

SIERRA LEONE

Family Support Units

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) was used as a method of warfare by various parties during Sierra Leone's 11-year civil conflict. Post-conflict, it has turned into a major social and security challenge. Family Support Units (FSUs) were created in 2001 in order to address what was seen as a "plague" of SGBV.

FSUs are part of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Sierra Leone Police and are tasked to deal primarily with physical and sexual assault, and cruelty to children.¹ Special training was provided to police officers on how to handle domestic and sexual violence. The FSUs work together with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs to monitor and report SGBV and child abuse, and work with a number of international organisations on service delivery.² The services offered by the FSUs include:

- Skills training for abused women
- Financial support to homeless battered women
- A women's help line
- Referral
- Sensitisation campaigns and awareness-raising activities around the country to encourage women to report SGBV

The FSU have established a referral service for victims of SGBV, whereby they are referred to "Rainbow Centres" in Freetown, Kenema and Koidu. There, victims are treated for free and their medical certificate is sent to the competent FSU for use in the police investigation and any subsequent court action. In addition, the Rainbow Centres offer psycho-social and legal counselling.

The FSU engages in extensive public awareness-raising, especially on the topics of sexual violence, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, trafficking and female genital mutilation. FSU officers attend monthly meetings of the Local Policing Partnership Boards, which aim to give local communities a voice in how they want to be policed. Since community leaders chair the Boards, FSU officers use these opportunities to convince influential leaders of the importance of spreading the message among their communities that domestic and sexual violence are crimes that must be reported to the police.

By 2005, there were 19 FSUs in the Police Local Command Units. 178 FSU officers were deployed throughout the country, of whom 71 were women. 105 staff (including police and social workers) had been trained in awareness-raising, human rights, media and communication skills, record-keeping, sexual investigation and in how to conduct joint police/social worker investigations of sexual offences. While the FSUs have been praised, there continues to be evidence that women find officers reluctant to intervene in domestic assault unless they are considered serious, i.e., involve maiming, wounding, or disabling.³

In the broader context of reform of the Sierra Leonean Police, positive results in integrating gender include:

- Adoption of a formal quota system to increase the number of female officers to 30 per cent of the service. As of 2006, 1,411 women served as part of an 8,881 strong force (16 per cent).⁴
- Creation a database of all reported crimes, including SGBV (although getting accurate figures on rape and sexual violence remains difficult).
- Training of over 9,000 police officers on the main topics of general policing, and modules on human rights, gender and community policing (through the UK Department for International Development's Commonwealth Community Safety and Security Project).

1 William G. O'Neill. "Field-notes: Sierra Leone". Prepared for UNIFEM, UNDP, DPKO. October 24, 2006.

2 UNFPA. *Gender-based Violence in Sierra Leone: A Case Study* (Geneva: UNFPA, 2005), http://www.unfpa.org/women/docs/gbv_sierraleone.pdf (accessed April 27, 2009).

3 Ibid., 9, 18; O'Neill. "Field-notes."

4 O'Neill. "Field-notes," 2.

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- ▶ Family support units and women's police stations are further discussed on pages 9–10 of the *Police Reform and Gender Tool*.
- ▶ Other procedures and initiatives to address gender-based violence are discussed on pages 8–9 of the *Police Reform and Gender Tool*.
- ▶ The integration of gender into police reform in post-conflict countries is discussed on pages 16–18 of the *Police Reform and Gender Tool*.