

Saving Sierra and



by Niamh Griffin

IN SIERRA LEONE

DUBLINER Sinead Walsh has learned a lot about electricity since moving to Sierra Leone in West Africa three years ago. The power supply can drop out for weeks, so she stockpiles batteries and has a generator at home.

When the power is on, she plugs everything in frantically, hoping to charge up before the next outage. She hopes a power surge doesn't destroy everything.

Eleven years on from the horrific civil war depicted in the film *Blood Diamonds*, Sierra Leone faces new challenges, including shockingly high rates of sexual assaults on women.

But for Sinead, it's home. Her work here for Irish Aid in partnership with international NGOs focuses on women's lives, whether it's preventing violence or battling malnutrition.

'The country after the war was destroyed. I was here in 2005 before I moved here in 2011, it's remarkable the changes even since then.'

'Most of our programmes are about women, and rights. It's an area that was neglected for a long time, even in Ireland. About 50% of girls by 18 here have either given birth or are pregnant, it's a huge problem and

'Shockingly high rates of rapes and assaults on women'

something the government here is taking on,' she said.

Sierra Leone is similar in size to Ireland with a population of just under six million. So even limited funding can go a long way.

The muddy street to the Irish Aid building where Sinead works requires careful navigation: there are potholes large enough to swallow a child, and dozens of people throng the edges of the narrow thoroughfare.

An Irish flag wilts in the sunshine, flying over high walls with rusting barbed wire coiled along the top.

Sinead is head of mission for Irish Aid in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Liberia. And while life can be tough, previous stints in Pakistan, Afghanistan and South Sudan provided a solid training ground.

Sierra Leone is seen as a 'fragile state'. Its plight has touched the hearts of people everywhere: in 2012, film actress Eva Mendes visited the country in order to raise awareness surrounding issues affecting women and girls. Since last year Sierra Leone has been one of the nine countries Ireland partners in development. Here, few families escaped tragedy during the war. A spokeswoman for Irish Aid in Dublin said: 'The populations in fragile states are more likely to suffer from extreme poverty, and these are the places where Irish Aid's funding and support can make the greatest difference.'

Sinead oversees funding for the Irish-funded Rainbo Centres, Sierra Leone's only sexual assault clinics. They are operated by an American NGO, International Rescue Committee, with a local group, the Rainbo Initiative. The centres recorded 1,549 cases in 2012 – about 95% of their clients are between 11 and 15 years of

The horrific civil war has ended – but Sierra Leone still faces many challenges, not least the fact that 50% of girls here are pregnant by the time they are 18. We visit an Irish aid agency fighting for women's rights



STAR: Eva Mendes visiting Freetown Left: Sinead Walsh works with Irish Aid



SCAR: Finda was referred to the Ireland-funded Rainbo Centre after her husband attacked her, above

age. Since 2006, Ireland has given €2.1m to projects tackling sexual abuse. In 2013, we donated €7.8m to different Sierra Leone projects.

Some of the rape survivors met by the MoS told heartbreaking tales of cruelty. Massah Swaray, 38, spoke of brutal gang-rapes during the war, watched by her terrified children. She is a counsellor now at a Rainbo-Centre in the city of Kenema. She said: 'Now I feel a bit happy, I can manage what is in my head. When my mind is going back to that time, I take courage now from what I am doing. I think that all is not lost.'

Others spoke of brutal husbands and drunk strangers, tales sadly all too familiar in Ireland.

But in Sierra Leone, the violence in broken relationships is compounded by the trauma of war and poverty. Women often have no support other than the aid programmes.

Finda Ffayia, 41, from Kenema, had her first child at 15 and now has four children with her husband. An older man, he beats her regularly. Finda has a long scar curving across her head received late last year.

'My husband said I should leave the house, I could not even enter the room where my children were sleeping. I said, "You cannot do this" and I tried to get to the door.'

'Then he hit me, he slapped me two

times. That man took the leg off the chair and hit me on the head. There was blood flowing from my head, my eyes became dark, I fell down,' Finda said quietly. When the police were called, they notified Rainbo Centre.

Finda said: 'He was put in prison. I am from a poor background, we have four children in school – they pleaded with me to have mercy on my husband. He is the only person paying

'He took the leg off the chair and hit me across the head'

the school fees. The Rainbo Centre supported me, they gave me tablets for the pain. I cannot work in the market now.'

She still lives with her husband, who phones as we speak, checking she is not at the police station.

Poignantly, Finda adds: 'I am not contributing any more, he is sorry for what he has done.'

Plain-clothes police investigators say they are often frustrated by situations like this. There are 24 'Family Support Units' across the country who work only on sex crimes. They

receive some Irish funding. Speaking in a small room, while dozens of people queued outside in the sun, Deborah Namineh Bangura said: 'In our cases, we deal with the child but also with the family as a whole. More people come now to report rapes; that is a good thing. Now girls know they should not be violated by their parents, or women by their husbands. 'It's not just that we send victims to the Rainbo Centres – I think for us success would be to have most of our cases convicted,' she said.

One of her colleagues jokes that they wear plain clothes so they can sneak up on suspects.

Definite figures are hard to come by, but conviction rates are low. Counsellors at the Freetown Rainbo Centre said many men simply offer to pay the family, and the case never goes to court.

But they feel this is changing. When the MoS was in Freetown, all the talk was of the firing and then arrest of a government minister following rape allegations.

Simply to have him arrested was a big deal, according to the director of the local NGO preparing to take over the Rainbo Centres when Irish funding comes to an end in 2015.

Surata Silla, formerly a senior nurse in London, is one of the many 'returnees' who left during the war

but came back to rebuild their country. 'In the Freetown centre, we have worked with under-18s, under-under-threes and on rare occasions we have had babies. I see this as of the effects of the war, there are huge social problems here.'

'The fabric of the country changed. But in 2012 the government passed the Sexual Offences Act, quite encouraged by this – if only they can implement it,' she said.

Ireland also works with the UN Nations to fund 'Saturday Court' extra sessions just for sexual crimes held in two cities. Another Dubliner, James Nunan, coordinates the programme. Donations from Ireland cover salaries for judges, police and prison officers. But not electricity. When the MoS visited, the old building was stifling, without even a fan to combat the heat.

The judge worked alone, as is traditional in Sierra Leone, taking notes often halting proceedings to check a quote. A policeman giving evidence leaned precariously over the witness box, angling his notes towards the sunlight. Speaking afterwards, consultant master register for court system, Julia Sarko Mensah, said these sessions were clearing the back-log.

'There is no immunity now, and we are taking the stigma away

its girls



AID: Sualu Liho, second from left, took part in a project to change men's attitudes

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women. It's important that people see there is a clear punishment,' she said. Meanwhile, Irish money also funds a deeper change – tackling men's attitudes in the region. Sinead said she was sceptical about this programme at first. 'I thought it sounded too good to be true. But they were

'She is doing nursing training, before I could not have allowed that'

saying it had just changed their thinking – and there was no benefit.

'A lot of the men's lives were blown apart by the war – they became refugees or combatants. They are sitting there (in the group) and telling awful things they used to do – there is solidarity there, it's like a buddy system.'

The MoS met with six men in a small village in western Sierra Leone. Dressed in a vibrantly patterned shirt, Sualu Liho, 30, spoke in a gentle, matter-of-fact tone: 'I used to sleep in the bush (as a boy), it was a very bad aspect of my life. I used to shoot arms, I used to kill people. After the war I got married but I was

very troublesome – I used to beat her, or flog her. When I wanted to live, I lived as I liked.'

A Muslim who never drank, Sualu added: 'The group was very difficult in the first week. When the leaders said how they live with their wives, I ... After, I tried. I went and got wood for my wife, I had to change the beds. Now she is doing nursing training, before I could not allow her to do something like that.'

The men said they liked that the NGOs don't make money from the group. Before this, village chiefs had fined men for hitting their wives, but it was seen as simply another form of corruption – a tax on violence, one man joked.

Back in Freetown, Sinead said these small changes add up to a good reason for Ireland to stay.

'You can get together here and talk, it can help – this work on violence is really filtering down. It's a small country, we know a lot of people here, and we can get a lot done.'

'I feel very fortunate to be here, it's a good fit for Ireland,' she said.

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BACK in the early Nineties, Nicola Horlick became known as 'superwoman' as she juggled a top job with the demands of raising a large family. But in 1998 she lost her eldest daughter Georgie to leukaemia, a tragedy that shattered her family and had profound consequences for her then youngest child, Antonia. By the time she reached her early teens, Antonia was drinking and taking drugs that delivered a so-called 'legal high'. Psychiatrists said her increasingly unruly behaviour was linked to emotional damage suffered when she was separated from her mother during Georgie's long illness.

In desperation, Nicola – who had a sixth child after Georgie's death – made the agonising decision to send Antonia to an American boot camp. Here, mother and daughter, now 17, describe how the experience proved to be Antonia's salvation...

ANTONIA: I started going out with friends when I was 14, and while this may sound young it is totally normal for my generation in London. At first I was just having fun: dancing, talking to people, but I started drinking at the weekend and getting involved with 'the wrong crowd'.

Then a friend introduced me to a drug that gives you a legal high. While I wasn't doing anything wrong, during the summer, I became lost in a cycle of compulsion. Despite the come down from the drug, I wanted more of it. My family and friends became secondary to me – getting high and dancing the night away was far more important. I lost all sense of value in my life. I became thin, pasty, wide-eyed, and hollow. Everything should have been great: Yet I spent my days locked in the confines of my saddest childhood memories.

NICOLA: At 14, Antonia was almost beyond our control. She was involved with some pretty disturbed children and immersed in a social scene that largely revolved around tobacco, alcohol and legal highs.

More worrying, some of Antonia's friends were using ketamine as a recreational drug. In March 2010 I returned from a weekend away to find the house wrecked. Antonia had invited a group of friends to a party via Facebook. At this time, she was in a tutorial college where things were unravelling in similar fashion. Antonia's father Tim and I were

RECONCILED: After boot camp mother and daughter enjoy a new, closer relationship

Multi-millionaire superwoman: The agonising day I let a 'Child Whisperer' raid my home... to take my daughter to a US boot camp

(and why her teenager says: 'You were right to do it, Mum')

By **NICOLA & ANTONIA HORLICK**

summoned to a meeting and told she was absent and disruptive when there. It was then that we began thinking about American wilderness programmes – boot camps.

Trawling the internet, I came across a camp in Utah that had apparently won awards. Antonia agreed to fly out to the States with me to take a look at it. I didn't tell her that I intended to leave her there. But I worried about the idea of leaving my daughter with people that I knew nothing about.

I got cold feet and took Antonia home to London. Tim and I then found an educational consultant who helped us select another camp, also in Utah. This time, I did not want to lie to Antonia. The camp told us that they would send a guy to collect her at 6am one morning but not to tell Antonia. I was told

that the guy was a genius. His nickname was the Child Whisperer. When he arrived

with his wife at 6am as arranged he was moustachioed, 6ft 3in tall and about 18 stone. Tim and I were told to stay in the kitchen with the door firmly shut. The Child Whisperer went upstairs and we heard cries of protest, but these were followed by laughter, then silence. It was June 2011, and Antonia was on her way to boot camp two days before her 15th birthday.

ANTONIA: An enormous guy appeared in my bedroom, with his wife lurking behind him. Sitting down on my

bed, he told me that he was taking me to a 'summer camp' for three months. I asked if I could take a shower. He said: 'No, we have to get to the airport.'

We flew first to Las Vegas where I was handed over to another couple who put me in a truck and drove me for a couple of hours until we finally pulled up at a building. I was ordered to strip. After I was searched and gave a urine sample for a drug test I was kitted out in thermals and a sweater and a pair of rubber shoes – Crocs.

Finally, I was driven to the camp, Redcliff Ascent by a man who called himself Rising Wolf. On the way there I was blindfolded.

I said I wanted to pee and I was told to do it on the ground. I tried to escape. A woman ran after me and grabbed my arm. Because I tried to run away, I was put in a red jumpsuit, given a number and told I had to call it out whenever I needed to go to the loo. At night, I slept on the ground under tarpaulin slung between two trees.

I was assigned to a group of girls called the Ravens and given a 'phase book', which explained what I needed to do to complete the programme. I did not know how long I would be there. Once I had got over the shock, I began to enjoy it. It was sweltering and the daily 15-mile treks made me ultra-fit. Mummy finally came to fetch me in September 2011. I had been in the camp for 83 days. I ran out of the desert and into her arms, sobbing. I was so happy to see her.

NICOLA: Antonia's name was called and a beautiful, bronzed girl came running towards me. The wilderness camp had been a success but it was just the beginning of her road to recovery. It wasn't until years later, when she started at a therapeutic boarding school in Virginia called Carlbroke, that she began to change for the better.

ANTONIA: The therapist there made me confront the issues that had haunted me. Now I think that there are so many troubled teens who don't have my opportunities.

NICOLA: Antonia started taking responsibility, rather than trying to rebel. She now has a grace and presence which is striking. She is extremely articulate and witty. But above all, she looks happy.

