



Gloria baking bread using the oven she had built with the savings she made from the flour she sold.

‘Gloria’, Democratic Republic of Congo

Gloria (not her real name), a 35-year-old mother of nine from South Kivu, Eastern Congo, was farming cassava with other women when she and two others were brutally assaulted by an armed group. Badly injured, they were found later by their husbands.

“There were three of us weeding the cassava field. We saw a group of six armed men coming towards us. They forced us to undress and they raped us,” Gloria said. “My husband took me to the hospital and a month later, he decided that we should move because the risk of being raped again was still there.”

In her new village, Gloria connected with SARCAF (Service d’Accompagnement et de Renforcement des Capacités d’Auto promotion de la Femme au Sud-Kivu), a Christian Aid partner supported by Irish Aid, the Government of Ireland’s development cooperation programme. SARCAF provided psychological and emotional support for four months, helping Gloria begin her recovery.

With \$75 from SARCAF, she began selling cassava flour, which helped support her family. Later, she joined a bread-making course through another organization SARCAF linked her with. Using her savings, she built an oven and began baking bread, which became popular in her community. The income allowed her to send her children to school.

Gloria also joined a village savings and loan scheme set up with SARCAF’s guidance. Starting with 12 members, the group grew to 34, including other survivors and local farmers and traders. The collective fund enabled Gloria to save and buy a plot of land where she built a new house.

Now, Gloria hopes to expand her business and continue building a stable future for her family.

“This year I bought sheets and boards and I built a house. In the future, I have it in my mind to create a cafeteria. I also intend to create a wholesale bread store in my house where shopkeepers can stock up and resell,” Gloria said.

Marlen Lourdes Salguero Hernández, Honduras

Marlen leads the Women and Energy project in Belen, Honduras. Through Christian Aid's partner OCDIH (Organismo Cristiano de Desarrollo Integral de Honduras), she has received training on the installation of solar technology and is a member of a women's network coordinated by OCDIH. To date, she has installed 38 systems. She received a loan to support this work, which helped her adapt to the challenges of climate change whilst earning a better living. Marlen is a leader in her community, supporting other women to gain financial independence and protect the environment.

Climate change is destroying livelihoods in this part of Honduras. Marlen's husband lost half of his coffee farm due to strong storms. Her business, making and selling food and clothes, did not earn her enough to get by and support her family. She was on the verge of changing her life dramatically and migrating to the US, as many families are forced to do.

Marlen said, "Here, we have had many disasters. My husband lost half a coffee farm. Then the pandemic made it worse, but we have not stopped the project, we have always tried to do the best to continue working. Climate change affects the crops. If it rains a lot, or if there is drought, or the temperature is too hot or cold, it damages the crops"

"As a family, we are accustomed to planting trees. Now it is our goal and purpose to take care of nature. We planted 100 trees. We also recycle and take action to educate other families to do so. To educate others to respect nature, is a reward"

"What we are trying to do with the women's network, is spread the message to recycle, to use natural resources carefully, to reduce the burning of forests. Women are not the weaker sex. On the contrary, we are the strongest people"



Joyline Kwava, Zimbabwe

Mother of three Joyline Kwava (43) is among almost 350 volunteers working as women's health champions, part of a Christian Aid-funded Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) project run by the charity's local partner, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches.

The project was set up to tackle the issue of child marriage, which is illegal in Zimbabwe, but still is a common occurrence with more than a third of girls married before their eighteenth birthday and 5% married before they reach the age of fifteen.

Domestic abuse is another serious issue that is addressed, as 40% of women aged 15-49 having reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency and UNICEF 2019).

Women affected often tend to be judged by their community for having failed at their marriage. Health champions, like Joyline, support and help women facing domestic abuse to report the offences to the police.

The project also distributes washable sanitary pads to women and girls. Disposable sanitary pads are available in shops but cost too much for many families. This leaves women and girls with no choice but to use unreliable cloth rags during their period.



Women and girls are heavily stigmatised and considered to have brought shame on their families if their clothes become stained during their period. As a result many girls do not go to school and many women are reluctant to go to church during their period. The SRH project aims to tackle the stigma associated with menstruation, so that women and girls can participate fully in the life of their community.

Since joining the project, Joyline has been visiting places of worship to talk to faith communities about these issues. Joyline said: "I'm happy to be making a change. I'm happy to help women speak up for their rights."

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Credit: Christian Aid/Lisa Fagan

Carolina Solano Gutiérrez, Colombia

Sisma Mujer is a Colombian organization that has worked since 1998 to end all forms of violence against women. They are a partner of Christian Aid funded with money from Irish Aid, the Government of Ireland's development cooperation programme. They provide legal and psychological support to survivors of sexual and domestic violence and work towards ending impunity for these crimes in Colombia.

Carolina Solano Gutiérrez (right), a lawyer and Deputy Director for Justiciability at Sisma Mujer, pictured here in front of Dáil Éireann alongside Roisin (left) from Christian Aid, visited Dublin in November 2022 to speak to politicians.

During her time in Dublin, Carolina discussed the work of Sisma Mujer over the last six years to document and present cases of sexual violence before national and international courts, including before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) which was created following the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016 between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The purpose of the JEP is to investigate and prosecute those responsible for sexual violence during the conflict, including the highest members in the chain of command.

A cornerstone of this work by Sisma Mujer has been to push for the JEP to open up a macro case (which is one that groups individual cases together) on sexual, reproductive and other forms of gender based violence rather than treating them as isolated incidents. Carolina explained why it was so important for such a case to be heard.

"What has been happening in the JEP is that there are people who think that sexual violence was committed only by bad apple individuals rather than it being a military strategy of the armed groups," Carolina said. Following six years of sustained advocacy on this issue by Sisma, the JEP finally agreed in 2022 to open such a case.

Carolina added "We have been pushing for the court to recognise that sexual violence was committed by every armed group throughout the conflict,"



Carolina Solano Gutiérrez (Right) pictured outside the Dáil.

Credit: Christian Aid/ Conor O'Neill

Hannah Finda Sesay, Sierra Leone

Hannah Finda Sesay is vice-president of the Kailahun Women in Governance Network, which helps women to become active in local, regional and national politics and government. Christian Aid's local partner in Sierra Leone, SEND, support the Network with funding from Irish Aid, the Government of Ireland's development cooperation programme.



Kailahun is in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province and most people lack access to good health care and schools. Like many rural areas in Sierra Leone, women in Kailahun also struggle to escape stereotypes, which expect them to take all the responsibility for household chores and the rearing of children. Women and girls are also often discouraged from continuing their education or taking up jobs traditionally done by men.

At the local level, culture and tradition have long played a role in determining women's access to power. As well as encouraging women to stay at home, traditional beliefs, customs and local laws have for a long time strongly discouraged women from getting involved in local politics or community affairs.

The Kailahun Women in Governance Network has provided a range of support to nearly 9,000 women across Kailahun, including providing them with training in lobbying, public speaking and leadership skills to help build their confidence to successfully demand change and improvements in their local communities. The network also provided financial and practical support to women to campaign for the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, a new law that was passed in January 2022 which guarantees that women hold at least 30% of elected and appointed positions, all the way from local council to parliamentary seats and cabinet posts.

As Hannah explains, the network is keen to see more women enter into politics. "We want to change the mentality of saying that women are not capable of decision-making or that women cannot be parliamentarians."

"We tell the political parties that we need more women in parliament, we need more women in politics. We'd like a female to stand for president in this country."