



BEARING THE BRUNT OF VIOLENCE: WOMEN & GIRLS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

In November 2013 donors, UN agencies and NGOs came together in a historic affirmation of their commitment to protecting women and girls from violence and sexual exploitation in emergencies. In a Call to Action hosted by the British and Swedish governments, humanitarian actors agreed to prioritise funding and programming on violence against women and girls (VAWG).¹ Humanitarian actors also committed to prioritise women and girls needs at a High-Level Meeting on Humanitarian Action in the Central African Republic (CAR) in January 2014². These commitments are now being tested as the women and girls of CAR bear the brunt of the violence and suffering created by the latest conflict.

In response to the escalating crisis in CAR, donors and other actors should prioritise prevention and service delivery for survivors of VAWG. This life-saving programming should be equal to the scale of need in responding to survivors and keeping women and girls safe from sexual and physical violence. Experience worldwide and IRC's specific experience in CAR shows that until services are established, women and girls will not come forward to report.

In only 3 months, IRC Women's Centres in Bangui have seen 238 women and girls reporting extreme levels of violence and abuse. 82% of women and girls report experiencing rape, with 73% reporting gang rape.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

A country already at the margins, throughout 2013 CAR quickly descended into chaos with unprecedented violence in the capital since December. Today, over 600,000 people remain internally displaced, 190,000 of whom are in Bangui. **Protection** – including from gender-based violence (GBV) – has been established as a **high priority** for the humanitarian response.³ IRC's field offices in Kaga Bandoro, Bangui and Bocaranga report a strong presence of armed groups with continued insecurity and violence (including against women and girls). The IRC has been working on women's protection and empowerment in CAR since 2007 in the prefectures of Nana Gribizi, Ouham and Ouham Pende. We have responded to the crisis throughout 2013 and 2014 and have increased our presence with activities in Bangui since December 2013. In Nana Gribizi and Ouham prefectures, IRC has been working for the past year with 12 women's groups on strengthening women's economic power and decision-making within their communities.

WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CURRENT CRISIS

The situation for women and girls in CAR remains desperate. In December 2013, the Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment identified **rape as the most common form of violence** experienced by **44% of women and 40% of girls** who reported violent incidents.⁴ In the past three months, through its activities in 7 IDP sites in the outskirts of Bangui, IRC has provided direct services to 238 women and girls who experienced sexual and physical violence, the youngest being just five years old. **82% of these women and girls were raped and 73% of them reported rape by multiple men.** Women reported physical attacks where multiple armed men hit them, raped children in front of them and kicked pregnant women in their abdomens. It is particularly striking that women and girls came seeking services before outreach activities had begun.

Make services available and women and girls will use them. In the IRC's nearly twenty years of experience with GBV programming, we have seen that **as soon as services** are available, women begin to report incidents and seek assistance despite stigma, ongoing insecurity and fear. **Women speak of horrific violence:** towns attacked by armed men, mothers and daughters raped in front of their families, husbands and sons killed after witnessing their rapes, and houses burned to the ground.



¹ [Keep Her Safe: Protecting Girls and Women in Emergencies](#), November 2013.

² UNOCHA, [CAR High Level Meeting](#), January 2014.

³ [Multi-Cluster Initial Rapid Assessment](#), Central African Republic, January 2014.

⁴ [Multi-Cluster Initial Rapid Assessment](#), Central African Republic, January 2014.

WHAT IS THE IRC DOING FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CAR?

IRC has remained in CAR throughout 2013 and the start of the crisis to provide lifesaving services and tend to the urgent needs of the population. Talking to women and girls to understand the specific risks they face, the IRC prioritised in Bangui:

- Distribution of 9,000 dignity kits to women and adolescent girls with cloth, sanitary items, soap, shoes, and other basic items. The IRC is now targeting adolescent girls with an initial distribution of 1,500 dignity kits designed specifically for them.
- Distribution of 200 fuel efficient stoves to vulnerable women to reduce the risk associated with collecting wood. Post-distribution monitoring revealed that the stoves cut the number of times women went to collect firewood in half, reducing their exposure to risks.
- Deployment of teams of social workers and community mobilisers to provide psychosocial support and information on services to women and girls in eight displacement sites, with a catchment population of 50,000.
- Training of health staff on clinical management of rape and provision of psychosocial support through four women's centres in Bangui, providing counselling and support for survivors.

In March the IRC received financing to expand services to Bocaranga. The team is currently setting up services for women and girls in six sites and six communities. The team is soon to deploy a mobile clinic to service four hard to reach areas.

During program assessments in Bangui and Bocaranga women and girls highlighted several specific risks around:

- Attacks while collecting firewood.
- Presence of armed groups in some shelters/sites.
- Lack of secure or private sanitary and bathing facilities.
- Finding money and resources to take care of themselves and their families and the associated risk of survival sex.
- Lack of assistance for women's groups that can help provide networks for mutual support and protection.
- A high number of households headed by women that had either been separated, widowed or abandoned. In some displacement sites, one-third of all households were recorded as female-headed.

LIFE-SAVING, NOT OPTIONAL: *When a woman has been raped, she could have **just a few hours** to ensure that life-threatening injuries do not become fatal, she has **three days** to access care to prevent the potential transmission of HIV, and **one week** to prevent an unwanted pregnancy⁵.*

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS, UN AGENCIES AND NGOS:

The humanitarian response in CAR has increased since December 2013. However, the tremendous scale of need, current programs and funding remain insufficient. Women's and girls' needs stem from deep structural discrimination and violence, leaving them more vulnerable to the recurrent risk of sexual violence and exploitation associated to conflict and emergencies.

Currently, only 19 out of 44 internally displaced population sites in Bangui receive direct GBV response service delivery and sensitization efforts.⁶ The 100 Day Plan for Priority Humanitarian Action in CAR focuses GBV efforts on disseminating a referral pathway and establishing coordination, but does not give priority to actual GBV services.⁷

- Humanitarian agencies should prioritise programs to protect and empower women and girls, who came into this crisis at an extreme disadvantage. Targeted efforts to meet their needs include lifesaving medical services, critical psychosocial support services, economic empowerment programs to protect against sexual exploitation, among others. Without specific services, it is likely that assistance will bypass and further anchor women into their already desperate situation.
- All donors should allocate specific emergency funding streams to address VAWG in CAR. Such programs are life-saving and should not be relegated to the recovery phase or considered a secondary priority. Funding should be directed both to integrated and stand-alone programs that serve the specific needs and abuses that women and girls are enduring.
- Donors who took part in the 2013 Call to Action and the 2014 Brussels Donor Conference should fulfil their commitments to fund specialized programs to protect women and girls in this continuing emergency.
- Donor governments and other international actors should exercise leverage over the parties to the conflict to press for an immediate cessation of violence against civilians and compliance with international humanitarian law. Women and girls are facing unacceptable, targeted attacks from armed groups and any path toward peace must address their protection needs, as well as their right to have a voice in bringing their country out of war.

⁵ The IRC analysed the humanitarian response to GBV in Pakistan, Haiti, the DRC and Horn of Africa in its Discussion Paper "[Life Saving, Not Optional: Protecting Women and Girls from Violence in Emergencies](#)", October 2012.

⁶ CAR Protection Cluster Crisis report #5, 9 Jan 2014-09 Feb 2014.

⁷ UNOCHA, [100 Day Plan for Priority Humanitarian Action in CAR](#), 24 December 2013 - 2 April 2014.