Breaking the silence in remote communities: How access to information and support is helping SGBV survivors seek justice in Falaba District

In remote communities across Falaba District, geographical isolation, limited access to essential services and the stigma associated with Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) continue to prevent many survivors from reporting abuse and seeking justice. For some women and girls, fear of discrimination, social exclusion and the absence of accessible support systems often force them to suffer in silence.

The experience of Zainab, 22 years illustrates how access to information, timely assistance and survivor-centred interventions can help break this silence and create pathways to justice.

Following an incident of sexual penitration, Zainab found herself isolated and living in hiding, with limited knowledge of where to seek assistance or how to pursue justice. The stigma surrounding sexual penitration, coupled with the challenges of accessing support in her community, further compounded her situation. However, through a project-sponsored radio awareness programme, Zainab learned about her rights and the support services available to survivors of SGBV. Encouraged by the information, she found the courage to seek help and access the assistance she needed.

With support from the project's paralegal services, Zainab was connected to essential medical care, emergency shelter and legal guidance. This assistance helped her navigate the reporting and justice processes while addressing some of the immediate protection and recovery needs arising from her experience. With the necessary support and engagement of relevant actors, her case progressed through the justice system and is now before the Magistrate.

Beyond her personal journey, Zainab's decision to speak out has encouraged other survivors to seek assistance, demonstrating the importance of community awareness, accessible referral pathways and survivor-centred support in addressing SGBV. The intervention has also contributed to strengthening institutional responses. Following engagements with relevant stakeholders, family support unit, referral system for SGBV cases, aimed at improving coordination and facilitating more timely referrals for survivors seeking protection and justice.

Zainab's experience demonstrates that access to information can empower survivors to break the silence, while coordinated medical, psychosocial, legal and protection services can help them pursue justice and rebuild their lives. Nevertheless, many women and girls in remote communities across Falaba continue to face geographical, financial and social barriers to accessing justice and essential support services. Expanding community awareness, strengthening referral mechanisms and improving the availability of survivor-centred services remain critical to ensuring that no survivor is left behind.

Through support from the UNDP, the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law – Sierra Leone (CARL-SL) continues to promote access to justice, strengthen institutional responses and support efforts to protect survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Zainab's story reminds us that when survivors know their rights and have access to appropriate support, silence can give way to courage, and courage can inspire change across entire communities.