



SUCCESS STORY

Women Reach for Legal Rights

USAID program provides critical support to bolster women's legal rights in Benin



Two girls at WLR Benin public awareness event in Houekanme, Benin, March 2005

PHOTO: LYN BETH NEYLON

With encouragement from the USAID-supported project, Benin has adopted national reforms that render many longstanding local customs illegal, but awareness is low and enforcement is weak. The Women's Legal Rights Benin team, with local partners, visit remote areas of the country informing women and men about the new laws.

U.S. Agency for International Development
www.usaid.gov

According to tradition in Benin, polygamy is commonplace, widows must marry from the family of the deceased husband, women inherit nothing from their fathers or husbands, and divorce and child custody are exclusively male domains. In some areas, female genital cutting is the norm. Sexual harassment, domestic violence, and forced early marriages are widespread, with girls as young as 7 "inducted" into new families. By age 19, more than half the women in Benin have at least one child.

One of the greatest barriers to empowering women in Benin is customary law and practice that denies women and girls basic human rights. However, an innovative Family Code was passed in 2004. This drastically changed the rights and responsibilities of men and women in Benin regarding marriage, divorce, children, dowry, succession, and inheritance. Passage of the Code has given USAID's Women's Legal Rights Initiative a strategic opportunity to frame education efforts around the new law. Since USAID's program began in September 2004, it has conducted an intensive public awareness campaign on women's legal rights and the Family Code throughout Benin. This campaign has resulted in:

- Passage of four national executive orders implementing key provisions of the Code.
- Publication and distribution of 15,000 public awareness booklets in French and four local languages and 4,000 legal training manuals on the Code.
- Placement of 2,000 posters on the civil status acts and marriage in city halls.
- Development of a film on the Code, which was broadcast on government television.
- Attendance of nearly 7,000 attendees at numerous public awareness events in rural areas.
- Training of 200 paralegals, 30 magistrates and lawyers, and 77 mayors on the Code from all departments.