

Pujehun: Interference by Influential People Undermines Justice for SGBV Victims

By Brima Grant – Moonlight Radio 104.5FM Bo

Pujehun resident, Borbor Sellu, is a distraught father; he is full of resentment with the justice system for, in his view, failing to give justice to his underage daughter, a victim of sexual abuse.

The girl was allegedly sexually assaulted by an Imam in a mosque compound in July 2024, when she was nine. He was her Quranic teacher. “Every morning, my children would go to this Imam in the mosque for Arabic learning before heading to school. But on this faithful morning, my daughter came home crying, and I knew that everything was not alright,” recalls Mr. Sellu.

He recounts his daughter reporting that the Imam, identified as Mustapha Rogers, asked her to accompany him to a nearby toilet, where he allegedly sexually assaulted her and then gave her NLe10 to keep quiet about the incident. The accused was subsequently released by the High Court in Pujehun after six months in remand and a brief trial. Court records revealed that the case was discontinued due to a lack of sufficient evidence.

Mr Rogers declined to comment on the matter when contacted by this reporter. He only said that the case had long concluded and that the court declared him innocent. He showed the reporter a copy of his discharge certificate, which states that the state failed to prove its case “beyond all reasonable doubt as there are no legal or factual proofs that the accused committed the offense.”

For rights and gender activists, the case represents everything that is wrong about the fight against Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in the district, which is located in the southern region of Sierra Leone, where many women and girls continue to endure violence and abuse in silence, despite the existence of laws designed to protect their rights.

Article 50 in chapter one of the TRC reports explicitly states how women and girls became targets in the brutal conflict in Sierra Leone, and how they suffered abduction and brutality at the hands of their perpetrators. The report explains that the vulnerability of women and girls was intentionally exploited to dehumanize them. “Women and girls were raped, forced into sexual slavery and endured other acts of sexual violence, including mutilations, torture and a host of other cruel and inhumane treatment,” the report notes.

In Article 316 in Chapter Three, it also stresses that “Women and girls were the deliberate targets of sexual violence and rape by all the armed groups during the conflict. Women continue to be victims of gender-based violence.” Article 324 states: “Never again should women in Sierra Leone be subjected to brutality. Every man and boy in Sierra Leone owes a duty to respect women and girls and to protect them from abuse at all times.”

But all the above is unlike what is seen in communities today. Subsequent articles in the TRC report from 316 to 340 lengthily provide recommendations as to how policies and customary laws should be harmonized to protect women and girls from experiencing SGBV in various communities.

Recent data and testimonies reveal SGBV as a persistent form of violation against girls’ and women’s rights in Pujehun.

Florence Sandi, Assistant Director at the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs in the district, said over 40 cases of sexual penetration have been recorded in the district from January to October 2025. She noted that these figures do not include the numerous cases of gender-based violence, particularly physical assault, reported daily at the Family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police.

Sandi is also the Manager of the One Stop Centre set up by the ministry in the district. It is a government-established unit at every district government hospital that provides vital emergency services, including psychosocial, medical, and legal support to survivors of SGBV. Sandi expressed deep concern over the alarming number of children affected by this phenomenon, as revealed by the data. She disclosed that the centre has recorded cases involving children as young as three

months old as victims of sexual penetration, adding that girls aged between 12 and 15 are getting pregnant as a result of these assaults.

Campaigners blame the situation on the manner in which reported cases are handled by relevant authorities, and they cite frequent reports of compromise involving “high-profile” individuals.

Ms. Sandi confirmed this, noting that some perpetrators are released with the intervention of influential individuals or the victims’ families themselves. She said that such compromises weaken the justice system’s ability to protect victims and punish offenders, which has “greatly frustrated their efforts after going through constraints to provide medical and legal services” with the hope of getting justice for the victims.

“After diligently doing our work, we want to see that justice prevails, but most times it does not happen as we expect, and that is frustrating,” she says.

Mr. Sellu believes his daughter is also a victim of such interference. He claimed that the Imam and his supporters paid a bribe of NLe 48,000, although he couldn’t say who received it. The aggrieved father recalls his daughter bursting out in cry after the judge read the verdict acquitting the accused for lack of evidence in her case. He recalls the judge saying that the money that the accused allegedly gave the girl to keep her muted about the incident was not presented in court as evidence.

Mr Sellu argued that even though the accused had pleaded in court not guilty, he (the accused), together with some other fellow clerics, visited him at his home to beg him to drop the case while it was being heard.

Also, the medical report reviewed by Sandi of the One Stop Centre and the police prosecutor in the case confirmed the claim of rape, but the court reportedly dismissed it for not indicating the name of the doctor who authored it.

Mr. Sellu, with a family of four, including two children, hails from a humble background. He was a personal driver for the late Paramount Chief SAS Gbonda of Panga Krim Chiefdom. He felt let down by the court and, at some point in the

interview, sounded angry and vengeful. He said he even contemplated taking action outside the law to avenge his daughter, if not for his wife, who discouraged him from doing so.

Concerns over the failure of the system to give justice to SGBV victims are rife among parents here in Pujehun. Many women complain of having suffered physical abuse at the hands of their husbands or partners. And many of these say the FSU does not treat their cases with the seriousness they think they deserve. And they believe this neglect contributes to the continued violence, as men often beat their wives with little fear of repercussions.

“The FSU here has failed to advance the case of my daughter, who is repeatedly beaten by her man,” laments one aggrieved parent, who asked not to be named. “Each time she came to the police with a complaint, it ended with nothing happening, and the man would repeat the same act after days or weeks. We are tired of coming to FSU for domestic violence.”

When contacted for a response to the allegations directed at the FSU, Inspector Momoh Gbanya, the line manager of the Unit in Pujehun, declined to speak to the media, stating that they are not authorized to do so.

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