



SUCCESS STORY

Victims of Violence in Timbuktu Begin to Heal

USAID is empowering Malian civil society to provide psychosocial counseling support to victims of gender based violence. This helps them combat the social stigmas and taboos associated with their experiences.

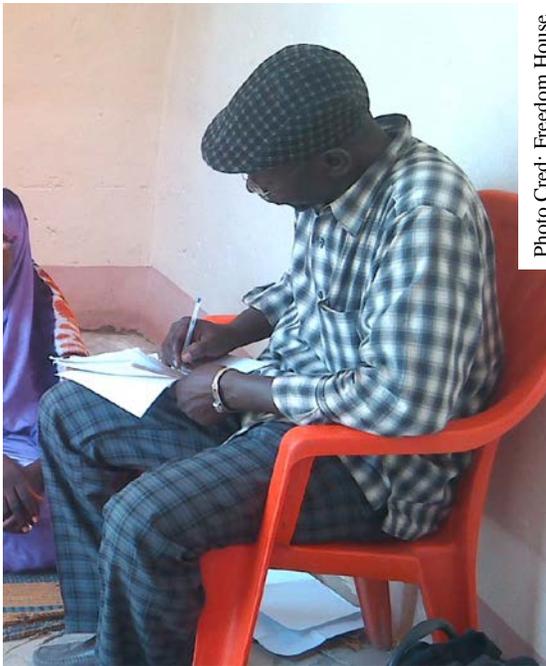


Photo Credit: Freedom House

A member of WILDAF conducting an interview

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November 2015—The citizens of Timbuktu, a region in northern Mali, experienced a large number of abuses during the country’s 2012 conflict, including rape and assault. Now victims of human rights abuses are attending psychosocial counseling as they move along the path to recovery. Since December 2014, USAID, through Freedom House, has supported Women in Law and Development in Africa/Mali, a local civil society organization, to provide the counseling. Sessions allow victims to share their experiences and help break taboos associated with gender based violence (GBV).

M.D., a recent participant in a counseling session, reported being raped in July 2012 when she was 16 years old. She described being arrested by the Islamic police in Timbuktu for wearing inappropriate clothing and being imprisoned for three nights, during which she was raped. When she was released, she did not report the violations, even keeping the rape secret from her immediate family.

“After I was free, I became another person and each time I thought of what happened to me, I cried,” she said.

By participating in the psychosocial counseling sessions—designed for both victims and their families—M.D. began to process her victimization. It was the first time she said the name of her rapist out loud and the first time that she told her family. After sharing her story, M.D. experienced a transformation and reported that she no longer carries the stigma and burden of being a victim. With her newfound confidence, coupled with the support of her family who also participated in the training, she is now speaking about her experience with other victims of GBV and encouraging them to do the same.

“Thanks to the psychosocial sessions, I was able to externalize the pain that was hidden in me. For this I thank WILDAF [Women in Law and Development in Africa/Mali] and partners,” said M.D.

The support that the counseling provides is crucial as victims often face a second victimization—having to confront the stigma and rejection resulting from their experience. To date, more than 93 victims of GBV in Timbuktu, including 19 victims under age 25, have shared and confronted their experiences, and moved beyond shame to begin the healing. These efforts are part of USAID/Mali’s Strengthening Human Rights Advocacy Activity. The objectives of this activity are to assist the Government of Mali (GOM) to effectively respond to human rights violations committed during Mali’s coup d’état and political crisis by increasing civil society’s human rights advocacy role and visibility in the protection of human rights. USAID/Mali will achieve this through: (1) strengthening the capacity of Malian civil society organizations to monitor the GOM’s implementation of the 2013 Universal Periodic Review recommendations on human rights violations; (2) advocating for the rights of victims of human rights violations; and (3) assisting Malian civil society organizations to conduct trial monitoring of prosecutions against high-level perpetrators of human rights violations. This activity began in December 2014 and will continue through February 2016.