



Women's lot in Togo is hard labour and few rights



The status of women is a major issue in this region of West Africa, writes Conor Sweeney in Dapaong, Togo

IT MAY look like a convict chain gang cracking stones, but a crew of villagers in a rural Togolese field are toiling to remove large boulders from a hillside so they can make the land tillable.

It's tough work, and as the men watch, women wield heavy sledge hammers, crashing them down again and again to break up the rocks into smaller pieces. They stop, take a deep breath, wipe away the sweat and swing the sledge hammers again.

Across much of western Africa, the same theme repeats itself – women do most of the work but receive little recognition and have even fewer rights.

"In the home, it's always the man who is the head of the woman, and the woman who has to submit herself and be below him so that the home is manageable," says Djengue Douti, who lives in the nearby village of Natigou in Northern Togo. She has six children, three boys and three girls.

"It used to be the case that the woman would do all the housework herself, but men now understand and they help around the house," says Douti (35), before adding her own experience: "My husband would not accept that, he's old. In our part of the world the woman is always young and the man is so much older that he can't work around the house with the woman, and she has to ask the children to help her mind the home."

Douti says she personally has not been a victim of domestic violence, but acknowledges concerns of development workers that it is a widespread issue in Togo. "There is a lot of violence, but I haven't had any," she says. "There are con-

flicts in the home, there are men who beat their women, but not in my immediate surroundings."

Douti's views are affirmed in more frank terms by Pascal Bomh, a development worker with the local agency Trax that partners with Irish-based Self Help Africa in the savannah region of northern Togo. "It's fair to say that the women do more of the work. They work in the fields with the men, but they also keep the homes, take care of children and prepare meals – while the men relax, smoke cigarettes and drink local beer," he says.

Bomh and his colleagues are trying to encourage better land use and agricultural methods in the long slender country of six million people, where a third of the population live in poverty – most in the far north, where Self Help Africa's projects are located.

Formerly a French colony, Togo stretches south to a short coastal strip near the capital, Lome, from the hotter north, where it borders Burkina Faso. It's sandwiched between Ghana to the west and Benin to the east along long land borders which, on a map of Africa, make it seem like little more than a long splinter.

Apart from supporting agriculture projects, Self Help Africa also tries to strengthen the status of women in numerous ways, such as horticulture projects and other small-business initiatives, to improve their living conditions.

Often the construction of a local well, such as the one at Doukpelou that caters for about 1,200 people, reduces the number of hours spent carrying water back and forth – a task that is women's work in West Africa.

Kolan Paligadin explains the difference a nearby well makes to her daily life. "Every day I needed to walk for water because there was no well here. When I got to the nearest well, there were sometimes too many people getting water, and I then had to go another two kilometres for water; it takes four or five hours."

Women are banned from the village granaries where precious food reserves are stored – another visible sign of the inferior status of women in the region. These small mud huts are located in every gath-

ering of a few families, but they remain a place where only men can enter, as another local villager, Cari Kolani, confirms.

Kolani literally does not know her own age and has to find her national identity card to show her date of birth September 22nd, 1968.

Douti's point that younger men share with household duties does at least anecdotally suggest a change in male behaviour, but for women's rights activists in the region the changes are too slow in coming. "Every day there is violence against women. It's difficult to tackle – women often say it's not a problem," says activist and chairwoman of Trax Togo, Kabissa Confort.

Women are also being affected by the spread of HIV and the lack of family planning because men refuse to use condoms during intercourse, which she highlights as another social inequality that is being nurtured by ignorance and inaction. "Condoms have a bad reputation; people say that condoms are the cause of sickness, and the men refuse to use them and say they don't work. They think Aids is a sickness created by the white people, or they think it's sorcery," she says.

There is legislation in Togo to defend women's rights, but according to Confort the laws are simply not being enforced in the country's poorer areas. "In this region, women have no rights – they don't even realise it themselves. Sometimes, they say 'It's not my house, it's my husband's house'," she says.

This is the second in a three-part series on West Africa. Conor Sweeney travelled to Togo with Self Help Africa – selfhelpafrica.org

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