Welcome to Spotlight. I’m Liz Waid. And I’m Bruce Gulland. Spotlight uses a special English method of broadcasting. It is easier for people to understand, no matter where in the world they live. When you think of a school, what do you imagine? Young students, learning math, or science? University students preparing for the future? But there is another kind of school - a school for husbands. These schools in Niger are only for married men. The men go here to learn about reproductive care - care for healthy pregnancy and birth. When husbands know about family planning, it improves their communities. Today’s Spotlight is on the School for Husbands in Niger. Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world. Much of this West African country is desert. There is not enough land to feed everyone. And the number of people who need to eat is growing quickly. Niger has the highest birth rate in the world. The average woman in Niger gives birth to seven babies. And it is difficult to feed and educate so many children. Ide Djermokoye works for a local NGO in Niger. She tells IRIN news the result of this: “This is a humanitarian emergency. We have no future without birth control. The government cannot cope. The population is poor. The health system is weak. There is no land for farming. We are already unable to feed and educate our population.” Many countries have used family planning as a way to control their birth rates. Some countries encourage families to have only two children. Others, like India, even offer free family planning services. Most experts agree that planning for children is necessary to control population growth. But the World Health Organization says limiting family size is also better for family health. Women stay healthier if they have fewer pregnancies. They, and their babies, are usually stronger if they wait three years between births. Family planning has been a good solution for many countries. But it has been difficult in Niger. Having many children is part of Nigerien tradition and lifestyle. Many people believe that having more children means more help with the work. A local Nigerien chief, Maidanda Saidou explains to NPR: “In our culture, having a large family was seen as a gift from God. It was a great thing. If you had many children, you were among the gifted. So a large family is still seen as something positive. This is not what is needed for the country to develop. The fast-growing population slows the development of the country.” The Nigerien government, along with the United Nations Population Fund, or UNPF, have tried to slow population growth in Niger. At first, they tried a solution like India’s. They provided free education to women about their health. Doctors taught women that it was important to leave time between births. They taught methods to plan family size. But this did not have much influence. This is because women in Niger do not have much control over their families. The web page of the UNPF says: “Niger is a country where men hold power, traditionally. Most women cannot read, and are married before they are 18 years old. The women do not always agree to being married. Violence against women happens often, and is accepted.” Because of this, women in Niger could not do very much with their education about family health. The programs for women did not have an effect. Then, in 2004, the United Nations Population Fund, or UNPF, created an interesting solution: the school for husbands. The school was an attempt to teach Nigerien men about family issues - especially how they affect women. Husbands would gather with an expert two times every month. They would discuss women’s health problems. The UNPF wanted husbands to understand how important family planning is, and birth control too. They hoped the men would encourage their wives to visit the doctor. In the beginning of the program there were not many meetings. The UNPF was not sure how most men would react. Instead, they invited the most important members of a few communities. These were traditional chiefs, and imams, Islamic religious leaders. These people had a lot of influence. If a chief, or an imam, attended the School for Husbands, others would follow his example. The process began very slowly. But soon, people began to ask what their leaders were doing, and wanted to join. Today, there are over 164 schools for husbands open in the country. The UNPF says that the use of family planning services has multiplied by three times. The number of people using birth control has doubled. Slowly, families are talking about their family size. They are planning ways to keep their families healthy. But the School for Husbands does more than teach about women’s health. It gets men to think differently about their wives, and women in general. Fassouma Monzo’s husband attends the school. She told the Inter Press Service News Agency: “Before the School of Husbands, men did not discuss things with their wives. But now, there is an issue in which they are very interested. As a woman, you can now find a space where you can talk. You can share with your man. It is a great side effect.” The UNPF thinks that this increased communication will reduce the birth rate. The UNPF reports: “Husbands and wives say that they are now talking to each other more. For the first time, husbands are attending the births of their children at the health center. So husbands from the school act as guides for their families. They also help families that would normally find it hard to get to a health center.” When the School for Husbands first started, people were not sure it would change Nigerien society. There were many ideas about how to solve the issue of overpopulation. People thought that one of these other ideas could bring more change. But the School for Husbands was a success that no one suspected. The process is slow now, but people are hopeful that education will help families in Niger be healthier. The School for Husbands also aims to improve the country for everyone. Men who are educated about women’s issues have a new view. They can help to plan a healthy family. And they can encourage their wives and daughters to get an education, too. Then women will begin to have more control over their lives. And this, experts say, is the best hope toward a better future for all of Niger. The writer of this program was Dan Christmann. The producer was Bruce Gulland. The voices you heard were from the United States and the United Kingdom. All quotes were adapted for this program and voiced by Spotlight. You can listen to this program again, and read it, on the internet at www.radioenglish.net. This program is called, ‘A School for Husbands’. We hope you can join us again for the next Spotlight program. Goodbye.