

Government Tackles Tradition of Girl-brides

In impoverished Burkina Faso, girls as young as eight are married off to men often older than their own fathers. But the government is now trying to eradicate this practice, alarmed by the continuing emergence of pregnancy complications in young mothers.

Typical of this phenomenon is the case of 22-year-old Christine. When she was 16, Christine ran away from home after realising that her family was preparing to marry her off to a polygamous old man.

"He was older than my dad," Christine complained to Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN). "He often came to our compound to discuss things with my parents".

Having been sent to the head of the family to prepare for the wedding ceremony, Christine ran away from home and found asylum with some Catholic nuns at a convent in Kaya, in the north of the country.

Also at the convent in Kaya, is Marie Sawadogo. She was eight when she was to be given to a man for

marriage. Horrified, she ran away from home.

"I fled to Kaya when I was sent to fetch water at the village well," Marie explained. Today, Marie is 15 years old and studying to become a doctor. Her education is paid for by the sisters at the convent.

Though no precise figures are available, hundreds of girls are thought to run away to convents such as the one in Kaya each year. The girls see them as their only refuge.

At the convents, the girls receive formal education and learn a variety of skills from gardening and sewing to soap making and cattle breeding.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, (UNFPA), early marriage is a serious social problem in Burkina Faso where one in three girls is married before the age of 18.

"The causes of early marriage are socio-cultural", explained Genevieve Ah Sue, UNFPA's representative in Burkina Faso. "Traditions are strong in Burkina Faso and values here mean that the local practice is for girls

to marry when they are very young. This creates problems for the girl and the society itself."

The UNFPA, together with the Burkinabe government, has launched a special programme to combat early marriage in poorer rural areas where the practice is particularly widespread.

are married very early, before 15 for example, who are too poor to afford health services and try to deliver at home," explained Burkinabe health expert, Dr Yacouba Zanre.

An obstetric fistula can occur because the woman's pelvis is too small, the baby's head is too big, or the baby is badly positioned.

In poor rural families, a dowry can be 2,000 or 3,000 CFA (between US\$4 to US\$6), plus a sheep or goat. Sometimes, a more traditional gift of cowries (a seashell that was used like money before paper bills and coins were introduced) and goat may be made.

Of particular concern to the government is the large number of pregnancy complications among young girls whose bodies are not yet ready to bear children.

Obstetric fistulas are common. "Women who have the fistula are often the very young women who

The woman can be in labour for five days or more without medical help. In most cases, the baby dies. If the mother survives, she is left with extensive tissue damage to her birth canal that renders her incontinent—either of her bladder or bowel functions.

Corrective surgery is possible as long as the fistula—or hole—is not too big. Without surgery, young women damaged by an early pregnancy remain physically and psychologically scarred.

A husband that took the girl-bride in the first place will often turn his back on his wife, appalled by her smell and inability to control her own motions. Many such women grow old childless in a society where motherhood is the essence of a woman's value in society.

Dr. Yacouba Zanre has carried out numerous corrective operations on women with obstetric fistulas at the main hospital in the capital. She is adamant that the best approach now is to stop girls from getting pregnant in the first place, while stressing that if this is not possible, women should be properly treated, delivering their babies in health centres.

The early marriage of young girls derives from a fear of pregnancy outside marriage. A young woman who is not a virgin is considered tarnished, and finding a husband becomes practically impossible.

"We did not want shame in our family, that is why we gave our daughter away in marriage at 13," said Hamzetou Cisse, a mother who is accompa-

nying a daughter awaiting surgery to have her fistula repaired.

In Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world, a girl's parents receive a bride-price or dowry from the girl's suitor. Payment varies from region to region, and depends on the income levels of the families involved.

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Forced marriage was outlawed in Burkina Faso in 1990, but according to UNFPA, acute poverty in the country is central to the problem of early marriage.

"There is a close link between reproductive health and poverty reduction," pointed out Genevieve Ah Sue of the UNFPA.

As a result, the UNFPA and the government are not only working to give girls education on reproductive health issues, but they are also making

funds and training available to young women for income-generating projects.

The government-led project "1000 Young Girls" has so far trained 2,000 girls over two years in rural Burkina Faso. The project targets girls aged between 10 and 14 years old. The government hopes that the project will reduce the number of young marriages in the country.

"Our philosophy is to take those potential victims of early or forced marriage from their families and thus save them," explained Dr Gislaine Conombo, director of the family health department of the Ministry of Health.

According to records, 84 percent of the girls who completed the programme are now engaged in income generating activities.

"They do not earn a huge amount of money, but they have enough to care for themselves, be important within their community," said Lydia Saloukou, research coordinator at the Burkina Faso population council.

However, the process of change is slow, Saloukou acknowledges. Talking of women's rights will not change traditions that have existed for generations.

"The response will come from the community itself. If not, they just say 'Yes!' and then the minute your back is turned, they go back to their old habits," Saloukou pointed out.

Back in Kaya, at the centre run by the Catholic nuns, Christine goes to class—she is in the second year at grammar school. At 22, she is much older than most of her classmates, who have nicknamed her 'grandmother.'

Christine does not care. She is determined that through education she will have a better life than the one she would have had with the old man her parents wanted to marry her to.

"I want to be clean like those women in town and have a better life," she told IRIN.

Source: <http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=40209&SelectRegion=West_Africa&SelectCountry=BURKINA_FASO>, 23 March 2004

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