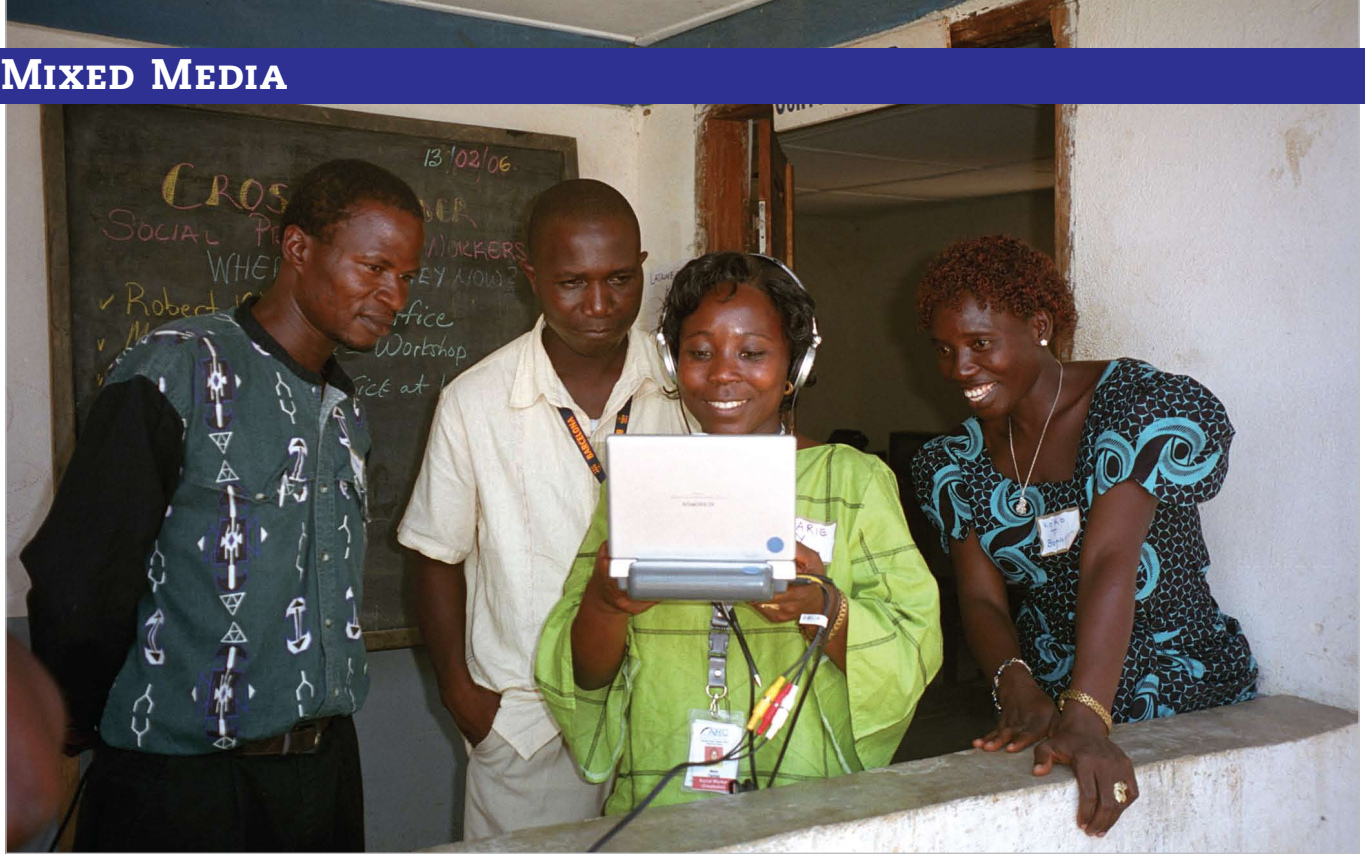

Through Their Eyes

Victims of gender-based violence fight back with video

by J. Trout Lowen

The young Liberian girl walks along a forested path. When she comes upon a man clearing brush with a machete, he stops her to talk. They argue. The man carries her into the bushes. Moments later, the girl emerges, crying, her white dress stained with blood.

In this case, the rape is a filmed dramatization, but the crime is all too familiar for many women and girls around the world, especially those living in refugee camps where gender-based violence has become endemic: Rape is a weapon of war, forced sex a currency exchanged for food or safe passage.

Often shrouded in secrecy, gender-based violence can be particularly difficult to combat in these settings because cultural traditions place the social stigma and shame on the victims. But with help from two American nonprofits, refugee communities in West Africa are focusing new attention on the problem using participatory video to show what gender-based violence looks like through the eyes of its victims.

The project, Through Our Eyes, is jointly sponsored by American Refugee Committee International (ARC) and Communication for Change, a New York–based nonprofit that has been training communities in developing countries to use participatory video techniques for more than two decades. These quickly produced, inexpensive community-made films tackle tough subjects such as rape, forced marriage, and wife beating. Community screenings of the videos spark candid discussions of the causes of and possible solutions to violence against women.

Because the videos are made by members of the community, told in local dialect and with respect for local customs, they have a big impact. People can't dismiss the stories as happening somewhere else.

Through Our Eyes began as a pilot project in 2006 in the Lainé refugee camp in Guinea, where tens of thousands of Liberians have fled during the country's 14 years of civil war. The project quickly spread into communities inside Liberia and in Sudan.

Community video teams, led by local Liberian ARC staff, train participants to use handheld cameras and microphones and school them in interview and filming techniques—including ways to use silhouettes and lighting to hide a victim's identity. Training takes a couple of weeks, during which participants begin work on their first video, explains Lauren Goodsmith, program manager for Communication for Change. Soon, they're training others.

In each community, the participants decide what issue to address in the film: child rape, for example, or forced marriage or sexually transmitted diseases. They select the for-

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mat—documentary, drama, or some combination of the two—and storyboard the concept. The videos are edited in-camera, often with immediate feedback from those involved. Completed in as little as two days, the videos are screened at community "playback" sessions in a public building such as a school, or even under a mango tree. That's where the real change occurs, says ARC's director of program development, Connie Kamara.

One video about rape resulted in an immediate increase in the number of women who sought out ARC's field staff to report assaults and seek counseling.

"Because of the training and education, people are not afraid now to come and report cases to law enforcement or aid organizations," says Albert Pyne, a Liberian ARC staff member who is a trainer for the project.

The video format also allows women to play important roles as community leaders. If they don't want to appear on camera, they can conduct interviews and work as camera operators and project coordinators. But for some women, choosing to tell their stories on camera becomes an empowering and important part of the healing process.

In the first video created in the Lainé camp, Kumba, a young woman in a brightly patterned dress, determinedly tells how she was forced at age 13 to marry a much older man. When she was 16, Kumba explains, she became pregnant. Her abusive husband rejected her, and so did her mother when she tried to return home. The community scorned her:

"So I was just all around in the community. Anywhere I pass, they drive me [away]. Anyone want to beat me, they beat me . . .

"I never had nowhere to go. Then I [was] left sleeping in the darkness. I [was] alone. I delivered [the baby] in the darkness. . . . Who it ever happen to? But it happened to me. Because why? Forced marriage."

Through Our Eyes participants have now created more than 20 videos with titles like "Rape Is a Bad Thing" and "Wife Beating Is Not Good." Although the titles sound simplistic to Western ears, messages like these are rarely heard in public in these communities.

Because television is still rare outside of the Liberian capital of Monrovia, the videos attract large audiences who pay close attention. Lured by the opportunity to use technology, men are also eager to become involved in the production process.

"Sometimes it's hard to get men involved in women's issues," says Kamara. "But when you bring technology into it, all of a sudden men feel like they've got a role."

With a grant from the United States Agency for International Development, ARC plans to continue the Liberian program and implement similar programs for refugees living in Pakistan and Rwanda over the next three years. ARC is also forming programs in Thailand and Sudan and plans to hold a workshop for people involved in all the programs.

"It's been successful in ways we've never imagined," Kamara says. "It's taken on a life of its own." UR

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