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Nigeria: Prevalence of arranged marriages within the Igbo community and of arranged or forced marriages between Igbo Christian women and Muslim men; information on the availability of state protection and recourses for victims of those kinds of marriage (2001-2005)

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The following information, provided by the executive director of Women's Aid Collective (WACOL) and the director of the Lagos-based Nigeria office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) respectively, may be of interest.

Referring to the Igbo community, the executive director of WACOL, in 13 December 2005 correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, pointed out that

[t]he practice of forced marriage and betrothal has died down even though we still have cases of early marriage in some [I]gbo communities. However, teen pregnancy is frowned upon and teen mothers are in most cases forcefully married off by their families to avoid the shame of having a child out of wedlock (13 Dec. 2005).

However, the executive director explained that victims of forced marriages

are protected if under 18 years by the Child's Rights Act 2003 particularly in states that have passed the law. Three of [five] Igbo speaking states [-] Ebonyi, Anambra and Imo states [-] have passed the law. Further, NGOs providing legal aid can support such a person to seek redress under the law. In fact the 1999 constitution contains bill of rights that protect right to freedom of association, privacy and religion amongst others including freedom from discrimination based on sex (WACOL 13 Dec. 2005).

Regarding the prevalence of forced marriages between Igbo Christian women and Muslim men, the executive director stated such marriages do not exist any more; explaining that this happened only during the Nigerian Civil war (1967-1970) (ibid.).

Based in Enugu, with branches offices in Port Harcourt (Rivers State) and in Abuja, WACOL promotes the protection of women and children's human rights (WACOL 26 Apr. 2005).

In 12 December 2005 correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, the director of the Lagos-based Nigeria office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), who is also specialist on African and development studies and who has published extensively on " the economic, social and political history and development of Africa, with a focus on Nigeria" (F.ize n.d.) provided the following information. HBF is a non-governmental agency that has been operating in Nigeria since mid-2002 in the field of civic education including "human, social and political rights, gender democracy, conflict resolution and good governance" (HBF 22 Nov. 2005).

According to the director of HBF, regarding the existence of forced and arranged marriages within the Igbo society,

[a]s [they do] everywhere in Nigeria, families in Igbo society do play an important role in the selection (or, at least, approval) of marriage partners. The spectrum of influence and pressure is very wide, and I do not doubt that there are cases that amount to "forced marriages" (depends on how one defines it). In general, I should think that it is rare today in Igbo society that a girl is "promised" for marriage to an elder man and actually forced to marry him when having reached puberty. On the other hand, such a thing may still happen. ...At any rate, forced marriages are widely believed in Nigeria to constitute a problem especially in (Muslim) Northern Nigeria, and not so much in the Christian Igbo-speaking South-East. By the way: The prevalence of VVF may be taken as an indicator for the (forced) marriage of very young women to elder men, and as far as I am aware, VVF is particularly prevalent in the North (12 Dec. 2005)

VVF stands for Vesico Vaginal Fistulae (VVF) and is a medical term that refers to a "breakdown of tissue in the vaginal wall communicating into the bladder" (FORWARD n.d.). In Nigeria, the practice of early marriage, often found in the North, leads to this condition (ibid.).

Regarding the prevalence of forced or arranged marriages between Igbo Christian women and Muslim men, the director of HBF stated the following:

I should think that marriages between Igbo Christian women and Muslim men (implying most likely Muslim men from other parts of Nigeria, as there are very few Igbo Muslims) do occur. However, I should also think that they are rather rare. I find it difficult to imagine a typical Igbo family (which usually thinks of itself as being thoroughly Christian) to force its daughter to marry a Muslim. But, of course, it may happen in special circumstances, for example in border areas to the North (where there are even small indigenous Igbo Muslim groups, as in Enugu Ezike or Afikpo), or among Igbo migrants to the North. Again, it would be worthwhile to know more about the particular case in question (HBF 12 Dec. 2005).

Asked for information regarding the availability of state protection and recourses available to victims of forced or arranged marriages, the director of HBF said that

[a]s this is the sphere of private/civil or "customary" law, there is little direct state interference. Recourse or help may be sought in practice more easily through the help of women's rights NGOs, or legal help institutions, which are quite strong in the Igbo-speaking Southeast.

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

Forum Internationale Zusammenarbeit für Nachhaltige Entwicklung (F.ize). N.d. "Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Leiter des Länderbüros Lagos/Nigeria." <http://www.fize.de/gaeste.harneit-sievers_axel.htm> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2005]

Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD). N.d. "Vesico Vagina Fistulae (VVF)." <<http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/vesico.htm>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2005]

Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), Nigeria office. 12 December 2005. Correspondence from the director.

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Women's Aid Collective (WACOL). 13 December 2005. Correspondence from the Executive Director.

_____. 26 April 2005. *A Memorandum to the Senate Committee on Information in Respect of the Bill on Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) at the Public Hearing Holding in Senate Hearing Room 1, National Assembly Complex, Abuja.* Media Rights Agenda Website. <<http://mediarightsagenda.org/sphwacol.html>> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2005]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The Director of the Nigeria Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC) did not respond to an information request within time constraints.

Unsuccessful attempts to contact the Lagos-based Baobab for Women's Human Rights were made.

Web sites, including: AllAfrica, Amnesty International, BBC Africa, The Danish Immigration Service Reports, Demographic and Health Surveys, ECOI.net, Human Rights Watch, Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), Nigeria Ministry of Health, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Fund for Women and Development (UNIFEM), United States Department of State, *Vanguard*, Women Living Under Muslim Laws; Women's eNews.

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