



PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO
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Women Beyond the Veil in Mali

By Whitney Richardson Aug. 18, 2014

[Link to story](#) on NYTimes.com

There are no beds in the small concrete home Madame Gassamba shares with her four teenage daughters. When night falls, cushions pushed against the spotted walls serve as makeshift beds. Everyday items are strategically stored away for additional space in the one-room home.

This has been the family's daily routine since 2012, when Islamic radicals forcefully occupied northern Mali, forcing thousands — including Ms. Gassamba's family — to flee to the capital, Bamako, and seek temporary housing.

But for Ms. Gassamba, a women's rights activist who abandoned her home in Timbuktu, getting her daughters out of the area was her primary concern.

Before France sent troops in early 2013, Islamist and Tuareg rebel forces imposed strict Shariah law across northern Mali for nine months. Along with looting government offices in Timbuktu, destroying century-old manuscripts and defacing most billboards, women were forced to remain indoors and wear full body and face-covering veils. Infractions of the law often meant severe punishment, ranging from being jailed in cramped holding cells and being whipped. According to Human Rights Watch, reports of forced marriage and rape also rose.

Katie Orlinsky, a New York-based photographer, had always been interested in Mali's vibrant culture and wanted to understand how women were affected by the new laws. In the fall of 2013, she obtained a grant from the International Reporting Project that allowed her to travel throughout northern Mali for almost a month, speaking with women who had experienced the Islamic rule and were willing to share their stories of survival with her.

"The Jihadists inflicted so much on the women in the north of the country," said Ms. Orlinsky, who has also documented the lives of women in conflict situations in Mexico and Nepal.

"It made just living almost illegal for women," she said.

Ms. Orlinsky mostly traveled around Timbuktu and on the outskirts of Bamako, spending time with women at home, mosques, clubs and family events. She said she was looking for women who wanted to share their stories and didn't want to pressure those who preferred to remain silent.

“Some had spent years in hiding, or silenced, and it was cathartic and meaningful for them to talk about what had happened,” she said in an email. “For other women, the trauma was too fresh, and they didn’t want to relive it by talking about it with me.”

Those who did speak with her expressed relief that they no longer had to live in fear. Northern Mali had always been a religious place, but their distinct practices had been known to blend traditional Islamic beliefs with indigenous ones.

In Timbuktu, Ms. Orlinsky spoke to a group of girls playing basketball who recalled several incidents when Islamists forced them to wear full burqas, even when playing in intense heat. The girls decided to wear the garment while walking to the courts, but stripped down to their athletic clothes while playing and then immediately put their burqas back on before returning home.

Another woman she spoke to had been jailed for several days for hitting a militant after he had slapped her for not covering her hair — while in her own home.

“There were all of these small acts of rebellion,” Ms. Orlinsky said. “They just didn’t want to stop doing what they had to do.”

In her photographs, she concentrated her images on finding semblances of this strength and resilience, including the photo of Ms. Gassamba (slide 6) standing tall in her temporary one-room home. Women are seen dancing in the streets adorned in bright, colorful garbs. Others are shown studying in school and attending food markets without any men around. Though seemingly mundane, just a few months before, these activities were completely banned in the northern Mali.

Although hopeful, Malians know there is a long road of recovery for their country’s future. For the women, Ms. Orlinsky said, the first step of their progress is to rediscover who they are again.

“It was a tough time for them,” she said. “It really wasn’t easy.”