

How radio can empower women in Niger

July 27 2018, by Emma Heywood



Women at work. Credit: [EPA/Marcel Mettelsiefen](#)

Mariama is 23. At the age of 15, she was married to a local religious leader twice her age. She now has two babies, is a second wife, and stays at home doing "nothing". Her childhood dream of becoming a doctor faded many years ago.

She is not alone. Women in Niger suffer from widespread [gender inequality](#), and [child marriage](#) is common. [The latter](#) is covered by the Civil Code, with a minimum age of 18 for boys and 15 for girls, but in practice, cultural and social traditions are still dominant.

Many women have only a patchy knowledge of their legal rights; many are uncertain about the legal age of consent, or differences between official, traditional or customary marriages. They are disempowered, have no voice in society, and are excluded from decision-making. Polygamy is also commonplace and legal, and Niger has the world's [highest fertility rate](#) at 7.2 births per woman.

Many respondents in my ongoing fieldwork appear to accept the situation. As Mariama and her co-respondent Amina agreed: "It is better to be a second or third wife than not married at all. So long as the husband manages it, polygamy can work well – it allows all women to be married." Forced marriage does still occur, and while many brides can choose their future husbands, it's their fathers who have the final say. However elevated they may be in their professional lives, wives are then subject to the will of their husbands.

Yet as male-dominated as Niger may be, women still play a major role in society. They run their families, organise the household, and many operate small businesses to provide funds. If they have a source of electricity and a fridge, they can sell frozen juice, enough to provide a necessary, albeit meagre, income.

What many of them don't have is a reliable source of information. Electricity is only accessible to 15% of the population ruling out TV and computer use. The internet also doesn't cover much of the country, so little information is available there. And even if computers and the internet were widely available, the country's 15% literacy rate would still be an obstacle. More than half of girls [do not complete primary school](#).

This also makes even mobile text messaging difficult. Women, and all the population, are therefore reliant on [radio](#) for information.

As part of a team at the University of Sheffield, I have been researching the impact of radio on women's empowerment in Niger. The research is based on a series of knowledge exchange workshops in the capital, Niamey, and focus groups and interviews over the course of a year involving listeners, civil society organisations, community leaders and radio stations. Our work is still in its infancy, but our findings are already significant. They are helping to shape and improve radio output – the main source of information available to the population – and to give marginalised and isolated groups a voice in society, in turn promoting democracy.

The spirit of radio

Niger is rich in radio outlets, with 184 community stations, 60 commercial stations, and one state station, Voix du Sahel. Impartiality can't be guaranteed, and community stations do not have the right to broadcast news; instead, they re-broadcast news programmes from international sources such as [VOA](#), the [BBC](#), [RFI](#) and the newly-launched [Studio Kalangou](#), run by [Fondation Hironnelle](#), known for its radio work throughout Africa and in conflict-affected areas. Studio Kalangou has gained popularity by providing domestic rather than international news. It is widely respected for its transparency and is considered independent.

In addition to broadcasting Studio Kalangou's national programmes, many of the partner community radios organise community awareness sessions where male and female listeners can receive information from radio volunteers or visiting NGOs.

This is a laudable concept and the events are well-attended, but they fail

to attract a large proportion of the female population, many of whose husbands do not allow them to pursue activities outside the house or attend such gatherings on the very grounds that they are mixed. These same restrictions hamstring the *petits commerces* many women run; although they may produce goods, their husbands refuse to let them go out selling meaning potential buyers have to come to them. According to many men I interviewed in my fieldwork, allowing their women to leave the home or attend mixed groups carries the risk of them entering adulterous affairs.

This in turn means much vital information obtained by women who care for their families comes to them via word of mouth. Accuracy is far from guaranteed. But many women are doing what they can to address the situation. To obtain better information and participate in political life, some are setting up women-only associations to circumvent these male-imposed restrictions.

Small steps

One example is Radio Scout, sponsored by Luxembourg's scout association in Kouara Tegui, one of the capital Niamey's most deprived areas. It has just launched "Kalangou", a [radio](#) discussion group run by women for women. The group was born out of [focus groups](#) in April 2018, when many women revealed that they were not allowed to attend mixed awareness meetings. They felt that they, and their families, would benefit from the information and an obvious solution was the creation of women-only meetings.

At least 80 women attended its inaugural session at the end of June, voting in a president and vice-president, determining subscription levels, and setting an agenda. Not only do these listeners meet in a women-only environment, but they also now have something specific to talk about; since May 2018, Studio Kalangou has been broadcasting programmes

targeting women and, each session, the listening group aims to discuss the latest in the series.

This is a small step towards women's empowerment, but it's a significant one. Little in these women's lives is spontaneous; almost every movement outside the house has to be planned in advance, with permission sought the day before. Even while staying within the rules of this patriarchal society, [women](#) are managing to gain knowledge without rocking the familial boat, all to the benefit of their family.

Their aim is not individual empowerment – although that might be a by-product – but a better life for their children, particularly their daughters. The accurate and impartial knowledge they gain at gatherings like the one we witnessed will be one of their most vital tools.

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