

Giorgia Nicatore
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Sini Sanuman / Advocacy Project: Mali

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. 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. »

This woman, known with her code name H3J1U (to ensure confidentiality) is currently in the company of twenty-nine survivors of sexual and gender based violence in Sini Sanuman’s reintegration centre in Bourem to recover through psychosocial support and through skills training.

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 rape survivors. 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.



Women in Bamako doing embroidery



Example of drawing on panel (to be embroidered); the drawings represent scenes that women have witnessed or lived through during the conflict



Women in Bamako preparing for clothes making training



Soap making trainer and project coordinator showing proud of the soap production



Lunch arrives at the centre in Bamako

My role working alongside the Advocacy Project and Sini Sanuman is to support the national NGO and facilitate their capacity building, making sure that the project and the project accounting run smoothly and to produce information material to advertise the programme abroad. To this end, I have been working closely with the project coordinator and the accountant at Sini Sanuman to ensure a smooth project implementation and to build their capacity and together we made sure that Sini Sanuman could get substantial funding from UNICEF (which they received in September).



From left to right: myself, Alpha (project coordinator) and Sitan (accountant)

I have also been producing [online blogs](#) and [photographs](#) to promote the organisation and the programme.

In this second period my work has been focused on data collection, understanding the challenges and the strengths of the programme, and setting clear goals for the centres in Bamako and Bourem. Unfortunately the security situation in the north prevents me from travelling to the Bourem centre, but the Sini Sanuman team has come to Bamako to brief us on the project up north. In my last couple of months in Mali I will put together videos, articles, partner pages, profile some of the women at the centre and make sure I collect all the embroidered panels to bring back to the US and make an advocacy quilt for the Advocacy Project to display around the world.

While women never fully recover from sexual violence, particularly rape, the centre in Bamako and Bourem have successfully created a safe space for them to come and relieve their pain and stress.