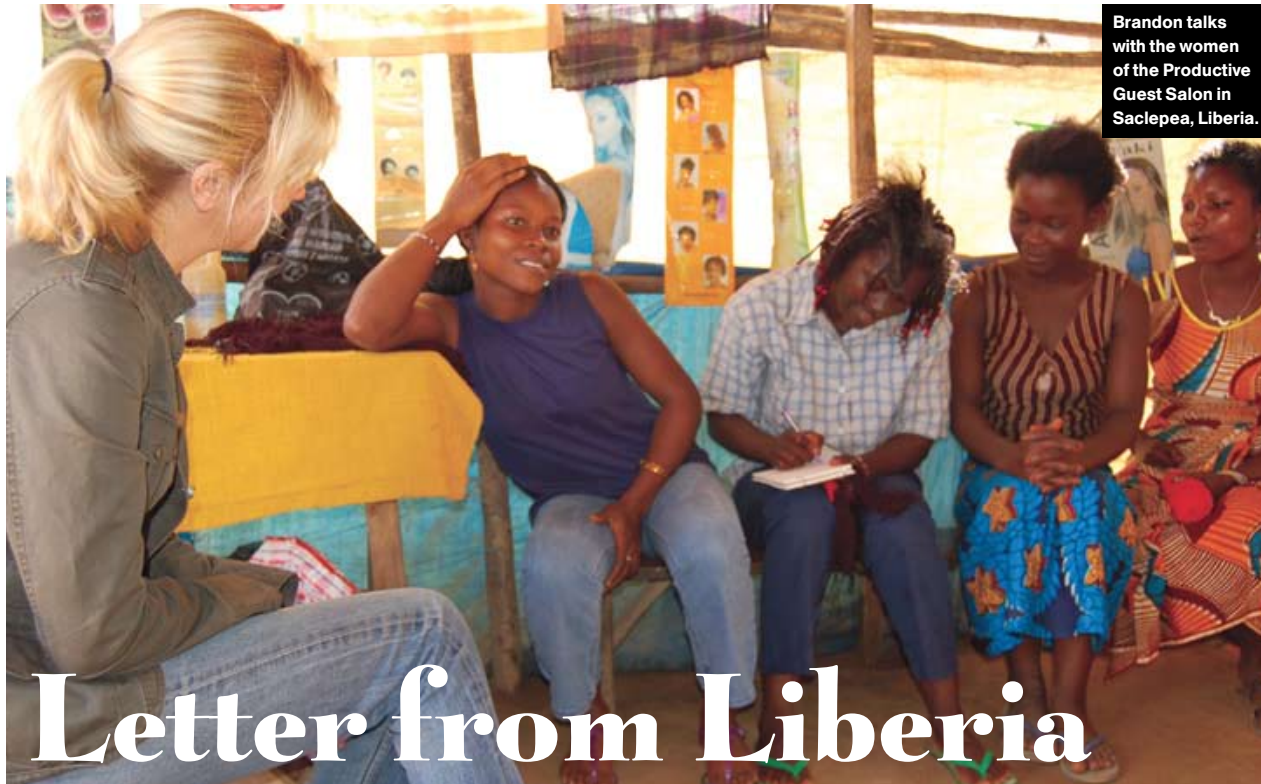


Brandon talks with the women of the Productive Guest Salon in Saclepea, Liberia.



Letter from Liberia

IN JUNE OF MY 16TH YEAR, when most girls my age were checking out hot guys at the beach in Rehobeth, Md., my dad asked if I wanted to go with him to work at a refugee camp in El Salvador. At the time, the country was ripped apart by a civil war, and traveling there was pretty dangerous, but we went anyway. My dad's a dentist, and we performed dental and basic medical procedures for 1,000 refugees who had lost their homes in the fighting. The trip changed my life. Ever since then, especially when I'm at fashion shows, listening to junior editors bitch about their seats, I think maybe it's time to do something like that again. So six months ago, I started calling around to see if *Jane* could help people in some way.

This year, *Jane* will be working with the International Rescue Committee to highlight crimes against women around the world, specifically gender-based violence (GBV). Over the next 10 issues, we'll run stories about amazing women who've lived through things you and I could never even imagine. Last month, we introduced

Children gather around the water pump in Chocolate City.



you to Atim from Uganda ("Abducted at 12," February 2007), who was kidnapped, forced into sex slavery and trained to be a child soldier. We've already received tons of e-mails from readers who were touched by her story (read it at janemag.com/magazine).

In December, I went to Liberia to meet women who have survived the horrendous 14-year civil war under President Charles Taylor (who is now in The Hague facing war crimes charges). These women talk about rape like they've accepted it as a wartime reality. And during Taylor's cruel campaign, it was all too common: According to IRC literature, rebels used rape as a means to "terrorize and humiliate communities, force women and their families to flee, disrupt social continuity and as a method of ethnic cleansing and genocide." Rape was *policy*.

But Liberia is trying to recover. Thanks to the IRC, Doctors Without Borders, the United Nations and the country's new president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf—who was elected in November 2005 and is Africa's first female head of state—things that were unspoken for years are now in your face. Billboards proclaim things like RAPE IS A CRIME, women wear T-shirts that read AGAINST MY WILL IS AGAINST THE LAW and GBV-recovery groups sing about how men should not touch young girls. This is an amazing turnaround for such a short period of time. Still, it is important not to forget what happened. The stories the Liberian women (some names have been changed) told me during my trip bring these textbook facts to life in grisly, horrifying detail. Read on.

**"I WAS RAPED BY TWO MEN."
—ETTA, 36**

Chicken Soup Factory, Block D, Monrovia, Liberia: If you lived in this sprawling shantytown on the outskirts of Monrovia, your address would look like this. No road names, just vast areas in a former factory arranged by letter, like an alphabet city. While I'm *continued*

editor's letter



Mamie, whose husband was killed in the civil war, now raises pigs in Saclepea.

wrote to the IRC. It granted her money to buy two pigs. One year later, she has eight pigs, which she sells or slaughters. She is finally able to support her kids.

"When the rebels were here, so many people were killed. After the war I was a sick person. Now I get a little flesh," says Mamie, meaning she has started to gain weight.

For Mamie, the piggery is a good business. Eight pigs can sell for up to \$400, a hearty earning, considering that civil servants like police officers and teachers earn the equivalent of \$360 a year. Mamie and her piggery are an excellent example of how the IRC can empower women to raise themselves out of poverty.

"THEY RAPED ME IN FRONT OF MY BABY." —HELEN, 29

My last stop is in Ganta at a tie-dye business that was started last year. The four women here have been through hell, but now they're making beautiful fabric that they sell for \$10. It is here that I meet Helen, 29, who shares the most heart-wrenching story of my trip.

"They raped me in front of my baby," Helen says. "I came from Monrovia with my mother to seek refuge, and I had a 4-month-old baby. There were hundreds of us. At one point, the rebels took me to a house with a dead body on a bed. They put my baby next to the body, and one rebel raped me on the floor while the other stood outside the door. I was scared for my baby and was screaming, so they beat me and left me there. Then I developed an infection. I lost my baby because I passed the infection on to the infant through my breast milk. A few months later, I met another man and was engaged to be married. The rebels came and killed my fiancé in front of me. They shot him in the head, then raped me. After that, I had nightmares

Annie, 21, has two children and just got a small business grant from the IRC.



Brandon introduces the women of Saclepea to Jane.



Kemah, 22, still has pain in her left ear from being beaten.

continued here, I meet with two dozen women who have formed the Women's Action Group, which has become powerful in the community and whose motto is "No compromise for rape." I am particularly affected by Etta, 36. "In 1996, I was living in Monrovia with my husband," she tells me through a translator. "Two soldiers tied him up, then raped me in front of him. They used instruments to cut my vagina. From that time on, I have been sick and have a lot of pain in my uterus, but to get treatment, I need money. Now I am facing domestic violence, because my husband blames me for the rape and doesn't want me."

"SO MANY PEOPLE WERE KILLED." —MAMIE, 34

In the small town of Saclepea, I meet Mamie D. Luogon, 34, who runs the United Women Empowerment Piggery. This operation was started with seed money from the IRC's Economic Opportunities program. After the civil war in 2003, the IRC offered women who had lost their husband or were abducted by rebels \$150 each to start a business. Mamie, after losing her husband, hiding for months in the bush and hunting at night to feed her children,

and migraines. The rebel who did all that then kidnapped me and forced me to have sex with him for a year. Finally, when the war ended, I was free, and now I make tie-dyes and sell them in town."

Liberia means "land of the free." Hopefully, with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as president and with the help of organizations such as the IRC, the women here will one day be truly free—from rape, from poverty, from violence of all kind. We at *Jane* will bring you stories of young women around the world and let you know how you can help. Because who knows? Maybe something you or I do will be the catalyst that changes a woman's life forever—for the better.

To find out how you can help and to learn more about the IRC, go to janemag.com/yournews.

Brandon

PHOTOGRAPHY: REBECCA HANKIN/INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE