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Feature

# Albinos face perilous social rejection

Health



Helen Blakesley/IRIN

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While albinos in West Africa are not facing the violent attacks seen in recent weeks in other parts of the continent, people with albinism in countries like Senegal face grave and even life-threatening discrimination.

In Senegal a lack of adequate health care, difficulties accessing education and employment, and social marginalisation mean many albinos are dying unnecessarily or are living in destitution.

Recent murders of albinos in eastern and central Africa have attracted worldwide condemnation. At least 36 albinos have been murdered in Tanzania and Burundi since March, apparently targeted because of the belief peddled by some witch doctors that albinos' blood or body parts have magical qualities that can bring riches or cure disease.

The European Union in September passed a resolution condemning the murders and calling for the killers to be prosecuted. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has condemned recent attacks in Burundi and is working with the governors of some provinces there to protect albinos and to dispel the myths surrounding them.

## Exclusion

While this kind of violence is not a daily threat for albinos in Senegal, social rejection is a daily reality, and their health, education and livelihoods suffer.

"In the street, when we [albinos] pass, people spit. On the bus, when we sit down, people move," Alseny Sall, a 22-year-old street vendor in the capital Dakar, told IRIN. "People shout insults and run away. Some cover their noses because they think we're infectious."

Mama Diallo, 18, is a college student in Dakar who also has albinism. "If I go and visit friends, often their family won't receive me. I had a boyfriend for many years. We loved each other and wanted to get married but his mother wouldn't allow it. She said, 'albinos shouldn't marry'."

A combination of eyesight problems and social marginalisation puts many albinos off going to school.

"At school I needed to be near the board because my eyes were so bad but the teachers didn't want to understand," explained Mamadou Bamba Diop, president of the Senegalese National Albino Association. "People insulted me and pushed me back." He told IRIN, with the difficulties in the classroom he was obligated to hire a tutor so as not to fall behind.

Albinism also poses a problem in finding and maintaining employment.

Vendor Sall told IRIN: “With my job it’s very difficult to sell, it doesn’t work, people don’t want to see us [albinos]. They’re scared of us. We’re so tired of it. I want a better job. I’ve had interviews but people didn’t want me.”

The Senegalese National Albino Association tries to alleviate some of this isolation.

“[People with albinism] meet to talk about their difficulties, their suffering,” said Bamba Diop. “Often they’re not accepted by their families, they’re refused marriage. The condition affects them physically and mentally.”

The association aims to provide training opportunities and therapeutic activities for albinos but a lack of equipment and adequate resources hampers efforts.

“I often have to pay for members’ transport out of my own pocket so they can get to meetings,” Diop said. “Funding is such a problem. We have awareness programmes planned but finding the money is hard.”

## Health concerns

Health care is a significant problem for Senegal’s albino population. Although some appointments and procedures are paid for by the state if a person applies through the government Office of Social Action, prescriptions are not covered. For people with albinism sun creams, eye protection and visual aids are crucial to maintaining health.

“Skin cancer is a huge problem [for albinos],” Mame Thierno, dermatologist at Dakar’s Aristide le Dantec Hospital, told IRIN. “We treat about a hundred



Photo: Helen Blakesley/IRIN

People at a meeting of an albinos association in the Senegalese capital Dakar

albinos a year. A lot of albinos can't afford treatment so they don't come to hospital, or they come too late because of a lack of knowledge about the condition. Many of them die.”

The Senegalese Ministry for the Family runs centres for social promotion and reinsertion (CPRS) but the centres lack funding. “Albinos are classed under the category of disabled people,” Boubacar Sagna, director of the CPRS Thiaroye told IRIN. “There's no specific money for them. We can only rarely help them...money is a problem...other organisations are often given funding instead.”

“There's so much prejudice” he added. “Even some parents think it [albinism] is a punishment from God. People need to realise albinos are like you and I. It is a medical condition.”

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Albinism is a genetically inherited condition in which melanin – essential to protecting the skin – is reduced or missing. This results in a lack of pigmentation in the hair, skin and eyes, and often in significant vision problems.

While in Europe and the United States albinism affects about one in 20,000 people, in some parts of Africa the rate is as high as one in 1,100.

In Senegal there are an estimated two thousand albinos, according to the albino association's Diop.

Legal hopes

Senegal has no law protecting the disabled, though according to the Director of Social Action at the Ministry for the Family, El Hadji Coly, one is in the works.

“There is a need for legislation,” Coly said. “A draft is with the government; after that it will go to the National Assembly. It will give more rights [to the disabled] in all social sectors.”

Senegal has signed but not yet ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which came into force in May 2008. Government sources reached by IRIN could not comment on why it has not yet been ratified.

CPRS Thiaroye's Sagna believes this is a major stumbling block. “If [Senegal] had ratified the Convention, we would be further on by now. Another battle is to make the government understand the

disability of albinism better.”

Khadim Diouf, a 20-year-old in Dakar is unemployed and has no job skills.

“I accept myself [as an albino],” he told IRIN. “I have no complex; it is the attitude of others that’s the problem. It makes conditions unbearable. Things cannot go on like this. We need help. We need someone to come and help us.”

[See accounts from people with albinism in Senegal](#)

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