

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

I'm June Simms, with Bob Doughty in Washington.

Today on the program, we report on efforts in the West African nation of Togo to protect the small country's rich cultural and language heritage.

"As a linguist, we have to be very worried about it. Because today, even when people move back to their village, they don't use the language of the village as it is."

But first, we hear about older Liberian women who are learning to read and write. Here is Bob Doughty.

Liberian Women Learn to Read and Write

A United Nations agency estimates that 516 million of the world's women cannot read and write. The UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, says programs are needed to help illiterate women learn although they are past school age. Women make up two-thirds of all illiterate adults. The majority of these women live in West Africa. Many girls in that area never go to school.

But in

Liberia, a new education program is giving women in their 30s, 40s and 50s another chance to learn to read and write.

Pauline Rose heads UNESCO's worldwide monitoring report on Education for All. She says being illiterate causes huge problems in daily life. She notes situations like not being able to read directions on a medicine bottle or the number on a bus.

"So there are real practical concerns about when women are illiterate."

Ms. Rose says illiteracy affects not only the women but also their families, because women are often the main caregivers of children. She says, when women are illiterate, they are less likely to use health services.

Some countries, like Senegal, have improved women's literacy rates through government efforts. They tell more girls in primary school and community programs about the importance of education. But there are still many nations where less than one in four women can read and write. They include Niger, Benin, Mali and Burkina Faso.

Ms. Rose says these countries need literacy programs that target women. She says there is a huge need for illiterate young women and adults to have a second chance to read and write.

for example, has launched a second-chance literacy campaign to teach women. The students never went to school, or they were forced to leave school because of 10 years of civil war in the country.

Lonee Smith is 35 years old. She is a student at the adult literacy school at the Firestone Liberia Natural Rubber Company in Margibi County. Her parents did not send her to school, and she could not read or write. Now she is in the first grade and has those skills.

She sells her goods at the market and can now count her profit without help. She says having a second chance at education has changed her life.

“Today I am a happy woman. I’m very proud.”

Liberia’s Ministry of Education says 5,000 women currently study in adult literacy programs across the country. I’m Bob Doughty.

And I’m June Simms. You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

Togolese Work to Protect Culture and Language

estimate that by the end of the century, half the 6,000 languages spoken on our planet will have disappeared. In West Africa, academics in Togo are trying to protect the small country's rich cultural and language heritage.

Once again, here is Bob Doughty.

At the University of Lome, professor N'bueke Adovi Goeh-Akue shows a visitor some video clips of Gen cultural rituals.

The professor is a cultural heritage specialist. He is also himself a Gen, one of many ethnic groups in Togo. He is making films of Gen cultural customs with financial help from the United States.

He says the Gen have an important place in Togo's history and culture. Gen rituals show how its people see their world, the interaction between the living and the dead, the seen and the unseen. The Gen believe in numerous voodoo deities. But today, professor Goeh-Akue says fewer and fewer Gen children go through voodoo initiation ceremonies.

He says that increasingly, the new generation does not recognize the importance of these cultural traditions. He says formal education and the spread of Christianity have reduced their influence. Many young people think traditional practices are uncivilized. And while the Gen language is widely spoken in the capital, Lome, the professor says it is not taught in schools.

Gen is one of about 39 languages spoken in Togo. A specialist in the UNESCO endangered-language program says by the end of this century, more than half of Africa's languages will be gone.

The specialist -- Anahit Minasyan -- says a language needs speakers, preferably people who speak it as their mother tongue, or first language. But she says a language at least needs people who can speak it as their second language.

"If there aren't any," she says, "a language is extinct."

She says languages can die as a result of an increasingly globalized world.

"Mostly, these days, they are economic. People switch to a language. Or they raise their children in a language which they think will provide for a better economic opportunity in the future."

Ms. Minasyan says in Africa, for example, people often switch to larger African languages, not necessarily to English or French. Instead, people might switch to Hausa or Swahili or Wolof. These have more speakers and provide more economic opportunities than their mother tongues.

Sociolinguist Komlan Essizewa says that today, many young, urban Togolese switch among several languages. These include the Mina language spoken in cities.

“As a linguist, we have to be very worried about it. Because today, even when people move back to their village, they don’t use the language of the village as it is.”

Thanks to Bob Doughty for joining us today. Mario Ritter returns next weekend. I’m June Simms and that is As It Is.