

Sierra Leone: Pastors Face Abuse Allegations

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With little oversight, some religious leaders said to exploit their positions.

Amie, 16, lives with her five-month old daughter, parents and siblings in a one-bedroom apartment in a hilltop slum in Freetown.

Her baby, she said, was the child of a local pastor who had repeatedly raped her since the age of 14.

Amie (not her real name) described how her family's spiritual advisor, who ran an unregistered church in the New England-Dwarzak community, had made her suffer through years of abuse.

After the first assault, which took place on February 1, 2014, in a local graveyard, Amie discovered she was pregnant and confided in her mother who helped her secretly arrange an abortion.

"I refused to tell my parents that [the pastor] was responsible for the pregnancy because he once threatened me that if I ever attempt to tell anybody about what has been happening between us, I will die or my life will become miserable," Amie said.

In August of that year she again discovered she was pregnant. Her mother arranged another abortion with the help of Le100,000 (25 US dollars) from the pastor, although he did not admit he was the father.

In March 2015, Amie said she was again raped by the pastor and became pregnant. This time, she kept the baby and told her family the whole story.

Her father is a baker and her mother helps sell bread, but they found the money to seek legal advice and her case went to court in April 2016.

However the case was dismissed by the magistrate who said that there was insufficient evidence to refer it to a higher court.

Experts say that incidences of sexual abuse against minors by religious or community figures are on the rise in Sierra Leone. Victims of such attacks rarely get access to justice.

Legal processes are lengthy and expensive, while issues of family honour mean many cases are resolved extra-judicially.

(See also **Sierra Leone: Seeking Justice For Rape Survivors**).

When the alleged perpetrator is a religious leader, it is even harder for victims and their families to pursue the case. Sierra Leone is largely a Muslim country, but around a fifth of the population is Christian and there is little oversight of religious institutions.

Amie's mother said that she herself had come under pressure to not press charges.

"In 2015 [the pastor] called me to say that if my daughter decided to make any statement against him, he will ensure her life becomes miserable," she said Amie. "But while investigations were on, [the pastor] sent some of his church members to me to plead on his behalf for me to tell the police to close the matter but I refused because of the harm he has cursed my daughter and family with.

The family also alleged that the police refused to take a statement from a key witness whose phone the pastor used to communicate with their daughter. In addition, there was no forensic investigation.

"The court threw out my case stating that there is lack of sufficient evidence, without ordering any medical or DNA testing on my baby and the man who I believe raped and impregnated me, so that the court could confirm my allegations," Amie said.

Although there are no DNA testing facilities in Sierra Leone, in some cases officials have ordered the procedure via a laboratory in Freetown that has partnerships with centres in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa.

VULNERABLE GROUPS

In Sierra Leone, rape is punishable by a term of imprisonment of between five and 15 years.

Attacks against those under the age of 18, the age of consent, are prosecuted as sexual penetration and

carry the same penalty.

Superintendent Mira Koroma is the director of the Family Support Unit (FSU), the police department tasked with investigating crimes of sexual abuse.

“Presently, reports about sexual penetration against children below 18 are on the increase,” she said. “We do receive reports from communities where people in authority, such as community leaders, pastors and imams engage in sexual activities with girls under the age of 18.”

Koroma said that nationwide there had been 2,353 reported cases of sexual penetration in 2015, up from 1,485 in 2013.

She said that most instances had involved girls aged between 12 and 16, noting that this group was particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Ethel Noldreld, lead paralegal for Legal Access through Women Yearning for Equal Rights and Social Justice (LAWYERS), said that many cases they dealt with involved abuse by a religious or community leader.

She added that her organisation had recorded 100 cases of rape and 30 cases of sexual penetration in the Freetown/Western Urban, Kono and Kenema areas alone between January and March 2015.

Religious figures acknowledge that the problem is real.

The general secretary for the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone (EFSL) Jonathan Titus Williams, agreed that reports of pastors abusing members of their churches were on the rise.

“One of the reasons why religious leaders are involved in cases of sexual abuse is because the respect given to them by people makes [nearly] impossible for them to face the law,” explained Naasu Fofanah, the founder and chief executive officer of United for Humanity, a Sierra Leonian NGO.

Fofanah said that she herself had been raped by a member of the clergy when she was a teenager.

Victims needed psychological counseling to help them deal with the trauma, something that was rarely available in the country, she continued.

“Staying in the same community where the incident took place makes the traumatic situation worse for its victims, so psychological therapeutic intervention is critical for victims,” she said.

The ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs (MSWGA) is responsible for overseeing the operations of the country’s religious institutions. The ministry did not respond to questions on what officials were doing to regulate the activities and conduct of religious leaders.

DISTANT HOPES FOR JUSTICE

There are multiple challenges involved in bringing cases to court.

Long delays in the judicial system mean that alleged perpetrators often go free because poorer families can simply not afford to continue with the case.

As well as the expense of legal advice, many are unable to meet the costs of repeatedly travelling back and forth to the court.

Koroma agreed that many cases of alleged abuse were being swept under the carpet or resolved informally.

“I believe women and girls are not safe from any form of sexual offence because of the manner in which sexual offence cases are compromised at community level by people who must ensure the law is enforced,” she said.

“Our leaders at all levels need to stand firm to ensure that our laws are fully implemented to ensure the safety of women and girls across the country.”

Ebun James-Dekam, secretary general for the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) said that a lack of oversight of religious leaders had allowed abusers to take advantage of their positions.

There are no set criteria for people to become pastors or imams in many of the country’s churches or mosques, leaving poor and illiterate people vulnerable to exploitation.

Cases of abuse often involved recently established churches under the control of one man and which had not been registered with the authorities, he continued.

“I have recommended to the ministry of social welfare that they should close down churches where their leaders are engaged in sexual offences,” he said. “Those religious leaders who are involved or caught in the act of sexually abusing women and young girls must be punished.”

Williams, of the EFSL, said that action was urgently needed to kick such offenders out of the church as they were damaging the reputation of entire religious communities.

“This is affecting the church negatively because lots of immoral issues that are now being reported about pastors are being generalised,” he said.

Williams also recommended that there should be set requirements for founding or operating a church in Sierra Leone.

Campaigners also argue that more needed to be done to support the operations of the legal system.

Fofanah said that she had long campaigned for the establishment of a sex offenders’ register, which does not exist in Sierra Leone. This would help coordinate actions across all religious groups in the country.

“We want the report of those cases and once they are convicted, we will take them to the inter-religious council for further discipline and if possible expel the perpetrators,” she said, “because people of such a nature should not serve as religious leaders.”

Location: Sierra Leone

Topic: Rape

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