



Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

Transnational Solidarity Network

WLUML Statement - Denounce, Protect, Act: Our Collective Duties against Rape and Sexual Assault in Senegal

On March 9th, 2018, one day after International Women’s Rights Day, while many of us continued to reflect on our struggles and the road ahead of us, Mr. Songué, a high school philosophy teacher, made a statement pertaining to women on the set of the TV show Jaakarlo. “We should be making formal complaints because you’re doing everything for us to rape you, and when we rape you, we go to prison and you, who have done everything for us to rape you, continue to be free. I take full responsibility for what I’m saying, I’m meeting you halfway, the poor man who fell into your trap will get 10 years and the woman who did everything to get raped will continue to live freely. Even at home, it is the voluptuous ones who get raped.”

The roles are thus reversed: the aggressors become the victims, and women and girls are guilty of the assaults they’ve suffered. The crowd laughs. The show intended to “celebrate” women on March 8th, and quickly became an apologetic platform for rape. This incredibly violent discourse, stated in a public place, reveals the systemic and systematic violence that women suffer regularly. This violence, which has become commonplace, is present everywhere and at any given moment. It manifests itself through numerous assaults, ranging from tenuous to incredibly violent, including workplace and street harassment, violence (both physical and psychological) in domestic and family settings, and sexual assault, rape and incest.

We want to alert people to this reality and spark a debate about the scope of these violent events and incidences against women and girls, but also about the indifference that these events are too often met with in our country.

What do these violent events have in common, and what do they reveal? These are not isolated incidents. They are occurring in a climate of general impunity where powerful men can dispose of women’s bodies without having to take responsibility for their actions. There is indeed a law criminalizing rape in Senegal but know that it is seldom applied. It’s also important to note that the ability to mobilize the legal system depends on resources that many victims simply do not

have or do not have access to. One must know that the law exists, understand the legal process and especially be ready to face a system that believe women are solely accountable for their safety. In Senegal, as elsewhere, victims of sexual abuse and other forms of violence seldom call out their aggressors. They live with the burden of shame, created and reinforced by blaming the victim. We fault them for their appearance, how they dress, how they walk, the hours at which they are out, the places they frequent. Such messages are received, inherited and ingrained in all those who, one day, will make the painful choice to keep quiet, because they feel deep shame and are convinced that no one will believe them – and justifiably so.

Shame must “change sides.” Women should be able to report violence, in all its forms, and feel welcomed in their steps. We must collectively denounce these forms of violence and the structural inequalities that allow them to exist and legitimize them. If people such as Songué Diouf can allow themselves to utter such obscenities on Senegalese television, at a time when women the world over are standing up together to denounce sexual assault and how commonplace it has become, it’s because they are gauging the strength of impunity which is inherent to rape culture.

#MeToo, #BalanceTonPorc, #MoiAussi and #DomaSiif (Since March 12th, 2018) are not empty hashtags. They convey a willingness to finally liberate and remove inhibition from women’s voices. In Senegal’s case, this message has not been heard, to this day. The authorities’ silence, most notably that of the Minister of Family and Gender, while women and their allies are mobilized, is proof of this. She should have been the first to publicly and firmly condemn this type of discourse and remind victims that they are not alone, that the State has the responsibility and duty to protect them.

Our collective of Senegalese women living in Senegal and abroad vigorously condemns all forms of violence against women and we are calling on the authorities to act. In a Senegal that has ratified international and regional conventions pertaining to equality of the sexes, it is imperative to ensure the application of rights and to effectively promote sexual education and respect of the physical and psychological integrity for all individuals, particularly for women and children. On that note, we believe that the creation of an Investigative Committee on violence against women is a necessary step in this direction.

In 2008, the Association of Women Jurists of Senegal (AJS) submitted a detailed report explaining how we may use the case of Rwanda as inspiration in eradication gender-based violence (GBV). The association made the following recommendations: that “GBV should be a

public health priority” to designate a “specific prosecutor in charge of GBV” and to reinforce the “legislative and regulatory provisions on equality, gender equality and on preventing and eliminating GBV.” These recommendations bring to light the necessity for a systemic intervention that cannot take place without the presence and participation of people within our institutions who are concerned about equality between men and women. Applying these recommendations would be a step in the right direction to set up a support network for victims beyond the legal system. This would entail:

- Creating spaces that are safe to speak in, organized by and for Senegalese women;
- Involving psychosocial health groups to develop shelter and accommodation resources, appropriate therapeutic resources accessible to victims of rape and sexual abuse that incorporate a feminist, intersectional and decolonizing approach.
- Concerted initiatives to develop self-esteem in women who are victims of sexual violence, so they can gradually regain control of their lives and futures.

This is a number of steps we can take that would allow us to better support victims who suffer from trauma following rape and sexual abuse in a place where psychological or emotional support in the community and in the healthcare system is almost inexistent.

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