

Hello, and welcome back to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

I'm Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Today on the program, our East Africa Correspondent Gabe Joselow is here with a report on how African men are helping stop rape on the continent...

"The government is giving more support to women who are victims of such crimes. It is also talking with men and to criminals who are seeking to improve their lives. These efforts are happening across Africa."

But first, we report on the latest efforts to make the rape of a spouse a crime in all of Africa...

"You know, there's the African thing that your husband can't rape you. You know, they'll tell you how can your husband rape you? It's an entitlement."

Fighting rape in Africa, the subject of our reports today, as you learn everyday American English with As It Is on VOA.

“Rape is rape” -- Making the Rape of a Spouse a Crime

In about half of African countries south of the Sahara Desert, it is not against the law for a man to force his wife to have sex with him. In at least three countries in the area, laws do not permit women to bring rape charges against their husbands.

There have been efforts to make spousal, or marital, rape a crime. But they have been debated.

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women recognized spousal rape as gender-based violence in 1980. Sub-Saharan African countries have taken several actions to make spousal rape a crime since then.

South Africa was one of the first to take action. In 1993, legislators changed a law that said a man could not be charged

with raping his wife. The new law stated that “a husband may be convicted of the rape of his wife.”

Since then, almost 20 other African countries have taken similar steps. But Nigeria, Ethiopia and Kenya are not among them. The laws in those countries say rape can only happen outside of a marriage.

Rape and family violence are underreported throughout Africa. And even in the countries that have made marital rape a crime, few people accept it as such.

In Uganda, a bill making marital rape a crime was controversial when it was debated by parliament earlier this year. The bill gives a wife the right to say no to sex, but only soon after childbirth or if she believes her husband has a sexually transmitted disease.

Rita Achiro leads the Uganda Women’s Network, which has supported the legislation.

“You know, there’s the African thing that your husband can’t rape you. You know, they’ll tell you how can your husband rape you? It’s an entitlement. That’s, that’s the belief people have, so we are still going `round in circles trying to safeguard women using conditions under which she can deny the other sex. Ideally, it shouldn’t happen like that -- there shouldn’t be conditions. Rape is rape.”

In the countries that have passed laws against marital rape, punishments differ widely. They include fines and prison time -- from eight days in Burundi to life imprisonment in Zimbabwe. However, activists say sentencing rules are not respected. And they say few women bring rape charges, and few men are punished.

There is much cultural pressure on women not to bring charges. And many women resist putting their husbands in jail because they are the financial providers for the family.

If they seem to have little effect, why even pass laws against marital rape? Some activists in Africa say it is important to pass

such laws to send a strong message that a woman is not her husband's property.

Men Help Stop Rape in Africa

Gender-based violence has long been seen as a woman's issue, even though most gender-based crimes are carried out by men. Now, VOA's East Africa Correspondent Gabe Joselow reports, there are more and more programs across Africa to end gender-based violence. He says these programs work with men and dispute traditional beliefs about what it means to be a man.

One prisoner at Liberia's Monrovia Central Prison is serving 10 years for raping an 11-year old girl. The 33-year-old admitted to the crime, and is now getting mental health treatment through a government program for sex criminals. The prisoner spends much of his day learning skills that he hopes will permit him to lead a less-violent life after his release.

"I'm a rapist. I was put in prison for the past two years. I've been able to improve my life in prison. I do some life skills

programs like animal-raising, soap-making so I feel so much better. One day when I will be released, I will be a good citizen.”

During Liberia’s long civil war there were many rapes and other gender-based violence. Such crimes have continued in Liberia since the end of the war.

The government is giving more support to women who are victims of such crimes. It is also talking with men and to criminals who are seeking to improve their lives. These efforts are happening across Africa.

The women’s organization FEMNET supports gender equality activities across Africa. It has created men-to-men programs in seven countries. It is trying to bring in more men to support a campaign against gender-based violence.

FEMNET Chairwoman Emma Kaliya is based in Malawi. She says men should be involved in the campaign.

“Personally I do not agree that they are the only perpetrators of violence, but they form, they form the higher percentage of those that are called perpetrators, and therefore it is necessary that you bring them on board and not leaving them behind on this process of eliminating gender-based violence.”

The effort to bring more men to the campaign seems to be working. Male activists recently protested in Nairobi. They were demanding justice for a female teenage rape victim. Her attackers were freed after being ordered to cut grass as punishment for the rape.

Kennedy Otina is with FEMNET’s Men-to-Men program in Kenya. He was among the protesters that day. He says that he used to act like what he calls “a typical African man” with little respect for women. Then, he says, his girlfriend became pregnant and that changed everything.

“The, the lady eventually gave birth to a baby girl and you know that’s where it was a turning point, because my daughter was so innocent and I was just imagining that if I am the one who is

discriminating (against) her to that extent, what would happen to a man next door, who doesn't have much connection to the girl?"

Mr. Otina now works in the community to increase understanding of the high level of sexual violence. Some of the programs give mental health treatment to men involved in these crimes.

Mr. Otina says men make the mistake of thinking the men-to-men program will help defend male rapists. Mr. Otina says that mistake gives him the chance to talk with the men responsible for the violence.

"When there's a case in court then they tend to think or assume that we'll be the ones to defend them, to support them in court, but you know when they get to us, we help them understand that violence against women is not acceptable."

Kennedy Otina says he has a special way to persuade men of the importance of gender equality and ending gender-based violence.

He talks to men about the women who are important in their lives -- like sisters, aunts or grandmothers.

I'm Gabe Joselow, VOA News, Nairobi.

And that's our program for today.

There are two more Learning English programs straight ahead -- and don't forget to listen to VOA World News at the beginning of every hour Universal Time.

Thank you for spending some of your time with us today.

I'm Christopher Cruise.

I'll see you next time on As It Is on The Voice of America.



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