

The Promise: Married at 11, A Teen in Niger Returns to School After Long, Difficult Deliveries, Many Girls Need Surgery; Father's Changed Outlook Outcasts in Their Own Villages

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NIAMEY, Niger -- Anafghat Ayouba, a slight twig of a girl, sat up on a stained hospital mattress. Nurses had draped a net over the bed to keep away the flies.

She turned to her father, a goat herder from the Sahara. "Father, you must promise me that when we go home I can go to school," she said. "And you must promise that my sisters won't get married so early."

Married before her teens and pregnant with the arrival of puberty, Anafghat was recovering from surgery to repair a fistula, a three-inch-wide hole in the bottom of her bladder, caused by four days of labor. She told the doctors she was 15, but they suspected she could be younger.

Promise is rare in the fistula ward of Niamey's National Hospital, where only two slow-moving ceiling fans stir the pungent air. As Anafghat recovered from the operation performed by a team of visiting American

doctors last December, the room was filled with nine other girls and young women, also rendered incontinent during prolonged labor. Dozens more lived in the hospital's courtyard, waiting for surgery.

More than one million young women with the condition are scattered throughout the so-called fistula belt that stretches across the southern hem of the Sahara from Eritrea to Mali. Because of their severe incontinence and smell, many have been ostracized by their families and villages and live by themselves or with fellow fistula sufferers. They are the lepers of the desert.

A confluence of poverty and social and religious traditions in the region creates a high number of early marriages. In Niger, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, nearly half of the girls are married by age 15, and 90% are married by 18. Half of all women in the country had their first pregnancy while still teenagers.

Many teens' bodies haven't yet matured enough to deliver vaginally, but in all of Niger, only 10 medical centers are capable of performing Caesarean sections. A fistula is caused by unrelieved, protracted labor. The pressure of the baby pushing for days causes a hole to tear in the wall between the bladder and vagina. This results in uncontrollable leaking of urine. The affliction has all but disappeared in the Western world in the advent of widespread maternity care.

[How to Help]

Contact the International Organization for Women and Development at its Web site, www.nigerfistula.org.

Niger has one of the highest maternal-mortality rates in the world, according to the U.N. The country's overall health picture is bleak. Due to limited medical care, poor nutrition and inadequate sanitation, life expectancy in Niger is less than 46 years.

All this contributes to the country's cycle of poverty, slowing development across the region. Niger has a fertility rate of eight children per woman.

Girls are required to leave school when they get married, so most of them are primary-school dropouts.

Less than 15% of the country's women can read and write.

Anafghat was on her way to living by these numbers.

But days after her surgery, she told the doctors and her father that she wanted to make something of her life. It was a lot to ask of her father, 42-year-old Ayouba Mahomed, who is also a Quranic teacher, to break with entrenched customs on girls' education and early marriage.

Mr. Mahomed had given Anafghat, his eldest daughter, in marriage in return for a dowry of one camel. But he never left her side during her ordeal in the fistula ward. Wrapped in a green robe, turban and scarf, he nodded his head to her demands. "Yes, yes," he said. "I promise."

A three-room schoolhouse is the biggest building in Anafghat's village, Tarbiyat, a settlement of about 2,000 Tuareg herders. Goats, camels and cows wander between the small mud-brick houses, spread out on a desolate expanse of sand. The primary school was built in 1992, and since then only one girl has gone on to the high school in the city many miles away. No girls had ever come back to school after leaving for an early marriage.

When Anafghat and her father returned home in February, they told the teachers that she wanted to be the first.

"The father was very persuasive, insisting his daughter must go back to school," says Maiwanzam Boubacar, director of the primary school. "I asked, 'Are you sure she wants to come back?' And her father said, 'Yes, she does. And she will stay in school.' "

The teacher spoke with Anafghat. "I could see she is motivated and very intelligent. She regretted leaving school," he says. "And I knew she could be a good model to the other girls to stay in school. The parents, too, would learn about the importance of education for their daughters. They would see that the consequence of early marriage can be traumatic."

Mr. Boubacar accepted Anafghat back as a pupil in the third grade. He hoped that she would be a teacher to the entire village as well.

Anafghat started school at 8, she says, like most rural children. By the middle of third grade she was finished, just as she was learning to multiply numbers and read French, the national language. She dropped out of school at 11 to marry a man nearly twice her age, chosen by her father.

This is routine in rural Niger. Mr. Mahomed, who can read only the Arabic of the Quran, had for many years taught that girls should get married to avoid unwed pregnancy. As a goat herder, he is at the bottom rung of the Tuareg economy, which prizes camels and cattle above goats. The camel which Anafghat's husband gave the family would provide needed milk and transport.

"We all have our own cultures," explained Chiek Abdou Salam, Tarbiyat's chief, as he took his seat of honor under one of the few shade trees in the village. For the Tuaregs, he says, a girl getting pregnant out of wedlock is an enormous shame for the parents. "So marriage is a solution to the problem." And, he says, "People are very poor, you don't have food and means. If you get your daughter married, then that helps."

For the first years of her marriage, Anafghat says, she lived with her parents, her older brother and five younger sisters in their round, one-room hut. She says she was 14 when she had her first period and then moved in with her husband. Soon, she was pregnant. Her husband, a herder, left for Libya to find work.

Neither Anafghat nor her father will say much about the husband, other than that he occasionally sends money home. As for the camel, one day it disappeared.

"It wandered off, or was stolen," says Mr. Mahomed.

In Niger, 80% of women give birth at home, without medical assistance. In Anafghat's village, it's almost 100%. The nearest health center with sufficient medicine and staff is a day's journey away on the back of a donkey or camel.

Ayoubah Mahomed's house in the village of Tarbiyat, Niger. His daughter Anafghat was in labor here for three days.

During labor, Anafghat was confined to one of the three beds in her father's hut. The mud-brick walls stand about 6 feet high, giving way to thatched roofing. A pole stands in the center, from the dirt floor to the tip of the dome. From the pole hang woven baskets and a clothes line. There is no running water or electricity in the village. The only light and breeze in the hut comes through two doors.

Anafghat's mother had died several years earlier. Now, her stepmother and her younger sisters tended to her.

After three days in labor, Mr. Mahomed knew she needed help. He scraped together money from friends and relatives to hire a car to take them to the nearest town with medicine and maternity nurses. For about 60 miles they bounced over rutted dirt roads. Once there, the nurses said they weren't equipped to handle her delivery. Mr. Mahomed hired another car, for \$40 -- a fortune for a goat herder. It took them to Niamey, the nation's capital, more than 100 miles away down a paved road pocked with potholes.

It was Sept. 16, 2004, when Anafghat arrived at the maternity hospital in Niamey. Doctors performed the delivery by forceps. The baby, a boy, was stillborn.

After the delivery, doctors discovered a fistula the size of a baseball. Four days of pressure during labor had battered her bladder and vagina. Blood flow was cut off, infection set in. Doctors fought the infection, but told Anafghat and her father they didn't have the skills or equipment to repair her fistula. They said a team of American doctors would arrive in December.

Leaking urine through her vagina, Anafghat waited.

The American doctors had already been to Niger six times, lured by the entreaties of Barbara and Ira Margolies of Rockville Center, N.Y. She is an author of children's books and a former elementary school teacher; he is a retired executive of a clothing manufacturer. After traveling to Africa on vacations, the couple headed to one of the continent's poorest lands, Niger, in 2000. They were captivated by the vast needs of the

country, where nearly two-thirds of the people live on less than a dollar a day. Ms. Margolies began teaching English to teachers several weeks a year. On one trip, Niger's minister of social development told her about the fistula problem.

In August 2003, Ms. Margolies set up the nonprofit International Organization for Women and Development Inc. to bring American surgeons to Niger. So far, 59 doctors from U.S. hospitals have volunteered their time, paid their own way and brought \$1.5 million of supplies and equipment with them. In nine visits, they have performed more than 330 surgeries.

"You look at Niger and you see the problems are so overwhelming," says Ms. Margolies. "You can't do it all, so you start small. You start with an individual."

Anafghat was at the National Hospital waiting for the doctors when they arrived in December. Dr. Clifford Wheelless Jr., associate professor of gynecology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, examined her and classified her fistula as stage four, one of the worst. "Absent vaginal wall and posterior bladder wall," he scribbled in his notes. "Only one cm (centimeter) of urethra intact. Size of fistula, 8 cm."

For three hours on Dec. 6, the doctors worked to repair Anafghat's insides, rebuilding her vagina and urinary tract.

Before surgery, the doctors shook their heads over Anafghat's youth and the severity of her fistula. Now, in the recovery ward, they marveled at something else:

her determination. She healed quickly and was soon up and around. "She never cried or complained," recalls Ms. Margolies. Instead, "she was patting all our hands and making us feel better."

In the National Hospital, shortages of essential medicine and equipment are routine. When they run out of gloves, some of the local staff use plastic bags to cover their hands. Cats, which keep the hospital free of snakes, play with the urine drainage bags dangling beside the beds.

Mariama Abdou, married at 15 and pregnant at 17, lived, incontinent, in the hospital courtyard for more than eight years, waiting for surgeons

capable of repairing her fistula. "She described herself as the walking dead," recalls Dr. Wheelless. Following her surgery in January 2004, Ms. Abdou said she wanted to make something of her life. But after so many years living in the courtyard, she didn't want to leave.

"This is my home," she says. "I have friends here." The hospital is allowing her to stay, as part of the team that cares for fistula patients.

Anafghat announced bigger ambitions, spurred by another role model. "I want to be like her," she told her father, pointing to a tall woman from Niger making the rounds with the U.S. doctors. Ghaichatou Amoul Kinni was a medical student, and also a Taureg, living in the capital city. Anafghat saw she spoke several languages and wore fashionable clothes. "You see how useful it is to be at school," Anafghat told her father. "I want to live in Niamey, be a doctor and be an important woman."

Dr. Wheelless recalls telling her, "Your future can be very, very good. If you can stay in school."

Anafghat's father had remained at her side throughout her stay at the hospital, sleeping on the ground outside the fistula ward. After watching her ordeal, and talking to the doctors, he gradually understood what had happened to his daughter. "She was too young to have a baby," he said, while brewing a morning pot of tea. "I am going to tell all the people how bad it is to get married so young and what the dangers are."

He had long taught that after reaching puberty, a girl could move in with her husband, as Anafghat did. But his daughter's experience has changed his thinking.

"Now I believe it needs to be more than just puberty," he says. "My younger daughters won't get married until they are bigger."

From the government offices in Niamey, ministers have spoken out against early marriage, but such pleas are rarely heeded. "Our traditions and culture are too strong," says Hama Amadou, Niger's prime minister.

With the high birth rate, he says, Niger's population will double to 22 million within the next two decades.

"For the development of the country we have to reduce the number of children per family and put the maximum number of girls in school," says the prime minister.

"We have to tell parents, if you want to improve the quality of life of your children, you can't have them get married so early. We've already started with advertisements."

Sabou Ibrahim, director of the National Hospital, says the best advertisement is the personal witness of fistula patients like Anafghat. "A fistula woman who is repaired and goes back to her village brings many changes," he says. "All the women get together and they talk about the risk of having a baby so young."

He says the hospital would like to become a West African fistula center, so women can be treated and return to their homes. "The impact of an individual can be great," he says.

Anafghat Ayouba works on her French with Maiwanzam Boubacar, director of the primary school in the village of Tarbiyat, Niger.

On an April morning, when the temperature soared well past 100 degrees, Anafghat took her place in the third-grade classroom, with other pupils who were 10 and 11 years old. She had picked up where she left off, memorizing the multiplication tables and learning to read French. The school, which goes through the sixth grade, has three teachers and 185 students, 83 of them girls. Most of the girls are in the lower grades.

Anafghat proudly showed off two orange notebooks filled with her lessons. Her first entry, on Feb. 25, was a paragraph about her family. On Feb. 28, she drew a thermometer and explained how it works. March 2 was conjugation of French verbs. March 31, a 10 out of 10 on a math test. "Très bien," wrote the teacher.

"Already, Anafghat is first in her class," says Mr. Boubacar, the school director. "The others call her the 'college student' because she is so smart and older."

"She is a good example for our children, and an inspiration for the parents," says Mohamed-yarich Mohamed, president of the school's parents' association. "She has gone through a lot, and wants to be back in school."

The village has a community radio station, which has a broadcast radius of about 10 miles and is powered by solar energy. "On the radio, we talk about the importance of education a lot," says Assogra Mohamed Adda, president of the Tarbiyat Women's Association. "When girls go to school, they will be more open-minded and there will be more chance that change will come to the country."

Next year, Ms. Adda wants her daughter, who is now in sixth grade, to go on to secondary school. Anafghat, she says, has alerted them to the perils of early marriage. "There is no rush to get married," says Ms. Adda, who was wed in her early teens. "Going to school doesn't mean you can't get married later. But if you get married, you can't go to school."

Anafghat is back living in the small round hut with her family. She and her father say she has no plans to return to her husband and she will stay with her family until she advances to the higher school. And she wants to make sure her younger sisters follow her. Mr. Mahomed sat on one of the beds stirring a bowl of rice, surrounded by all of his daughters.

He says he will keep his promises to Anafghat. "Even if one of my daughters asks to get married while they are still in school," he says, "I will refuse."

Want to help? Contact the International Organization for Women and Development at its Web site, www.nigerfistula.org.

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