



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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Senegal: The situation of women of the Toucouleur ethnic group, including whether they are subjected to forced marriages; if so, whether this practice applies to educated women; the risk incurred by a woman who refuses such a marriage; the attitude of the government authorities toward forced marriages; the possible recourse and state protection available to women subjected to forced marriages (March 2004)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

A representative of the National Human Rights Organization (Organisation nationale des droits de l'homme, ONDH), a Senegalese non-governmental organization associated with the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), provided the following information in a 31 March 2003 telephone interview.

Forced, arranged and early marriages are practised in Senegal, particularly within the Toucouleur and Sarakole ethnic groups. These marriages are, however, more common in rural areas than in large cities. The practice applies to both educated and uneducated girls. The only difference is that educated girls are more likely to oppose these kinds of marriages, while others resign themselves to them.

The ONDH representative cited the case of a Senegalese girl who lived with her parents in France, where she was studying for a bachelor's degree. Since her parents had arranged her marriage to a Senegalese man without her consent, they bribed her into going to Senegal by offering to take her there on vacation. Upon arriving in Senegal, she discovered that her parents wanted to force her into marriage. It took a great deal of pressure from her classmates, the media and non-governmental organizations to stop the marriage.

The ONDH representative went on to say that, in principle, government authorities are against this practice, but, in fact, [translation] "they are rather reluctant to intervene in what many people consider a cultural and traditional matter." The law prohibits any marriage that is not consented to by both spouses, but very few women would dare [translation] "to drag" their parents through the courts. Furthermore, a woman who refuses to marry a man chosen by her parents risks being rejected by the other members of her family.

The ONDH representative also stated that, with the exception of some women who are financially independent and who can choose to live on their own—especially in large cities like Dakar—few Senegalese women defy their parents' wishes.

A paper published in June 2003 by the Support Office of the Canadian Cooperation in Senegal indicated that [translation] "Senegal established as one of its priorities the improvement of the status of women," particularly by ratifying the international conventions on women's rights and by enacting laws in 1999 against genital mutilation, rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment (June 2003, 13). However, the report added that [translation] "the enforcement of these laws that benefit women has run into cultural and religious resistance" (Support Office of the Canadian Cooperation / Senegal June 2003, 14).

Country Reports 2003 pointed out that "[p]olice usually did not intervene in domestic disputes, and most persons were reluctant to go outside the family for redress" (25 Feb. 2004, Sec. 5). The same source added that "[t]he minimum age of consent to marry is 21 years for males and 16 years for females. . . . This law was not enforced in some communities where marriages were arranged" (*Country Reports 2003* 25 Feb. 2004, Sec. 5). *Country Reports 2003* did not specify, however, to which communities it was referring.

The 6 May 2003 issue of *Sud Quotidien* referred to domestic violence on the whole and noted that, in Dakar and Kaolack, [translation] "out of 515 people surveyed, 257 women, or 59 per cent, had been victims of domestic violence at some point in their life." The Senegalese newspaper also indicated that [translation] "there is no reliable databank, multifunctional crisis centre, assistance, or temporary shelter for victims" and that the lack of structures to assist prostitutes and young girls who are [translation] "given away in marriage for no apparent reason" was also a concern (*Sud Quotidien* 6 May 2003).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003. 25 February 2004. United States Department of State. Washington, DC. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27748.htm>> [Accessed 31 Mar. 2004]

Organisation nationale des droits de l'homme (ONDH) [Dakar]. 23 March 2004. Telephone interview with a representative.

Sud Quotidien [Dakar]. 6 May 2003. "Lutte contre les violations faites aux femmes : un bilan peu chiffré et en-deçà de la réalité." <<http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/200305060752.html>> [Accessed 1 Apr. 2004]

Support Office of the Canadian Cooperation / Senegal [Dakar]. June 2003. "Coopération canadienne au Sénégal. Panorama d'un partenariat renforcé." <http://web.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/10638135993PANORAMA_PROGRAMME_DE_COOPERATION.pdf> [Accessed 31 Mar. 2004]

Additional Sources Consulted

Publications: *Africa Confidential*, Resource Centre country file.

Internet sites, including : Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Federation of Human Rights, ReliefWeb, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

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