Village chiefs are traditionally the first point of contact outside the family on matters of domestic violence against women perpetrated by a husband or male relative. Chiefs, unaware of the criminal nature of these abuses are reluctant to punish perpetrators, believing that this would bring disharmony to the community and leave women without any financial support.

To add to this is the government’s reluctance to interfere - reinforcing the belief that the state has no business in family and community affairs. But it is the government’s responsibility to protect women from this human rights abuse.

The unwillingness by the state and chiefs to pursue justice for women creates a culture of impunity. With nowhere to turn, women are simply forced to accept domestic violence, and give up demanding justice or protection.

The government must provide paralegal and legal aid to women and punish chiefs when they make illegal rulings against women.

Use a postcard to send your message to the Minister of Justice.

Address it to AI’s office in Sierra Leone: AI staff will take your postcard and attach it to a tree in front of the Ministry of Justice to make your support for this campaign visible.

Feeling creative?

Design a postcard and AI Sierra Leone will publish the best 3 on this webpage - so watch this space!

Ameen (AI campaigner on Sierra Leone) and Karen (AI online editor) felt creative:



Sample letter

Dear Minister of Justice,

I am concerned about the problems women face in seeking protection and justice for domestic violence in rural communities.

Unbelievably, women suffering from domestic violence are often made to pay fines and can face imprisonment because of judgements by local chiefs.

It is your government's responsibility to provide **legal aid** to women and **punish chiefs** when they illegally make judgements on domestic violence cases.

Yours sincerely,

AI Sierra Leone
16 Pademba Road
Freetown
Sierra Leone

Links

Watch an activist march in Freetown

[http://emedia.amnesty.org/sierra_leone-march-170506-eng.ram]

Watch a play on domestic violence in Sierra Leone

[http://emedia.amnesty.org/sierra_leone-drama-eng.ram]

No one to turn to: Women's lack of access to justice in rural Sierra Leone

[<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf510112005>]

Sierra Leone: Women face human rights abuses in the informal legal sector

[<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf510022006>]

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Domestic violence exposed: the sixth in the series of monthly features focuses on Sierra Leone

Field Code Ch

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Next month will feature **Bahrain**

[Sections campaigning on the issue]

- Netherlands
- Sierra Leone
- UK
- USA