

Niger Police News

NIAMEY, 6 December 2007 (IRIN)

The news that 70 percent of women in parts of Niger find it normal that their husbands, fathers and brothers regularly beat, rape and humiliate them came as no surprise to human rights experts in Niger. "Women here have been indoctrinated by their families, by religious officials, by society that this is a normal phenomenon," said Lisette Quesnel, a gender-based violence advisor with Oxfam in Niger, which produced the statistic from a survey of women in the remote Zinder region of eastern Niger in 2006. The frequency of the crimes and the impunity granted to the attackers partly explain the broad social acceptance of it, activists say. Rape is not illegal under Nigerien law and according to Oxfam it is "increasingly common" in the capital Niamey. Beatings and mental and physical abuse are "frequently" part of life in a typical Nigerien polygamous family, Oxfam says. And women are often made destitute overnight when their polygamous husbands throw them out on the street. Divorces are passed by judges without even hearing "one word" from the women involved. The full extent of the abuse goes unrecorded because no national statistics on the incidence of violence against women have ever been drawn up by the police or the medical services. Hospitals and health centres keep records of injuries people are treated for, but not whether injuries were caused by violence, even when a woman's bruised face and broken bones are clearly the result of a physical assault, activists say. "Violence against women remains an absolute taboo in Niger," said Ibrahima Fatima, who designs projects meant to prevent this kind of violence in Niger, also for Oxfam. "We talk about it in consultations and in meetings but the authorities keep saying officially that it does not exist." "When we bring individual cases of abused women to the attention of the authorities they accuse us of having brought the women into Niger from abroad," Fatima said. Oxfam's Quesnel added, "If a woman goes to the police, they will tell her she must have been a bad woman and ask her what she did to deserve it." Even talking to families about violence is frowned upon, especially when the accused is a husband in a marriage arranged by the woman's parents. "When a woman is beaten, she can't even tell her mother," said Mariama Moussa, President of the Nigerien NGO, SOS women and children victims of family violence. "If she does tell her mother she will often force her to keep it private and tell her to go and sort things out with her husband." In some cases, the insistence that a woman return to an abusive husband has resulted in the woman's death - cases in which the men have not been arrested. Human rights workers have tried setting up centres for abused women in Niger, but found most women stay away for fear of being seen even going to the centres. Now, SOS women and children, and a consortium of other Nigerien NGOs, are focusing on discreetly providing made-to-measure assistance to women, ranging from legal advice to medical care. They have set up an information point at one of the main markets in Niamey. Activists say that if real change is going to happen, it must be driven by the highest levels of political decision-making, and be enforced on the religious and legal authorities. "We need strong political leadership to help women, otherwise their rights will never be respected," said Salamatou Traoré, a prominent Nigerien women's rights activist. Activists want Niger to institute unequivocal laws banning all forms of violence against women, including rape, underage marriage, physical abuse and arbitrary divorces. Girls also need to be educated about their rights and given the intellectual tools to survive in a society dominated by men, activists say. At the

moment, just 15 percent of women in Niger can read and write, compared to 43 percent of men. And women need a push to get into the workforce. Currently, just under 7 percent of women are employed in official income generating activities, compared to 81 percent of men. The imbalance means Niger has one of the highest overall unemployment rates in the world. Niger's male-dominated government has shied away from anything more than tokenism when it comes to women's rights, according to activists. Despite a law that institutes a quota for women's representation in government, only 13 percent of the seats in the National Assembly are filled by women. According to the national employment agency (ANPE), just 22 percent of the 46,906 government officials, known locally by the French word 'fonctionnaires', are women.

When Niger in 1999 signed the United Nations anti-discrimination instrument, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, it made reservations on key articles governing a married woman's right to choose her own place of residence and to divorce. Negotiations over a family code which was to include several new rights for Niger's women descended into what activist Traoré called a "farce" when on the final day of drafting parliament backtracked on promises for new far-reaching rights for women. "Men started saying that we just wanted these laws so women could marry women and that lesbianism and women were going to take over Niger now," said Traoré. "It was ridiculous - of course that's not what we want." Despite the odds stacked up against women, rights activists in Niger say they are nonetheless seeing a gradual awareness among some women of their rights, even if men do not offer the same respect. "At one school seminar I attended a young girl put her hand up and asked why her parents want her to get married and whether she should," said Oxfam's Quesnel. On 25 November, to mark the international day for eliminating violence against women, hundreds of women turned out for a march in central Niamey. "Women walked through the centre of Niamey, some of them with tears streaming down their faces, as they realised for the first time that they are not alone in what is happening to them," Quesnel said. "That said to me that change can happen."