

Confronting sexual violence in a conservative Mauritania

Feminists in Mauritania fighting an uphill battle

NOUAKCHOTT: Feminists in Mauritania are fighting an uphill battle to see tougher penalties for sexual violence and discrimination in a conservative state where criminal law is derived from Sharia. "Few survivors of sexual assault dare to speak out in Mauritania," Human Rights Watch said in a report last September. It blasted "a dysfunctional system that discourages victims from pressing charges (and) can lead to re-traumatization or punishment." Women's groups have helped to draft legislation to combat gender-based violence, calling for stiffer penalties for rape, criminalization of sexual harassment and the creation of specific courts to handle sexual violence.

But the bill has been twice rejected by parliament, despite efforts to craft text which is within the confines of Sharia law - for example, extra-marital sex would remain a crime. Lawmakers objected to provisions allowing women to travel without their husbands' permission, and permitting victim support groups to file civil suits. Spearheading the struggle for change is the Association of Women Heads of Family (AFCF), whose president Aminetou El Moctar told AFP: "We need this law, because we know violence against women is soaring" - although statistics on the scourge are seriously lacking.

At AFCF's offices, Zahra (not her real name), related how a neighbor snatched her five-year-old daughter from her home while she was sleeping, and then raped the girl. Because of the girl's young

age and the fact that the rapist was a serial paedophile, he was quickly convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison. But AFCF says that in Mauritania, convicted rapists rarely serve out their sentences. "He will probably do a year at most," said Mariem, a case worker. "After that he'll be able to pay bail and get out on parole. Then, when there's a general amnesty, he'll benefit from it."

That is why specific legislation is needed, women's rights activists argue. They hold periodic sit-ins at parliament to demand passage of the law, noting that it was drafted by civil society, Islamic scholars and jurists and stayed within the bounds of Sharia law. MPs from both the ruling party and the opposition voted down the bill in January 2017.

In December 2018, the draft did not even proceed past the parliament's Islamic Orientation Commission, which vets proposed law for its conformity with Sharia. "We rejected this law because it was not aligned with Sharia and our cultural specificities," said Zeinabou Taghi, an MP of the opposition Islamist party Tewassoul. The penalties "appear to interfere with private life," she said. She objected to punishing a man for forbidding his wife to wear figure-revealing clothes, or for forbidding his daughter to live on her own with no husband.

For her part, opposition MP Nana Mint Cheikhna of the Rally for Democratic Forces (RFD) said she backed the bill, despite reservations about vague text. "Women obviously need protection... in a society where they are considered minors, both in peo-



NOUAKCHOTT: A picture shows the feet of the daughter of Zahra (not her real name) in the office of the president of the Association of Women Heads of Family (AFCF). Zahra related how a neighbor snatched her five-year-old daughter from her home while she was sleeping, and then raped the girl. —AFP

ple's minds and in practice," she said. In September, HRW had praised the bill as a "step in the right direction" but said it "falls short of international standards in several ways." The draft bill "fails to

criminalize other forms of sexual assault" besides rape, it said, adding that it still criminalized consensual extra-marital sex and allowed the law criminalizing abortion to remain on the books.—AFP

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