

## **HRCSL HOLDS FIRST MOBILE COMPLAINT HEARING IN PUJEHUN**

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone with funding from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on Monday 22nd to Tuesday 23rd May conducted its first mobile complaint hearing in Pujehun.

The Director of Complaints, Investigations and Legal Services of HRCSL, Doris Sonsiama said the objective of the mobile complaints was to receive complaints of human rights violation from communities that cannot access HRCSL and speedily address them. She also said the mobile hearing was to increase the visibility of the Commission in rural communities and to help identify and address systemic violations of human rights.

Commissioner Rashid Dumbuya of HRCSL said during a meeting of stakeholders at the Growth Center that as a result of limited financial resources, the Commission cannot set up offices in all the districts. He said because of that, people in Communities where HRCSL is not present, find it difficult to access the Commission.

Commissioner Rashid further stated that the Commission was aware of harmful traditional practices in rural communities that most times go against human rights violations and best practices. "As a result, many victims of human rights violations go without redress. The purpose of these mobile complaints hearing is to bring the Commission closer to those communities that cannot access it. The Commission will use the opportunity to make itself visible, raise public awareness about its mandate and functions, engage in public education on human rights issues, address human rights concerns in those communities in addition to receiving complaints" he stated.

HRCSL has received very few complaints from Pujehun District. During the Commission's recent monitoring on the implementation of the sexual offences Act in Pujehun in April 2017, the team observed there were reports of numerous cases of sexual violence and the seeming inability and delay in police investigations of those cases. The hospital alone had recorded Sixty (60) cases of sexual abuse within the first quarter of this year whilst the police had only charged six (6) matters to court.

Victims of sexual violence continue to suffer both at the hands of the perpetrators and the justice system which is slow to respond to them. The Director of Education, Communication and Training, Frederick Kamara

emphasized that the Commission has the responsibility to inform the community and remind law enforcement officials that there are laws specifically designed to address the issues of sexual and gender based violence. These laws, he stressed spell out the responsibilities of the law enforcement agencies on how to handle such matters. "The Commission also needs to educate the police that failure to properly and timely investigate such cases could amount to a failure of a public official to prevent a violation which will amount to a human rights violation which falls within the mandate of the Commission to investigate". He said.

The Commission used the opportunity to educate schools on the activities of HRCSL and to educate the community on laws dealing with the issue of sexual and gender based violence and what they should do when they are faced with such issues. An engagement with the Police, Magistrate, Correctional officers and the Government Hospital was also done.