

Bhy6Table of Contents

- ***Africa's most turbulent country - and the women trying to fix it***
- ***African women set to benefit from \$250 million European Union Empowerment Initiative***
- ***African Development Bank President attends historic African Union summit, decries child marriage***
- ***African nations urged to enforce family laws to protect women***
- ***African survivors of female circumcision call for help with mental trauma***
- ***FGM rates in east Africa drop from 71% to 8% in 20 years, study shows***
- ***Finally girls matter: Why religious leaders are vital in the fight to end FGM***

Africa's most turbulent country - and the women trying to fix it

By creating vibrant economic networks, women in the Central African Republic are coming to terms with the violence they have suffered during their country's civil war

By Jack Losh

The Guardian (28.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZvjbEA> - The bakers of Bamingui have lost loved ones to war. Rebel soldiers drive past their roadside bread ovens daily. A spectre of violence remains. Regardless, Yvette Abaka and her female baking collective make dough and roll with it.

In this impoverished, rebel-held corner of the Central African Republic (CAR), this group of mothers came together last year to better their lot. Since then, their loaves have become a hit in the wider community, promoting the women as their families' breadwinners and promising further, quietly profound, change.

"This bakery makes us more powerful than before," says Abaka, the group's leader and a 50-year-old mother of two. "My husband respects my work. Now I am his equal."

In this turbulent country, scarred by years of conflict, Abaka's bakers are not the only people hoping for something good to come out of the troubles. Following a major ceasefire brokered earlier this year between the government and 14 rebel militias, groups of women are coming together across the nation to reinforce the grand strategy for peace at a community level. They are rebuilding their country from the ground up, forging formidable sisterhoods in the ashes of a protracted conflict.

High rates of sexual violence, maternal mortality and teenage births have made CAR one of the worst places in the world to be a woman. But now female activists, displaced mothers and survivors of rape have joined forces to heal deep wounds and restore trust

between opposing ethnic factions as part of an ambitious attempt to mend a broken country in the heart of Africa.

Besides Abaka's bakers, another group called *Femme Debout* ("Woman Standing") is defying religious tensions by bringing together Christian and Muslim widows in Bangui, CAR's capital, teaching them commercial skills and helping traumatised individuals recover collectively. Elsewhere, in camps for displaced people, where people shelter from militants who use sexual violence as a weapon of war, survivors enrol with associations to fight the stigma of rape and to cultivate hope.

"Such groups are vital forces for social change," says Viola Giuliano, a researcher in CAR for the Center for Civilians in Conflict, an NGO focused on civilian protection. "They are uniquely placed to find and prioritise solutions and enable a sense of ownership of the peace process, which is key for sustainable, long-term reconciliation."

In the northern village of Bamingui, lead baker Abaka is familiar with such horrors of war, having survived six years of it. In 2013, an alliance of mainly Muslim rebels assembled close to her village before running amok through the rest of the country, committing atrocities and seizing power in a bloody coup d'état. In response, "anti-balaka" militias consisting of Christians and animists rose up and carried out revenge attacks against Muslim communities.

Increasing waves of violence killed thousands, displaced more than a million people and prompted warnings from the United Nations of an impending genocide. The rebel coalition has since fragmented into numerous armed groups competing over territory and access to mineral reserves.

Among the many fatalities was Abaka's son. Her brother, aunt and grandfather also perished in the bloodbath. Today, gunmen from the same rebel group that killed them frequently drive past her home and bakery. While the militants' presence has taken on a surreal air of normality, Abaka's war-weary community – like others nationwide – fear this uneasy truce could shatter at any time.

"At first the kids were scared of all these weapons, but now they're used to it," she says. "But I do worry that the war will begin again. We've already lost so much. We cannot afford for it to happen again."

Despite these concerns she presses ahead, along with seven friends, with what they do best. They rise at dawn and congregate to scrub baking trays, gather large logs, chop up kindling and light fires in the kilns. Beneath a tin roof, they knead dough into hundreds of rolls. Small ones sell for the equivalent of 7p, a medium one for 14p, a loaf for 35p. Any profit is split between the women, allowing them to buy key household items and reinvest the remainder.

Revenues are modest; the impact, big. With almost half the country affected by acute food shortages and several regions teetering on the brink of famine, food production for malnourished communities is crucial. The bakers sell to local Muslim families, bringing once-divided communities together to intermingle in the marketplace.

And in a place where the international response to a humanitarian crisis has received less than 50% of the funding it needs, a little extra cash represents a lifeline for struggling families.

"This bakery is the only opportunity we have to make any money by ourselves," says Estella Yarsara, Abaka's fellow baker and a 27-year-old mother of five. "This work means

I have some extra food for my children too. I do this to help myself and to help my family. We all want to lift up our community.”

The job has upended a conservative hierarchy, helping Yarsara challenge her role in society: “If I have some money and my husband does not, I can intervene and support him. It is making our relationship more equal. I don’t have to depend on him. I have more strength in the family.”

Their bakery opened last September, kickstarted by an EU-funded initiative. While this programme was focused primarily on wildlife conservation in the nearby Bamingui-Bangoran national park, officials were keen to reach out to the wider community. In addition to the bakery operation, other locals are taught how to farm guinea fowl, produce shea butter and air-dry beef in order to reduce an unsustainable dependence on bushmeat.

Reverent Yakoudou, a park manager, knows the value of this investment: “Women are more reliable with money. They use all their profits to look after their family and reinvest in the business.” Abaka’s vision for the bakery’s future confirms this. She hopes eventually to open up a permanent shop, selling their bread among many other products: “That way we can help our children and our community even more.”

Although separated by hundreds of miles of rebel-held roads, Abaka would find a sister in arms in Florence Atanguere, who runs the Femme Debout women’s association for widows and orphans in Bangui. Many of its members have suffered displacement and witnessed extreme violence, yet despite the war’s divisions along religious lines, Christians and Muslims are welcomed alike.

Supported by UNHCR, the UN’s refugee agency, the group meets every week on the edge of the capital to discuss their difficulties and successes. From sewing to soap-making, they are taught new skills, helping them foster solidarity and a boisterous, entrepreneurial spirit.

“Little by little women are getting together to fight back,” says Atanguere, a mother of six who saw her brother stabbed to death when rebels stormed her neighbourhood in late 2013. She fled to a squalid camp for displaced people and eventually returned home three years later, founding the association with the women she met there. “We are sisters. We are all Central Africans. It doesn’t matter whether you’re Muslim or Christian. Here, we are all equal.”

While the worst of Atanguere’s ordeal is over, more than 600,000 people remain displaced within CAR, with a similar number uprooted as refugees outside the country. Many of the women have been raped by militants. Yet among these exiled communities, there is resilience and a restless desire to rise above such harrowing circumstances.

One of them is 18-year-old Céleste, who was five months pregnant when rebels attacked her village in northern CAR late one night. Gunshots and the roar of motorbikes woke her. “They raped many girls and tortured many men,” said Celeste, just 15 at the time of the attack. She wasn’t spared either. Four soldiers entered her house, each taking turns to rape her: “My pregnancy was visible but they still did it anyway.”

Afterwards, she fled her village and hid in the bush for several days, surviving on whatever she could find to eat. Her distress was amplified by memories of what she had lost. Before the war, she had enjoyed helping her father farm cassava, okra and peanuts, participating at school as an enthusiastic dancer and eager pupil. Now, forced from home, her sense of helplessness grew when she learned a few days later that her fiancé – the father of her unborn child – had been murdered in the course of a car-jacking.

Céleste, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, eventually made it to a displacement camp on the outskirts of a rebel-held town called Kaga Bandoro. She moved into a cramped tent where she saw out the last few months of her pregnancy but could not shake off the psychological and physical pain of the attack. "Sleeping at night has been hard," she said softly. "It is difficult to forget. I miss my fiance terribly."

Yet even in this overcrowded and perilous camp, where armed groups freely operate, Céleste has started to overcome this nightmare. A friend introduced her to a women's association where fellow survivors of rape enter a shared process of mutual healing and, together, tackle the stigma of sexual violence.

"I now feel that I have the strength to deal with what has happened," said Céleste. "The pastor at church teaches us to forgive, let go and move on. During therapy sessions, we can express ourselves. We talk about what has happened and discuss any problems that we still face."

Céleste and her fellow members are keen to return to school. Their dream: to take up midwifery and help pregnant mothers receive the care that war and poverty have denied them.

In spite of the camp's dangers and dreadful conditions, her son is now two years old and in relatively good health. With her country edging towards greater stability, Céleste clings to the hope of a life beyond their tiny, dusty tent – for now, the only home her child has ever known.

African women set to benefit from \$250 million European Union Empowerment Initiative

By Amaka Obioji

Nairametrics.com (19.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZjxQDD> - The European Union (EU) has set aside \$250 million for the empowerment of African women. This was revealed by Laolu Olawumi, EU's Programme Manager to Nigeria, at the UN and EU spotlight initiative workshop held in Abuja. This initiative, according to reports, is in line with the organization's 2030 Agenda in Africa.

About the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative: According to Olawunmi, the EU-UN joint Spotlight Initiative is a global initiative focused on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls.

"Spotlight Initiative is a global initiative that has attracted \$500 million and several countries have been selected across some continents in the world, to benefit from the grant.

"A total of about \$250 million has been set aside for countries in Africa and Nigeria is one of the countries that have been selected. In Nigeria, additional envelop has been earmarked, which would be soon confirmed."

An official of the UN Women, Patience Ekeoba, also disclosed the number of countries that are set to benefit from the fund. She stated that the fund would be allocated to some African countries that include Nigeria, Liberia, Niger, Malawi, Mozambique, Mali, Zimbabwe, and Uganda.

Ekeoba added that the overall vision of the Initiative is to achieve a *Nigeria, where all women and girls are free from violence and harmful practices.*

The focus of the organization: According to Mr. Kwasi Amankwaah, Head of UN Resident Coordinator's Office, the EU-UN Joint Initiative was launched in 2017, to focus on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls.

He urged residents of the participating countries to participate in order to assist in eradicating violence and harmful practices that are related to sexual and reproductive health, as well as the rights of women in the society.

African Development Bank President attends historic African Union summit, decries child marriage

AfricaNews.com (08.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2NIuWHk> - The president of the African Development Bank, Akinwumi Adesina joined continental leaders in Niger for an African Union summit which saw the official launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement – the world's largest free trade area since the formation of the World Trade Organization.

The agreement, ratified in April, will cover a market of 1.2 billion people and an estimated gross domestic product (GDP) of \$2.5 trillion, across all 55 member States of the African Union.

The Bank has been central in shaping the AfCFTA agreement, setting its strategy and format and approving a \$4.8 million grant to the AU for the establishing of the Secretariat and to accelerate its roll out. Nigeria made history at the summit by becoming the 54th African country to sign up.

Commending all the parties involved for bringing this historic agreement to fruition, President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou said: "The time has come to translate words into actions. The continent has waited for far too long, and we are glad this historic moment for the people of Africa is being witnessed in Niger."

His comments were echoed by AU President, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi and AU Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat who both stressed the need to celebrate the strides the continent has made.

"An old dream has come true. The founding fathers must be proud," said Faki.

Whilst in Niamey, Adesina also participated in a high-level panel on combatting child marriage, organized on the sidelines of the summit by the First Ladies of West African Economic Community states and Niger's first lady Dr. Lala Malika Mahamadou Issoufou.

The panel, themed: "*Combatting child marriage and promoting girls' education and retention in schools*", heard testimonies from young girls as well as from Niger's traditional chiefs, who committed to support the recommendations of the meeting.

"It is totally unacceptable that in Africa some people would block the future of girls. Fundamentally, we have to protect girls, help them achieve and perform." Adesina said.

Highlighting the need to urgently address "this plague which jeopardizes the future of girls in Africa," Adesina urged participants to prioritise the inclusion of women. "Women

are the backbone of the African economy and of the African communities," Adesina stated.

President Issoufou also reaffirmed his government's commitment to supporting the First ladies.

"Keeping girls in school is one of the best ways to end child marriage. Like men, an educated girl will contribute to her community's transformation," the President said.

Rounding off the conversation Niger's First Lady described the issue as a "critical priority."

"It is not just a West Africa issue, but an issue for the entire region. So all of us must come together – public, non-governmental institutions, religions leaders, communities, families, and schools – for a sustained multi-stakeholder approach to combat early marriage and promote girls' education," Malika Mahamadou Issoufou concluded.

African nations urged to enforce family laws to protect women

By Nita Bhalla

Thomson Reuters Foundation (02.07.2019) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/306dei0> - Women and girls in Africa are still being pushed into forced or early marriages, while those in unhappy unions face discrimination when seeking divorce, campaigners said on Tuesday, urging governments to enforce fairer family laws. The Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) - a coalition of 50 groups - said while most nations had committed to a pan-African pact on women's rights, states had failed to enforce laws relating to marriage, divorce, child maintenance and inheritance.

The pact, known as the Maputo Protocol, came into force in 2005 and guarantees extensive rights in areas from protection against violence to economic empowerment.

Anisah Ari from the Nigeria-based Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative, a SOAWR member, said while African nations had taken steps in other areas such as tackling sexual violence, family laws were largely being ignored.

"While the Maputo Protocol affirms women's rights to exercise self-determination and bodily autonomy - free from discrimination, coercion and violence - many African girls and women continue to bear the brunt of discriminatory family laws," Ari told a news conference.

"For instance, despite the fact that women have a right to inherit their husbands' properties after death, this is not always assured - leading to protracted legal battles."

The SOAWR members, which come from 25 African countries, said many nations had enacted progressive family laws in line with the Maputo Protocol, but the laws were not being enforced.

Women's contribution and access to familial property was rarely recognised during marital disputes, and women often faced an uphill struggle when seeking child maintenance, they added.

The legally binding pact, lauded as the most progressive human rights instrument for women and girls in Africa, has been signed and ratified by 42 of the African Union's 55 member states.

Three countries - Botswana, Morocco and Egypt - have neither signed nor ratified it.

The SOAWR members - which come from countries such as Tunisia, Uganda, South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya - said addressing the protection and rights of women and girls in the family was the integral to the advancement of women.

"Family laws are key as the family unit is where the socialisation of gender roles begins. It is where girls first learn their rights and roles in society," said Violet Muthiga from Sauti Ya Wanawake, a Kenya-based women's rights group.

"So if we can intervene at the family level to ensure they are protected and treated fairly, we can change perceptions and curb practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation - all of which happen with the family unit."

African survivors of female circumcision call for help with mental trauma

By Nellie Peyton

Reuters (18.06.2019) - <https://reut.rs/2KlsqnG> - African survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM) said mental health services are their biggest need and urged governments and charities to provide support for dealing with long-term trauma.

Survivors and activists from across the continent attending a summit on FGM and child marriage in Senegal this week said mental health should have been on the agenda.

Common in 28 African countries, FGM is often seen as a rite of passage and justified for cultural or religious reasons but can cause chronic pain, infertility and even death.

"We don't have mental health services for survivors of FGM - that is a big thing that is missing in Africa," said Virginia Lekumoisa, a survivor from Kenya who works for the government on children's rights.

FGM typically involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia and is practiced on girls from infancy to adolescence, with the World Health Organization (WHO) estimating about 200 million women and girls have undergone the procedure.

World leaders pledged to end the practice under a set of global goals agreed in 2015.

Cut at 18 against her will, 29-year-old Lekumoisa said she has never received any services to help with the trauma.

"There's this picture that has never left my mind of the blood," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

She works with survivors at shelters in Kenya and said they are desperate to talk to someone about what they went through but the topic remains taboo.

If more survivors received mental health support they might be empowered to speak up and help end the practice, she said.

Aida Ndiaye, 35, from Senegal, said she never had suffered physical complications but the trauma of being cut when she was six years old had stayed with her.

"I remember my sister screaming, 'They're going to kill Aida!'," she said, shaking as she told her story. "I've never been able to forget those screams."

She has never spoken to her parents about it, she said.

Mental health services are lacking in Africa in general, with less than one mental health worker for every 100,000 people, according to the World Health Organization.

Fatoumata Seyba, an activist from Mali, endured a different kind of trauma when her mother-in-law cut her baby daughter without her knowledge. Seyba was against the practice, but her husband's family disagreed.

"It's not easy for a mother to see her baby bleeding and not be able to console her," she said.

Having grown up with friends who told her about their nightmares and shame after FGM, she wants to make sure that her daughter does not suffer in silence.

"I am going to talk to her about it," Seyba said.

FGM rates in east Africa drop from 71% to 8% in 20 years, study shows

Analysis in BMJ Global Health suggests dramatic decline in number of girls undergoing the practice, yet experts advise caution over the figures

By Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (7.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2T1ySSb> - The number of girls undergoing female genital mutilation has fallen dramatically in east Africa over the past two decades, according to a study published in BMJ Global Health.

The study, which looked at rates of FGM among girls aged 14 and under, suggests that prevalence in east Africa has dropped from 71.4% in 1995, to 8% in 2016.

The reported falls in the rates of FGM are far greater than previous studies have suggested, though some in the development community have advised caution over the figures.

In February, the United Nations Population Fund warned the number of women predicted to be mutilated each year could rise to 4.6 million by 2030, an increase driven by population growth in communities that carry out the practice.

According to the study in the BMJ, the rates of FGM practised on children have fallen in north Africa, from 57.7% in 1990 to 14.1% in 2015. In west Africa, prevalence is also reported to have decreased from 73.6% in 1996 to 25.4% in 2017.

The study aimed to assess if FGM awareness campaigns targeted at mothers had been successful. Unlike many other studies, older teenagers and adult women – who tend to have higher rates of FGM – were not included. The research developed estimates by

pooling and comparing FGM data by proportion across countries and regions, using a meta-analysis technique.

Nafissatou Diop, coordinator of UNFPA-Unicef joint programme, said it was possible that girls included in the study would still undergo FGM at a later point in their teenage years.

"Some girls who have not undergone FGM may not have reached the customary age for cutting and may still be at risk," said Diop. "The age at which the girls are undergoing FGM changes from ethnic group to ethnic group. In Kenya, for example, the Somali community practice FGM on girls aged three to seven. But in the Maasai community they practice FGM when the girl is a teenager, aged between 12 and 14."

Although global FGM rates are falling, she added, increasing numbers of girls will be living in countries where FGM remains prevalent by 2030.

"Because of the demographic trends, the absolute number of girls and women undergoing FGM will continue to increase," said Diop.

UN analysis suggests that rates of FGM among girls aged 15-19 have fallen from 46% in 2000 to 35% in 2015, according to statistics across 30 countries with nationally representative data.

The authors also warn that while rates of FGM are falling in many areas, this downwards trend could easily be reversed.

"If we think, 'OK, let's celebrate,' and we don't continue with the same efforts, that may have reverse consequences," said Ngianga-Bakwin Kandala, the report author and professor of biostatistics at Northumbria University. Risk factors – such as poverty, poor quality education and support for FGM among some religious leaders – continued to persist, he said.

The study was based on data collected through demographic health surveys, developed by ICF International, and multiple indicator cluster surveys, which are directed by Unicef. Data ranged from the years 1990 to 2017 for 29 countries across Africa, and two countries in western Asia: Iraq and Yemen.

Kandala added that trends varied both within and between countries.

Across Yemen and Iraq, FGM prevalence increased by 19.2% per year between 1997 and 2015, though rates remained lower than elsewhere.

The report drew on 90 sets of survey data, covering 208,195 girls.

The report did not examine the reasons why FGM rates had fallen, but said it was likely to have been driven by policy changes, national and international investment. National laws banning FGM have been introduced in 22 out of 28 practising African countries, according to the campaign group 28 Too Many.

In Somalia, where there is no national legislation expressly criminalising FGM, anti-FGM campaigner Ifrah Ahmed said the practice was still prevalent. "I remember being at a school in Mogadishu asking girls about FGM. All the girls said they were already cut. Just one said she hasn't yet," she said, adding the girls were aged between seven and 12 years old.

"Nothing will change until you change the religious leaders' [attitudes] because they are very powerful in the community," added Ahmed, founder of the Ifrah Foundation, which supports women and girls who have undergone FGM, and girls who are at risk.

The report concluded that if the goal of eliminating FGM was to be reached, further efforts were urgently needed, including working with religious and community leaders, youth and health workers.

"This package of comprehensive intervention could include legislation, advocacy, education and multimedia communication," the report said.

Finally girls matter: Why religious leaders are vital in the fight to end FGM

In The Gambia renowned hardliner Imam Fatty admitted that FGM is not a religious obligation – this is progress.

The Guardian (22.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1SP58BO> - As someone who comes from a very conservative Muslim household, one of my biggest struggles has been trying to understand the link between Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Islam. My father is an Imam and growing up I always heard my family refer to FGM as sunna. Even though sunna is not an obligation, it is a favoured action in Islam.

Last year I sat down with Imam Fatty, the former imam of the State House Mosque who has [strongly advocated FGM in the Gambia](#).

Although we did not agree on the majority of issues around FGM, it was an important moment when the renowned hardliner admitted to me that FGM is not a religious obligation.

This was a huge step forward for the campaign. In the past few months we've witnessed previously unthinkable changes in the approach to FGM in the Gambia. In November the country's [President Jammeh agreed to ban the practice](#) and since then we have been working behind the scenes to make sure that this law is really used to protect the rights and lives of young women from FGM.

My team and I in partnership with [Think Young Women](#) and Women's Bureau with funding from The Morris and Alma Schapiro Fund and The Girl Generation organised the first National Islamic conference in The Gambia.

This event gathered religious leaders from all regions of the country and also with well-known religious scholars from Senegal and Mauritania. In the lead-up to the conference we were faced with a number of hurdles that we had to overcome and even getting some of the religious leaders in the room proved difficult. Ninety per cent of the religious leaders who attended were pro FGM, and this was a steep learning curve for us as we were addressing an audience who we needed to convince to come on side.

It was important for us to provide a space where we could encourage them to engage in the issue and speak their minds so that we could find a way to move forward together.

By the end of the conference we could sense that something had changed. The general consensus was that FGM is a harmful practice that is not Islamic, although there are some who still need to be convinced.

A simple majority of 16 from the Supreme Islamic Council agreed that circumcision or mutilation, should be stopped as recent times has proven that the practice causes more harm than good. These sixteen religious leaders signed a declaration to join other leaders involved in the fight to end FGM in The Gambia.

One statement that really stuck in my mind was by a religious scholar from Farafeni. He is known as one of the most pro FGM religious leaders. At the end of the conference he stood up and said: "If this practice is bad for our daughters, lets please end it now". He then walked up to me outside and thanked me.

Culture is not stagnant. When you look at where we started to where we are now, you will see that change is happening.

This conference was needed to create an understanding than FGM is not just an Islamic issue but it also practised in non-Islamic states and communities such as those in Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania. By addressing the misconceptions around FGM and Islam with discussions involving religious leaders, The Gambia can serve as a model for other countries in [Africa](#).

There is hope for the millions of girls that are at risk and as young people, with the future ahead of us, we know that hope is the only thing stronger than fear.
