

Child brides in west Africa

Girls fight back

Helping girls to say no

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No to nuptial nightmares in Niger

ZEINABOU Moussa is but a girl, flat-chested, soft-skinned and shy. Yet at just 16 she has seen more of marriage than she would like. Earlier this year, having been beaten and bullied into wedding a stranger, she took a stand.

She fled her husband's home in Niger's southern province of Zinder no fewer than four times after the ceremony, only to be dragged back by unsympathetic parents. Then she made her wedding bed a battlefield. When her husband forced himself on her, she bit him where it would hurt most. "He fainted," she says wryly. "And I ran." The next day her husband, sore and sorry, took her before a traditional chief to demand a divorce. Her parents will not force her into marriage again.

Zeinabou is one of millions of child brides in west Africa, where early marriage is common. Across the region almost half of girls under the age of 18 are thought to be wed. In Chad and Niger, whose rates of child marriage are among the highest in the world, that figure tops 70%. In those countries, girls below the age of 15 are more likely to be made wives than almost anywhere else.

Poverty, poor education, prohibitive school fees and tradition are among the many reasons. Parents are more likely to send their boys to school than girls. Instead, daughters are a source of income through dowries. Moreover, some families prefer to see their girls married than to take the risk of them misbehaving outside wedlock. And for the most part child marriage is

accepted. Yet it causes all manner of problems. Child brides miss out on education and usually become mothers younger, which in turn increases maternal mortality.

There is not much sign of change. The New York-based Ford Foundation thinks that between 2000 and 2011 the trend in five west African countries was towards even earlier marriages for girls. But at least in some places they are being helped to fight back.

In Nigeria and Niger teenagers are learning about their rights and the risks of early marriage in special “safe-space” schools financed by the UN Population Fund. Girls enrolled in these schools seem to be marrying later than their peers. By 2018, around 160,000 girls will have passed through them in Niger, where the total population is just 17m.

Other organisations are providing legal assistance to girls who object to early, forced marriage. In southern Niger, Balkissa Chaibou says she went first to a local magistrate and then to the police to prevent an uncle forcing her to marry a relative almost twice her age. Here, more traditional chiefs are beginning to take a stand against early marriage. Campaigns on television and via social media are increasingly outspoken. The secondary-school curriculums now include various issues related to child marriage. Girls are becoming more assertive. “More of them”, says Monique Clesca, who heads the UN Population Fund in Niger, “are being empowered to say no”.

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