

## ZISVAW PROGRAM 2006-2008

### Combating Violence Against Women and Girls in Sierra Leone

#### UN Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence Against Women US\$50,000

#### THE NEED

Gender-based violence (GBV) and legal inequality have been systematic problems in Sierra Leone before, during, and after the violent decade of civil war that began in 1991. Figures suggest that 67 percent of urban Sierra Leonean women experience domestic violence<sup>2</sup> and 50 percent have suffered from sexual assault (in 90 percent of cases the perpetrator was a husband or boyfriend).<sup>3</sup> Women are further victimized by a culture of silence and stigmatization and a chronically weak justice system that charges prohibitive court fees.

The 2007 passage of the Domestic Violence Act, Devolution of Estates Act, and Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act was the result of a long struggle for law reform by the women of Sierra Leone. Until the enactment of the new legislation, domestic violence was lawful so long as it was 'reasonable,' discrimination against women in property laws was legal, and women were trapped in marriages because they could not afford to return the bride price and were entitled to no property of their own. While the new legislation is a first step, much still needs to be done to begin to change the long-ingrained customs, practice, and implementation systems that surround the issues addressed by these laws.

#### THE PROJECT

Recognizing the momentum of the recent passage of laws in Parliament, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is working together with the various stakeholders to develop a plan for putting the new laws into practice. IRC and its partners will broker partnerships and cross-sector alliances from the most senior to grassroots levels to galvanize support for implementation of the new laws and establish a network of activists across the country to increase accountability



*Woman in Sierra Leone. Photo by Kevin McNulty*

In addition to rape, women and girls are abducted into sexual slavery, forced into marriage and pregnancy, and forced to exchange sex for survival. When women are forced to flee their homes, they continue to be at risk of rape and may face increased levels of domestic violence.

of state institutions, serve as resources for their communities, and facilitate dissemination of knowledge and skills nationwide. Ultimately, women and girls will be empowered to equally contribute to and access the benefits of reconstruction and peace in Sierra Leone, free from sexual and physical violence.

<sup>2</sup> FSU statistics, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, 2002

### **ZISVAW PROGRAM**

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