

Do Sex Strikes Work?

This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

Last month, women in a civil rights group in Togo called a weeklong sex strike to try to force the president of the West African nation to resign. Members of "Let's Save Togo" planned to withhold sex from their husbands to pressure the men to take action against President Faure Gnassingbe.

The opposition says his family has ruled Togo for too long. He became president in two thousand five, shortly after the death of his father -- who had held power for thirty-eight years.

Withholding sex for political goals has a long history. It was used in ancient Greece. In the play "Lysistrata," the women of Athens decide to stop having sex with their husbands until the men end the Peloponnesian War.

But do sex strikes work? Pepper Schwartz is a professor of sociology at the University of Washington in Seattle. She says the idea is good for making news headlines, but it takes a lot of work.

PEPPER SCHWARTZ: "If you're talking about a few days where women make a point, I think that works. If you're talking about turning a whole nation around because nobody's getting any, I wouldn't put hard money on that because I don't think people stick to sex strikes. Yes, it's good to bring consciousness to your mate, [but] it's probably hard to stick to. Three, if you do stick to it too long, you might lose that other person's willingness to support your issue. So it's a tricky thing. I think it's a good headline, a lot harder to put into practice."

But pro-democracy activists in Togo say a sex strike during the civil war in Liberia gave them cause for hope. In two thousand three, Liberia had been through fourteen years of war. Leaders of the group Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace organized a series of nonviolent actions. Those included a sex strike.

The actions earned the group's leader a share of the twenty-eleven Nobel Peace Prize. Leymah Gbowee shared the prize with two other women, including Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. She became Africa's first democratically elected female president in two thousand six. The third winner was Tawakkul Karman, a women's rights activist in Yemen.

Yaliwe Clarke is a lecturer in gender studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

YALIWE CLARKE: "I think if there's a sharing of the gains of this approach with other African women, then it will inspire them just like in Liberia -- this, the way in which the Mass Action for Peace, the methods that the women used in Liberia for the Mass Action for Peace. They've been written about, a film has been made, so now, you know African women are saying, 'Well, we can do that, as well.'"

But Pepper Schwartz at the University of Washington says women need to hold real power in order for something like a sex strike to work.

PEPPER SCHWARTZ: "They only work in proportion to the amount of power women have in a society. In other words, you have to have a certain amount of power already to tell your husband no. In some societies your husband would pound on you or, you know, enact his own kinds of revenge, but you have to have a society where a man respects a woman's opinion and her desire to say no and will, in fact, respect her for it."

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report. For more stories for people learning English, go to voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Steve Ember.

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