



Quarterly Newsletter of the U.S. Agency for International Development Mission in Benin

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Photo: Pierre Mas, elanbenin.com

Sister Marie Regina Tossou

International Women's Month

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR BENIN WOMEN,

For twenty years, Sister Marie Regina Tossou has dedicated herself to saving young women and girls from the traditional practice of forced marriage.

FROM SEX WORKER TO PEER EDUCATOR

“My name is Emma. I am fifty years old. I have been a sex worker for 10 years. But three years ago, I became a peer educator to my sisters.”

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Making a Difference for Benin Women.

Climbing out of the canoe onto the wooden porch, Sister Marie Regina Tossou welcomes us with her warm smile, surrounded by singing and clapping teenage girls. No one would suspect the horror that these girls had suffered. Sister Marie Regina Tossou is a Catholic nun and heads the Maria Goretti Center in Sô-Tchanhoué. It is Benin's first safe-haven for victims of gender-based violence, and is now supported by USAID as part of the Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative, which focuses on raising awareness about women's rights and helping victims of gender-based violence.

Sister Marie Tossou's safe-haven brings hope to young victims of gender-based violence.

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Making a Difference for Benin Women

(Continued from page 1)

For twenty years, Sister Marie Regina has dedicated herself to saving young women and girls from the traditional practice of forced marriage. She lives with the girls in the harsh conditions of the center, a wooden structure perched on stilts within the lake village. Even the most basic needs have to be brought in by boat.

In this part of rural Benin, girls frequently become victims of trafficking and gender-based violence, being sold by their families to the man who offers the highest bid. They are kidnapped, tied up and transported in boats to the man's house. They are raped daily, and beaten into submission; often held hostage in these inhuman conditions until they become pregnant and have no choice but to stay. The girls sometimes succeed in escaping their tormentors, but have nowhere to turn for refuge. Their usual safety networks – their families – were complicit in their sale and kidnapping. Their only hope is the Maria Goretti Center. With support from USAID, the center is able to welcome all the girls who come in need of her help. The girls are safe in the Maria Goretti Center. Through the USAID program, the center provides a package of services to the girls, including

health and psychological care, and slowly they recover from the trauma of being victims of such violence. They also become literate and learn a trade. Earning the trade diploma takes about four years, and once they have their certificate, and with family counseling, they are able to go back home, ready to earn their living and no longer in danger of becoming a victim of trafficking or violence.

Though Sister Marie Regina has been threatened and her center attacked for saving the girls and fighting the traditional practice of forced marriage, she courageously continues her dedicated service. Within the USAID supported awareness raising campaign, she is also a

Since 2007, the U.S. Government helps to raise awareness about women's rights in Benin and to assist victims of gender-based violence to recover their place in society.

strong national voice in advocating a stop to gender-based violence and in particular to forced marriage. She insists that eradicating forced marriage can and must be done, and she has made it her life work to make it happen – one girl at a time. ■

By: Elvire Houenassou, USAID/Benin.



Cotonou sex workers listen to a peer educator talk about HIV/AIDS.

From Sex Worker to Peer Educator

“My name is Emma. I am fifty years old and I am the mother of a boy who lives in the United States. I have been a sex worker for 10 years. But three years ago, I became a peer educator to my sisters here in Jonquet, the red light district of Cotonou.”

In Benin, USAID works with its partners, the Beninese Association for Social Marketing (ABMS) and PSI International, to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. As a peer educator, Emma warns sex workers and their clients about these diseases and how to protect themselves. In addition to education, activities include screening tests and the distribution of condoms. Emma and her peers feel this is a beneficial action that speaks directly to them in their work place.

“We, sex workers, do not always hear the messages aired on radio and television that talk about sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. When we hear them, we do not understand the words they say. We do not read either. But thanks to women like Emma, we learn that sexually transmitted infections are dangerous for our health and we are determined to avoid any risk of contracting these diseases and passing them on to others. “For Emma, this is enough of a good reason to keep on educating other sex workers like her about the danger of AIDS. ■

By Paula Agbemavo/PSI Benin

Assault Victims Get Day in Court

Déborah* and her husband Djobo live in the village of Guiguiso in northern Benin. On the night of Sept. 9, 2009, while they slept, three men entered their home and assaulted the couple. Djobo was left bleeding and unconscious, and Déborah was raped. After he regained consciousness, Djobo alerted the village.

The coordinator of the USAID-supported EMPOWER project to advance women's rights and combat gender-based violence (GBV) in Benin promptly informed the police commissioner and project facilitator in nearby Bassila. With the help of the entire population of Guiguiso, the three men were tracked down and taken into custody before sunrise.

Déborah and Djobo sought medical attention from the Bassila hospital and, with medical certificates in hand, they went to the police commissioner. After hearing the victims, and the witnesses, the commissioner presented the case to the prosecutor. Today, the three accused men await trial in jail.

That the three men were brought before the country's legal system at all is remarkable. In Benin, more than 75 percent of women are victims of violence, and 44 percent are sexually abused. Since 2007, USAID has helped to promote greater recognition and acceptance of women's rights in Benin, and also to get more female victims to seek help from Benin's Social Service Centers and justice system.

The Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative (WJEI) is a presidential initiative to advance women's rights and combat GBV in Africa. In Benin, USAID, working through CARE International, seeks to increase awareness of GBV and improve the capacity of care centers and shelters to address the comprehensive needs of victims through medical, psycho-social, legal, and police assistance. At the same time, the US Depart-

ment of Justice focuses on strengthening the justice, forensic, and prosecuting system, by training lawyers, police officers and health care providers that deal with GBV crimes.

In Benin, the EMPOWER project conducts media and interpersonal awareness campaigns that aim at reducing GBV while calling for the application of existing anti-GBV laws. Although the evaluation of the project completed in July, 2010 found that the fight against GBV has progressed, victims face numerous problems. On the one hand, the Government of Benin lacks the resources to address and act at the level that the magnitude of the violence against women problem requires; on the other hand, the victims of GBV continue, under social pressure, to withdraw their complaints for fear of family reprisals.

"The injury we suffered as a result of this gang rape may pass with time," Déborah said weeks after the assault, "but I dare not imagine what life would be like had we not received help from EMPOWER, starting from the hospital and the police station, to the prosecutor's office to press charges."

From November 2007 to September 2010, the U.S. government helped 2,782 victims file complaints with the police, of which 996 reached the Courts of First Instance. While that figure represents only 35 percent of gender violence complaints, it is more than 6.5 times higher than the results targeted. For Beninese women, it is very difficult to press charges against the men who abused them.

"Before, we would attempt to resolve cases of gender-based violence 'amicably' and out-of-court," a Beninese judge said. "This happens less because of EMPOWER, which helps the victims understand and pursue their cases in the court system, and mounting pressure from the media, that acts as essential partner in the cause of justice for women. ■

By Jeronime Mongbo, Care International, Benin

* Names withheld by the Courts to protect the safety of the couple.



Elvire Houenassou, Kevin Armstrong, USAID Director, Alassane Idrissou, Urbain Amégbéji, National Secretary of Centre Afrika Obota.

USAID Supports Benin Elections Observers

On Monday, February 14, in Cotonou, the Centre Afrika Obota (CAO) presented its training modules for election observers.

With support from USAID, CAO will deploy 300 observers during the Benin presidential and legislative elections to be held in March and April 2011 respectively.

In his opening remarks, Urbain Amégbéji, General Secretary of the CAO, praised USAID for its support of election observers which, in his opinion, "guaranties the autonomy of civil society against political interference".

Kevin Armstrong, USAID Director, also spoke to congratulate the government of Benin, civil society, and the National Election Committee (CENA) for their dedicated efforts to strengthen democracy in Benin.

In concluding the opening ceremony, Alassane Idrissou, representing the Benin Ministry of Government Relations, thanked the U.S. Government for its support to free, peaceful, and transparent elections in Benin. ■

André Rousel, USAID/Benin with Centre Afrika Obota



Indoor Residual Spraying technician in protective gear ready to spray insecticide inside of houses.

Indoor Residual Spraying Moves to Benin's North

All systems are ready to move the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI)/Benin's indoor residual spraying (IRS) to the country's North. After two years of successful spraying in four communes of Ouémé department in the South (around Porto-Novo, Benin's capital), where near-universal household coverage was achieved, more than 600,000 people were protected from malaria for two years. For 2011, a new area has been selected for IRS: seven communes of Atacora department. Benin's National Malaria Control Program and USAID decided to move the spraying to expand the benefits of IRS to more people in a larger geographic coverage area.

There are several differences between the North and the South of Benin. Atacora department has one major rainy season, requiring only one spraying campaign per year. Benin's South (where Ouémé is located) has a long and a short rainy season; this requires spraying campaigns twice a year. On the other hand, the North is more sparsely populated, and households are in smaller clusters in hamlets that are further apart from each other. The insecticide used in the North will be a carbamate just like the one used in the South; however, intensive monitoring will be done to ensure that the *Anopheles* mosquito that transmits malaria is still susceptible to carbamate, an insecticide previously used in the area's cotton fields.

The two years of IRS campaigns have resulted in reports of drastically reduced malaria cases in Ouémé department – up to two-thirds below pre-spraying levels. Pregnant mothers and young children are the main beneficiaries of IRS, since they are the most at risk to malaria. The current low level of malaria transmission will be maintained through universal household use of long-lasting, insecticide-impregnated mosquito nets. A distribution campaign, supported by a major behavior change communication strategy regarding mosquito net use, is planned for April 2011. ■

Milton Amayun/USAID Benin

UPCOMING EVENTS

International Women's
Day.....March 8
Bed Net Distribution In
Ouémé.....April 23
World Malaria Day...April 25

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