Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Responses to Information Requests

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GIN105143.FE
Guinea: Single women without family support; their ability to live on their own and find housing and employment without requiring a man’s approval (2013-March 2015)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Background

According to a report from a joint mission to the Republic of Guinea, conducted by the Belgian, French and Swiss government organizations responsible for refugees — namely the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (Commissariat général aux réfugiés et aux apatrides, CGRS/Belgium), the Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People in France (Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides, OFPRA/France) and the Federal Office for Migration (Office fédéral des migrations, FOM/Switzerland) — marriage is still [translation] “a particularly important event” in a Guinean woman’s life because it awards her a social status (Belgium et al. Mar. 2012, 16).

According to the Demographic and Health and Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (Enquête démographique et de santé et à indicateurs multiples, EDS-MICS 2012) conducted by the National Statistics Institute of Guinea (Institut national de la statistique de Guinée) [1], sexuality and procreation are practised primarily within the framework of marriage; this explains why, for women, [translation] "longterm celibacy [is] not a mainstream phenomenon (only 0.2 percent of women between the ages of 45 and 49 are celibate)" (Guinea Nov. 2013, 55). According to the same study, the rate of female celibacy diminishes with age, [translation] "going from 66 percent at 15-19 years of age, to 11 percent at 25-29 years of age, and 2 percent at 35-39 years of age" (ibid., 56).

According to the EDS-MICS 2012 study, women account for 18 percent of heads of families in urban areas and 17 percent in rural areas (ibid., 26).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Associate Director for West Africa at the Human Rights Watch office in New York stated that [translation] "women [in Guinea] usually married young" (15 Apr. 2015). According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Promotion of Women and Children of Guinea [ministère des Affaires sociales, de la Promotion féminine et de l’Enfance de la Guinée] three out of five girls marry before the age of 17 (Guinea Feb. 2013, 11). Other sources also point out that "early" and "forced" marriages are common in Guinea (US 2014, 29; FIDH et al. Oct. 2014). According to a joint alternative report released by the International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme, FIDH) and four other Guinean NGOs, [translation] "early and forced" marriages exist "in most ethnic and religious groups in the country, influenced by social and economic pressures" (ibid.). According to the same source, the practise of sororate, "where a woman is obligated to marry her late sister’s husband,” is influenced by the same pressures (ibid.).

According to the findings in the World Bank report *Women, Business and the Law 2014: Removing Restrictions to Enhance Gender Equality*, when compared to men, unmarried women are not discriminated against under the law in areas such as access to employment, starting a business, access to a bank account, choosing where to live and being the head of family, and in the area of property rights (World Bank 24 Sept. 2013, 102). However, based on the same criteria, a married woman faces inequalities under the law when it comes to access to employment, choosing where to live and her ability to be head of the family (ibid.).

### 2. Single Women in Guinea

#### 2.1 Option of Living Alone

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the FIDH stated that it was his understanding that [translation] “single women in Conakry do not encounter any particular problems, other than social pressure to marry and receiving very little social recognition as women living on their own” (FIDH 30 Mar. 2015). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Program Director for Wafrica Guinée, [translation] “an international and local NGO whose mission is the promotion and protection of [Guinean] women and young girls” (*Les Amazones* n.d.), stated on her own behalf that, for the following reasons, it was rare for unmarried women to live on their own:

[translation]

Most often, a young woman remains with her parents if she is not married. It is unacceptable for her family, often for reasons of honour, and it is frowned upon by the community to live alone as a woman. She also loses her chances of getting married because she might be perceived as a poor prospect: being from a bad family or being too liberated.

Single women who are divorced can live alone if they have stable financial means, but, like women who have never married, the accepted practice is to live with the family.

As for widows, they can live on their own if they have inherited a home from their husbands. However, what often happens is the practice of sororate, where the brother of the deceased marries the widow, thereby preventing the woman from being alone. Failing that, other members of her family will often come and live with her to maintain decorum or ensure her safety (9 Apr. 2015).

Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Guinean Organization for the Defense of Human Rights (Organisation guinéenne de défense des droits de l'homme, OGDH), a Guinean NGO that is affiliated with the FIDH (FIDH n.d.), stated that [translation] “single women really can live alone, but there are risks associated with this female celibacy related to the community’s perception of unmarried women who are not living under parental authority” (OGDH 14 Apr. 2015). Furthermore, the Associate Director for Human Rights Watch stated that, as a result of the socioeconomic conditions in Guinea, Guinean women tend to live within the family unit (Human Rights Watch 15 Apr. 2015).

#### 2.2 Access to Housing

According to the Program Director, it is easier for a single woman to find housing if she has sufficient financial means (Program Director 9 Apr. 2015). According to the same source, a man’s support can make it easier for a single woman to obtain housing because some landlords are reluctant to have them as tenants due to their social status and because they perceive them as being unable to fend for themselves (ibid.). The Program Director also stated that [translation] “for issues of security [...], landlords might refuse to rent to a single woman in order to avoid problems for themselves or for the woman” (ibid.). According to the Program Director, there would be [translation] “a greater risk that she would be harassed or assaulted” (ibid. 14 Apr. 2015). The OGDH representative provided the following information:

[translation]

In many cases, [single women] can find housing only if they are accompanied by a male family member, who is also required to provide proof of the familial relationship. In situations where it is easy for her to get housing without any conditions attached, she might be subjected to harassment from either the landlord or the person who helped her obtain the housing (OGDH 14 Apr. 2015).
2.3 Access to Employment

According to the alternative report by the FIDH and other partner NGOs, [Guinean] women are victims of "professional segregation" because they are primarily employed in low-paying, low-skilled jobs (FIDH et al. Oct. 2014). *Country Reports 2013* states that “[a]lthough the law requires equal pay for equal work, women received lower pay than men for similar work.” (US 23 Feb. 2014, 28).

According to the alternative report, "women do not have the same access to employment as men have, and, as such, they are over-represented in the informal sector, which does not provide any social protection,” which contravenes section 18 of the Constitution of Guinea (FIDH et al. Oct. 2014). The Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women corroborates the fact that very few women participate in the official economy and adds that they make up around 10 percent of the economically active population in Guinea (UN 14 Nov. 2014, para. 46(c)). According to the report released by the government of Guinea in 2013, *Strategy Document for Reducing Poverty (2013-2015)* (*Document de stratégie de réduction de la pauvreté (2013-2015)*), Guinean women make up 80 percent of the agricultural workforce and 27 percent of salaried workers in non-agricultural sectors (Guinea May 2013, 37).

The FIDH representative stated that a woman living alone in Guinea can find employment without assistance from a man or without being represented by a man (FIDH 30 Mar. 2015). Similarly, according to the Program Director, being assisted or represented by a man is not "essential" for a single woman to find employment (Program Director 9 Apr. 2015). A doctoral candidate with the Anthropology Institute at the University of Basel, Switzerland, who conducted field research in Guinea from 2011 to 2013 and who maintains regular contact with his sources in the country, corroborated this information and noted that, although a Guinean women can find employment without assistance from a man "networks are important [and] there is usually mutual assistance from female friends or family members" (Doctoral candidate 21 Apr. 2015).

According to the Program Director, "women are often relegated to menial informal jobs, work doing crafts, sewing, embroidery or subordinate jobs in administration or in the service sector" (Program Director 9 Apr. 2015). Additionally, being unable to find someone to take care of the children and discrimination in hiring are barriers to employment for single women with children (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.4 Ability to Move Around and Relocate

The FIDH representative stated that he was not "aware of any particular security problems or the fact that it might be impossible to relocate” for women living alone in Guinea (FIDH 30 Mar. 2015). However, according to the Program Director:

[translation]

...it is often difficult for women to move around on their own and to settle elsewhere alone; they often need support from their family or from a man. Women are also strongly advised against travelling or relocating to a new community alone. There is, in fact, cause to fear for their safety. However, age and the presence of dependent children can be mitigating factors (Program Director 9 Apr. 2015).

Similarly, the OGDH representative stated that "although [single women] can travel and move anywhere in Guinea, they often have a very strong feeling of insecurity.” (14 Apr. 2015).

3. Services Available for Single Guinean Women

According to the Program Director, "[social] services being offered by the Guinean state and the NGOs have limited capacity and are not very widespread” (Program Director 21 Apr. 2015). Furthermore, the same source states that these services do not target single women specifically (ibid.).

Information regarding social services specifically targeting single Guinean women that might be offered by the government of Guinea or by NGOs could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes
The National Statistics Institute (Institut national de la statistique, INS) is a subsidiary of the Minister of Planning of Guinea (Guinea n.d.). The institute is responsible for the [translation] "design, development, coordination and implementation of statistical research and socioeconomic information throughout the country." (ibid.).

References


Doctoral candidate, University of Basel. 21 April 2015. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.


Human Rights Watch. 15 April 2015. Telephone conversation with the Associate Director, West Africa.


Program Director, Wafrica Guinée. 21 April 2015. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.

_____. 14 April 2015. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.

_____. 9 April 2015. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.


Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Coalition nationale de Guinée pour les droits et la citoyenneté des femmes; Femmes, pouvoir et développement; Gender Development Centre, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); Guinea – Institut national de la statistique; Mano River Women’s Peace Network, Tostan Guinea; sociology professor, Université Kofi Annan de Guinée; sociology professor, Université Oprah Winfrey de Guinée; United Nations – International Labour Organization Subregional Office for the Sahel Region, UN Women; Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF).

**Internet sites, including:** African Development Bank; Afrik.com; Agence guinéenne de presse; AllAfrica; Amnesty International; Aujourd’hui-enGuinée.com; Conakry.info; ecoi.net; Factiva; Femmes de Guinée; Freedom House; Guinea – Présidence de la République de Guinée; International Monetary Fund; IRIN; Minority Rights Group International; Norway – Landinfo; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; United Nations – Development Programme, Economic Commission for Africa, International Labour Organization, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Population Fund, Refworld, UN Women; United States – Department of State; VisionGuinée.Info; Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

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