News



Sr. Victoria Amie Tholley, a member of Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, consoles Nana Kamara in Makeni, Sierra Leone, on Sept. 20, 2023. Kamara is among thousands of Ebola survivors who have been rejected by their families and communities after the Ebola outbreak that hit Sierra Leone in 2014. (GSR Photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



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Sitting outside her brick house in this northern town of Sierra Leone, Nana Kamara held a picture of her daughter, who in 2014 died of Ebola virus disease, and she began to cry inconsolably.

The 56-year-old mother of four lamented that the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak — the worst in history, killing more than 11,000 in West Africa — changed her life forever.

"I lost my two daughters to Ebola, and I also got infected with Ebola," grieved Kamara, noting that she lost her sight in 2014 after surviving the virus following months of quarantine in Makeni. "When I returned home, I faced a lot of rejection with my surviving children and grandchildren, and we had to live in the bush for months for fear of being attacked."

Kamara said she contemplated taking her own life after the virus killed her daughters. Her family and friends rejected her, accusing her of bringing Ebola to the community with the intention of killing everyone. (A contagious infection, Ebola is transmitted by direct or indirect contact with blood and body fluids such as saliva, urine, feces or semen of infected people.)

"I had nothing to eat with my family because I was already partially blind and unable to work and feed my family," Kamara said, choking back tears at the recollection. "No one also wanted to come near me, and we were not even allowed to go to the community well to fetch water."



Residents of Makeni, a town in northern Sierra Leone, attend one of the religious sister's sessions on fighting the stigma that is associated with Ebola and that educates people to accept Ebola survivors back into the community. (GSR Photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Kamara said Catholic sisters saved her life and that of her family during a visit to Makeni around 2015, when her family was near starvation and living under deplorable conditions.

"I met sisters when they had called for a gathering in the neighboring village to talk about Ebola," she recalled. "People didn't want to see me, but I was determined to listen to the sisters. They urged people who had attended the gathering to fight the Ebola virus and not the people it infects. The message excited me, and I rushed and embraced the sisters."

After listening to her ordeal, she said, the sisters registered Kamara in their counseling, feeding and health care programs for Ebola survivors. The sisters also reintegrated Kamara and her family after educating the community about Ebola and

the need to show love and acceptance to survivors.

Kamara is among thousands of Ebola survivors in Sierra Leone whom dozens of Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny continue to help and reintegrate into their communities nearly a decade after the World Health Organization, or WHO, declared the country free of Ebola transmission.

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During the Ebola outbreak that started in 2014, the West African nation with a current population of more than 8.6 million experienced more than 8,700 cases and 3,589 deaths. Survivors have faced medical complications as their communities and friends rejected them.

According to WHO, the Ebola epidemic in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone infected more than 28,600 people and killed 11,325 people.

"When Ebola started, everybody was afraid; once one member of the family was identified as having Ebola, people avoided an entire home," recalled Sr. Philomena Joseph Kulangara, the health care coordinator of Loreto Health Service in northern Sierra Leone. "The survivors were shunned by their communities, which continues until now. The majority of people still believe that Ebola was a curse from their traditional gods as a way of punishing people for their evil deeds."

Sierra Leone's health ministry records show that there are more than 4,000 Ebola survivors. Today, many survivors continue to face stigma and discrimination from their families, friends and communities due to fear of contagion. Survivors experience physical symptoms such as eye and vision problems, muscle and joint pain, headaches and fatigue. Their livelihood and financial situations have also been affected due to their health conditions, as they are not able to work as easily as others.



Residents of Makeni, a town in northern Sierra Leone, receive food aid from religious sisters on Sept. 20. Since the end of the Ebola epidemic in 2015, religious sisters in Sierra Leone have been providing food to Ebola survivors and presenting awareness sessions to help survivors reintegrate into their communities. (GSR Photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

The situation in the West African nation prompted Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny to start educating communities about Ebola. Since the country was declared free of Ebola virus transmission on Nov. 7, 2015, the religious sisters have been reintegrating survivors into their communities, addressing ongoing health problems, providing food and psychosocial support, and economically empowering survivors by engaging them in income-generating activities.

Kulangara, who has worked in Sierra Leone as a midwife and a nurse for more than 20 years, said sisters have been doing outreach work in communities, families, churches and schools. They also have been on the radio, educating people about Ebola to raise awareness and dispel myths and fears about the virus.

"During our discussions, we allow people to ask questions and share their fears and myths surrounding the virus," she said. "The sisters, who are mostly health care workers, can answer questions and educate the participants on how the virus spreads."

The sisters invite everyone — including survivors, members of the community and their leaders, government officials, health workers and religious leaders — to such gatherings.

Kulangara said the program, which runs monthly, has helped sisters reintegrate hundreds of survivors into society through community, family and friend dialogues.

"We reassure everyone that once a victim is cured, they cannot infect others and that families and communities should accept them back into society," she said.



Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny help reintegrate Ebola survivors into their communities, addressing ongoing health problems and providing food and psychosocial support. Sr. Philomena Joseph Kulangara, center, is pictured with two nurses at the Loreto Health Service in northern Sierra Leone on Sept. 20. (GSR Photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Sr. Victoria Amie Tholley said that in addition to isolation, job loss,and physical side effects, survivors are also still experiencing trauma and mental health issues. Most of the survivors witnessed the deaths of their loved ones and never buried them due to health restrictions.

Tholley also said the sisters have only managed to open businesses for a few survivors because they lack funds. The gap has left many survivors in poverty, as they can no longer fend for themselves with their health conditions and stigma.

"We have been counseling and praying with survivors so that they can understand that God still loves them, and He saved them from death," said Tholley, who worked as a volunteer during the period of the Ebola outbreak.

She said the sisters have been visiting survivors and communities monthly since the WHO declared the end of the Ebola outbreak. "We also do counseling in communities and churches, encouraging people to accept survivors back into their societies and offer them support," she said.

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Kamara and other survivors acknowledged the sisters' efforts, saying their campaign to end stigmatization and discrimination of Ebola survivors has borne fruit.

"The awareness campaign by the sisters made people slowly start accepting us back into the community," Kamara said. "The process took some time, but we are now seeing progress. We can freely interact with others without being criticized or chased away."

Meanwhile, Kulangara and other sisters hope to sustain their programs by providing vocational training and offering business opportunities to survivors so that they can generate income and help themselves and their families. They need sponsorships to fund this dream, they said.

"In the future, we want to see these survivors stand on their feet," Kulangara said. "We want them to be self-sustained and be able to take care of themselves."