

Some profit from wives despite French polygamy ban

By Elaine Ganley

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In this Friday, April 23, 2010 picture Lies Hebbadj, left, and his wife who refused to be identified, speak to reporters in Nantes, western France.

(AP Photo/David Vincent)

PARIS – The burqa, or face-covering veil, is getting all the attention in the debate over Muslim immigrants in France. But another controversial tradition among some immigrants is less noticed and far more widespread: Polygamy.

The issue resurfaced last week after a woman received a traffic citation in the western city of Nantes for driving with a veil over her face. Officials then accused her husband of having at least three other wives, and said he may be profiting from them financially while the state pays the bill.

Polygamy is one of several issues, like forced marriage or genital mutilation, that France and other European nations face, as immigrants arrive with customs that conflict with the law of the land. But experts say polygamy in France can also be linked to fraud, where husbands hijack a generous social welfare system to line their pockets with state funds from each of their wives.

"They practice polygamy just for that," said Jean-Marie Ballo, founder of an association that helps women escape from polygamous situations, Nouveaux Pas, or New Steps. "I'd go so far as to say that polygamists here (in France) are breeding for cash." Ballo said he's even aware of cases where a legal wife's papers are used for hospital care for a second — a health risk as medical records intermingle.

It's hard to count how many polygamous families live in France because of the secrecy of the practice. But the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights in a 2006 report made a minimal estimate of 16,000 to 20,000 polygamous families in France, or some 180,000 people, including children. That compares to fewer than 2,000 women who are thought to wear burqa-style garments.

For decades, polygamy was legal in France for immigrants arriving from any of about 50 countries where it is legally recognized. Historically, taking numerous wives was either a social and economic necessity in poor countries with high death rates, or a sign of external wealth or male domination. France banned polygamy in 1993. At the same time, it launched a process of

"decohabitation" to help multiple wives trapped in small apartments with numerous children to move into their own homes. Experts say that system has been largely successful.

But abuses thrive. Especially vulnerable are women who arrived in France after 1993 — often here illegally and, therefore, with limited means to extricate themselves. The state "minimally resolved the problem of polygamy but didn't provide the means to resolve it completely," said Catherine Quentier of the association Rajfire, which helps women in distress negotiate French red tape to gain legal status or state-funded housing.

It's hard to interview women who live in polygamy because associations say the current sensitive climate has aggravated their daily fears of being caught or their sense of shame. But the human rights report recounts a story that shows how multiple wives and children can lose their own identities.

A woman from Mali, where multiple wives are legal, arrived in France in 1981 at age 14 as wife No. 2 — using the documents of wife No. 1, whom the husband sent back home. The woman, identified as S.Y., had three children under her new identity but bolted when wife No. 3 arrived. She could not reconstitute her real identity for herself and her children. When the report was written, S.Y. had lost her job, was living in a room provided by an association and could not access her bank account. Officially, she no longer existed, the report said.

Chantal Brunel, a lawmaker from the governing conservative UMP party, called last weekend for a region-by-region examination of the family subsidies program to stop corruption by men profiting from state aid to illegal wives. Brunel, who has written a book about violence against women, said she has polygamous families in her district east of Paris "and since 2004-2005 I have asked that the state stop closing its eyes." "To have children cannot become like having a salary," she said.

Other countries in Europe also struggle with polygamy. Fines and prison sentences, in some cases up to seven years, are the norm for those convicted of polygamy in Europe. An exception is Norway. In France, marriage to more than one person is punishable by a year in prison and a euro45,000 (almost \$60,000) fine. However, the law is being challenged in Ireland. And in Cyprus, with a 5-year prison term, the court can take into account arguments that the accused's culture or religion permits polygamy.

Carina Hagg, a Swedish lawmaker for the opposition Social Democrats, warns against mixing notions of polygamy and culture. "You have to be careful not to make it an issue about ethnicity," she said. "Fundamentally it's about women's rights." Those who deal with polygamy also note that in Europe, numerous children can be found living in small apartments with two sets of fighting mothers. They take turns using the kitchen, the bathroom and sharing sleeping space. "Polygamy is not at all adapted to the context of life in the West," said Ballo. "There are conflicts, catastrophic hygienic conditions. Kids do poorly in school as there is nowhere to study."

Ballo, whose Malian father and grandfather were both polygamous, said he helped "decohabit" 12 households with 26 wives and 145 children in Les Ulis, south of Paris, where his group is

based.

The human rights commission report notes that "there is, of course, no question of generalizing and considering all polygamous men as executioners."

Ballo is more cynical: "There are always people in life who defend hell."

Associated Press writers Karl Ritter in Stockholm, Shawn Pogatchnik in Dublin, and Menelaos Hadjicostis in Nicosia, Cyprus, contributed to this report.

Source: [Yahoo! AP](#) .