



SUCCESS STORY

Supporting Legal Redress for Victims of Violence in Darfur



Paralegals in an IDP camp in Darfur receive training on addressing sexual and gender-based violence through a UNDP project.

USAID/OTI is supporting efforts in Darfur to train paralegals to handle cases of violence against women.

November 2007 – Violence against women on a mass scale is a disturbing feature of the conflict in Darfur. In an environment charged with ethnic and political tension, rape has become a weapon of war, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has been part of a pattern of violence inflicted on targeted communities. A number of factors work together to allow most of the perpetrators to go unpunished, including the reluctance of victims and others to report crimes, the tendency of the Sudanese legal system to ascribe blame to women who have been victims of sexual violence, and an absence of the political will to investigate or prosecute cases of SGBV.

To address the climate of impunity that breeds these crimes and to ensure that the perpetrators of SGBV are held to account, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) has coordinated support for a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) activity in Darfur since April 2006. With funding made available by the Secretary of State's Initiative to Combat Violence Against Women, the UNDP program is building the capacity of legal professionals in Darfur, providing legal aid services to survivors of SGBV and their families, and raising awareness of and changing attitudes about SGBV within communities and among the populace.

One element of the program has focused on training paralegals in camps for internally displaced persons (IDP) throughout Darfur. Paralegals are on the frontlines in the fight against SGBV – often the first professional a victim will seek out. As advocates, paralegals can help ensure that clients make informed decisions about seeking medical assistance or pursuing legal action. When necessary, they can refer clients to lawyers in the UNDP Legal Aid Network. Lawyers in the network, which draws its members from local human rights organizations, have received training to ensure that they can handle SGBV cases in an appropriate manner.

OTI's support for the UNDP is part of a holistic approach to improving access to justice for vulnerable groups in Darfur. OTI also supports human rights monitors and the UNDP-sponsored legal aid centers administered by the International Rescue Committee. By supporting these activities, OTI has improved victims' access to justice and significantly contributed to the monitoring, reporting, and prosecution of cases of violence against women.