

From VOA Learning English, this is As It Is.

Welcome back. I'm Caty Weaver.

On the show today we go to a conference in Cameroon. Delegates are seeking an end to sexual abuse and the establishment of reproductive rights for all Africans.

Then we hear from survivors of acid attacks in Pakistan. The attacks continue although there are laws in place to prevent them.

African countries have been called upon to accept "sexual rights" as a basic right for all African people. These countries are also being asked to remove all barriers that prevent women, girls and boys from having sexual rights.

Christopher Cruise has more.

About 550 people from 55 countries took part last week in the sixth Africa Conference on Sexual Health in Cameroon. Young people sang at the conference to draw attention to the problem of sexual violence. And they are asking their African leaders for help.

Among those singing is 18-year-old student Mbassi Antoinette. She attends University of Yaounde 1. She says her professor violated her sexual rights.

She says it started with the professor promising to help her. After that he started asking for sex. He told her that if she refused to have sex with him, he would fail her on her exams.

Sexual violence and rape seems to be increasing in many parts of Africa. Ahmadou Bouba is a Cameroonian professor. He says a study he carried out shows surprising amounts of violence in Cameroon. He adds that this violence is one of the main barriers to quality education in Africa.

Mr. Bouba says that cases of sexual mistreatment have increased in universities. Male professors are sexually threatening more female students. He adds that in some cases, female professors sexually threaten male students.

The U.N. Population Fund says Africa has more people under the age of 20 than any place in the world. Fund officials estimate that the continent's population is set to double to two billion by 2050.

However, Christine Boutegwa from Ghana says this economic development is at risk. She says the legal systems in Africa do not protect the sexual and reproductive rights of these young people.

"They do not see adolescents as sexual beings. The policies that are there are not right for boys and girls."

The conference representative from Uganda, Sarah Mokossa, says there is a culture of silence around sex and sexuality on the African continent.

"We still practice child marriage, we still practice female genital mutilation, we still view it as acceptable that young women and young men should not be educated on their sexual and reproductive health and rights even though we know that they are sexually active and that usually that sexual activity is not one of choice. It is one in which they are coerced by older men in the case of young girls."

The situation is similar in Zimbabwe where laws are weak and do not punish those who carry out sexual abuse, says Ndana Tawamba. Ms. Tawamba represented Zimbabwe at the conference.

"The justice systems in the countries we are coming from are pretty much lacking behind in terms of what it is that they can do in terms of seeing to it that those girls that are being married at early ages get the kind of recourse that they deserve, getting the justice that they deserve after being raped particularly."

U.N. Population Fund Deputy Director Kate Gilmore spoke at the end of the conference. She called on African leaders to end all barriers that prevent women, girls and boys from having a healthy sexual life with control over their reproductive choices.

I'm Christopher Cruise.

A vicious form of punishment continues in Pakistan although the government has enacted laws to stop it. Almost 150 acid attacks were reported to the Acid Survivors Foundation in Pakistan last year.

VOA reporter Sharon Behn spoke to two victims in Islamabad. Cathy Weaver has her report.

Females represent sixty percent of the acid attack victims in Pakistan. Nusrat Bibi is among them. Ms. Bibi's brother refused to marry a member of her husband's family. She suffered the results of that decision. Her husband punished her by throwing acid on her.

Ms. Bibi was in a hospital for nine months and had 17 operations to rebuild her face and body.

Muhammad Hassan Mangi is the director of Pakistan's Ministry of Law, Justice and Human Rights. He admits that more needs to be done about preventing acid attacks.

“You need to have such methods and things in practice that you can express your, even, anger in a decent manner. That has to be understood by society.”

Mohammed Farooq, a former member of the Pakistani military, is another victim. He also was punished after refusing to marry a woman chosen for him. He dealt with severe pain, damage and depression following his attack.

“At first I was devastated. There was nothing left in my life. No past, no future, no present.”

But three years later, he is able to face the world again. Mr. Farooq dreams of being an athlete. He wants to start bicycling again.

Valerie Khan leads the Acid Survivors Foundation in Islamabad. She says changing the way society judges acid attack victims is critical to their survival.

“It’s about rebuilding your mind, your self-esteem, and it’s about reclaiming your space in the community and in the public space as a man, a woman, who deserves and will obtain and achieve respect and dignity again.”

Mohammed Farooq is no longer hiding his face. He is learning the art of photography. He is getting on with his life.

“My message to those that did this is that you tried your best to kill us, but we have been saved. God willing, we will move on. Never lose hope. Be patient. This is a test of patience. God will reward us.”

And that’s As It Is for today. I’m Caty Weaver.

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