

Easing fears and promoting gender equality in Chad's girls-only classrooms

A teacher holds up a drawing of an adolescent girl who has just been caught unawares by her first menstruation cycle, while at school. She's addressing neat rows of young women sitting in class, in the town of Bol, in Chad.

"We spoke about puberty and periods and looked at a story of a young girl who experienced her period for the first time," Fatime Ali Abakar told UN News in her classroom at the single-sex Lycée de Bol school.

Some 50 girls are present. Many like Fatime Ali Abakar, have already started menstruating, but the lesson is still relevant, according to 20-year old Houa Adoum Abdoulaye. "This class can help us to support younger girls who may be confused or worried about what is happening to them."

Awareness-raising

The class which takes place after regular school hours is organized by the League of Women Preachers, a group of female Muslim teachers who are closely associated with Chad's Higher Council of Islamic Affairs.

The aim of the League is to contribute to awareness about issues which affect women and girls especially gender-based violence, the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and the dangers of radicalization by terrorist groups which operate in the region.

Mariam Abakar is the president of the League for the Lac region where Bol is located and is proactively engaged in the classes. The sharing of information takes place in what is called a madrassa, an Islamic religious school.

"In the Muslim world women are separated from men, especially in the mosque, so it is important that women get together to discuss the wide range of issues which particularly affect us," she said.

When the class focusing on puberty is over, some of these young women will return to family homes where female genital mutilation, early marriage and young pregnancies are accepted as traditional practices and considered part of normal life in Chad.

Early Marriage

Figures quoted by the United Nations show that 30% of Chadian women between the ages of 20-24 are married before they reach the age of 15. In that same group around 14% give birth also before the age of 15. Female genital mutilation, which is practiced in most parts of Chad, affects 44 per cent of

all women.

The [UN Population Fund](#), [UNFPA](#), is working in the country to reduce the incidence and damage caused by practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage. “The persistence of these harmful practices is tied to traditional sociocultural beliefs,” said Edwige Adekambi Domingo, the Resident Representative of UNFPA in Chad. “They limit the empowerment of women and adolescent girls and increase their vulnerability and risk to poverty and more discrimination.”

Change is happening. An intense advocacy campaign organized by UNFPA with traditional and religious leaders, including some Muslim leaders and the League of Women Preachers, successfully pressed members of parliament to vote in favour of a law which ratified a presidential decree forbidding child marriage and setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 years.

But early marriage and early non-consensual sexual intercourse is still taking place. “Poverty combined with the low status of women, high fertility rates and low rates of education of girls are the underlying causes,” explained UNFPA’s Edwige Adekambi Domingo. “UNFPA is committed to increasing access to quality and youth-friendly reproductive health services for marginalized adolescent girls, including those that are subject to risk of child marriage,” she added.