

9 Pastoralist schools in Mali: gendered roles and curriculum realities

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This chapter is based on on-going work with pastoralist schools in the Gao region of north-east Mali, funded by Oxfam GB. It examines strategies for improving gender equality in education through the work of *animatrices* – female community mobilisers – who support girls’ access to education and foster their participation through complementary developments designed to make the curriculum more gender-equitable.

We argue that the work of the *animatrices* has been successful in increasing the access and retention of children, and especially of girls, in school. However, recent evaluations suggest that the *animatrices* do not challenge conventional assumptions about roles for women and girls and may even have increased women’s workload. We consider ways in which the *animatrice* model can be supported to become more challenging and transformative, as part of a wider strategy for gender equality involving, among other things, curriculum change. In the wider context of decentralisation and education reform, *animatrices* can work simultaneously with other initiatives for opening up democratic spaces and gender equality. As this is work in progress, the chapter draws primarily on unpublished reviews and evaluations and interviews with key NGO staff.

Background

Mali is one of five West African countries where Oxfam GB has been implementing a pilot programme entitled ‘Promoting Gender-Equitable Basic Education in West Africa’. Although Mali has had some of the worst figures in the world for education, current statistics demonstrate encouraging results as far as access is concerned, with a rise in the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in the first cycle of basic education from 32 per cent in 1992 to 67 per cent in 2003 (Ministry of Education 2003), and recent statistics indicating 70.5 per cent for 2003–4 (Ministry of Education 2005). However, the gender gap is still very wide, with girls’ primary enrolment estimated at 59.9 per cent and boys’ at 81.3 per cent (*ibid.*).

The Gao region is an area of semi-desert, inhabited by nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists (including Touareg, Songhai, Bella, and Arab peoples). The communities move with their herds of sheep and camels in search of pasture in

the region, which is beset by drought. At the time of writing (mid-2005), they are experiencing severe food shortages in the aftermath of the widespread destruction of crops and pasture by locusts in 2004. The region is disadvantaged in terms of communications, infrastructure, and basic services. Its political marginalisation was one of the factors that prompted the Touareg rebellion of the early 1990s. Since Mali's independence in 1960, there have been attempts to provide some education for pastoralist children, starting with a policy whereby government officers forcibly took one child (usually a boy) from each family to attend boarding school. More recently some children received primary education at mobile schools, but the government found this initiative too costly and difficult to sustain. The current Oxfam programme is supporting government schools in communities where there has been no prior provision, and in contexts where parents face very real problems in sending their sons and daughters to school.

In the pastoral communities of Gao in northern Mali, girls' school attendance is as low as 30 per cent, and non-completion rates for primary education are very high. A range of factors hinder girls' attendance, including practices such as early marriage; girls' excessive work load; an assumption that girls and women are inferior to men in intellect; and widespread economic poverty. A review conducted in 2002 (Terry 2002), and subsequent interviews with teachers, students, and parents have identified two sets of barriers to girls' education in the pastoralist communities of northern Mali (and northern Niger). The first set applies to both boys and girls, while the second applies to girls (see Table 1).

Terry notes that where demand for girls' education is already low, poor provision tends to have a more negative impact on girls than on boys. Members of Parents' Associations and mothers often expressed the view that girls are weaker and more vulnerable than boys and are thus in need of protection. Girls and boys often have to walk 4–8 kilometres to and from school, which may militate against girls' attendance. Moreover, where feeding arrangements at school are inadequate or non-existent, parents who think that girls need to be especially well fed in order to mature may be deterred from sending their daughters to school (Terry 2002: 10). When girls and boys have to walk long distances, and the school day is itself long – from 7.30 a.m. to 5 p.m., with a break during the hottest part of the day, when temperatures can reach 45 degrees Celsius – attending school is onerous, and girls have limited time left to assist their mothers in domestic tasks.

It was within this context that Oxfam GB, together with its three local NGO partners,¹ initiated an education programme in 2000 with the aim of promoting gender-equitable basic education for pastoralists in remote and marginalised areas of Gao (Sanou 2001). The nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle of the peoples of the north makes providing education and health services and ensuring

Table 1: Barriers to education in Mali

Factors applying to both boys and girls	Factors applying to girls
Distance from home to school.	Vulnerability during long walks to school.
Pastoralists' need to move with their herds in search of water and pasture, which compounds the problem of distance.	Parents' wishes for daughters to marry early (as young as eight years old).
Lack of clean water at schools: a major problem in many schools.	Fear that girls will become pregnant if they go to school: a dishonour that may reduce their chances of getting married.
Difficulty in feeding children at school, compounded by general food insecurity in these communities.	The higher a girl's level of education, the higher the dowry that the husband's family have to pay.
Communities' pessimism, based on past experience, about their children's chances of attaining primary-school certificates.	The belief that keeping girls at home and feeding them up will lead to earlier maturity and marriageability.
Traditional religious beliefs that children who go to school will grow up to be 'heathens'.	The gendered division of labour, which makes girls and women responsible for tasks such as collecting water and pounding millet, in an area where water is in short supply.
High poverty levels among pastoralist communities in the Sahel, due to factors such as drought, desertification, and the legacy of conflict.	The idea that girls are vulnerable and intellectually inferior and need to be sheltered at home.
The political marginalisation of pastoralist communities, compared with the sedentary population.	Resistance to girls' education on the part of some local religious leaders.

the quality and relevance of such services a big challenge, because schooling is developed according to a model designed for permanent, static communities.

Gender equity in education is an issue much broader than the question of opportunities for girls in pastoral communities, as a recent case study of education services in Mali indicates (Public World 2004). This study notes that, with the exception of some women's NGOs, no one working to achieve greater access to school for girls was challenging existing gender inequalities in the school system or wider society – or, indeed, questioning whether increased access to schooling for girls could or should have any impact on the traditional role of Malian women as first and foremost good wives and mothers. The Oxfam GB programme has responded to the challenge of achieving gender equality and quality education for girls (and boys) by developing a flexible innovative approach which aims to increase significantly the number of girls who go to school and stay in school, and to ensure that they acquire relevant and sustainable basic skills in mathematics, literacy, and key aspects of health and nutrition. Through some basic training in health and hygiene and HIV/AIDS awareness for members of Women's Associations and Parents' Associations, it also aims to improve child mortality rates and family health in the communities.

By encouraging positive attitudes to school attendance for girls, while discouraging practices that infringe the rights of girls and jeopardise their well-being, the programme aims to change beliefs and ideas about schooling for girls, using a rights-based approach. Oxfam's strategic aim is to ensure that all children living in poverty will achieve their right to a good-quality basic education which is gender-equitable (Roche and Roseveare 2001, Oxfam GB 2004).

Before presenting a detailed examination of this programme and its work with *animatrices* and national curriculum reform, we tell the real story of a young Touareg girl, Fatimata, which illustrates some of issues that constrain girls' participation in schooling – constraints that Oxfam and its partners are attempting to address.

The story of Fatimata

Fatimata lives in Bourem town, in Bourem district in the Gao Region.² Bourem is about 96 km from Gao town, in an area inhabited by nomadic and semi-nomadic Touareg, Songhoi, and Arabs. It is a poor district, with very little rainfall, hence long droughts and poor harvests. The people eke out a living from keeping livestock (cattle, camels, goats, and sheep) and subsistence farming, mainly rice cultivation with traditional and vulnerable irrigation systems. The district was severely affected by the Touareg rebellion of the early 1990s, which forced many young men to become migrant labourers in neighbouring Libya, Gabon, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. Consequently, migrant labour is an important source of income in the district, and the larger the remittances the more successful is each household/family.

The population of Bourem is conservative and predominantly non-literate. Women occupy a subordinate place in society, with little or no autonomy in decisions regarding certain aspects of their lives, such as choice of partner or age of marriage.

Sidiki, a 30-year-old Touareg and migrant labourer working in Ghana, decided that it was time to get married. He returned to his home town of Bourem to marry his first cousin Aisseta, who was 15 years old and attending secondary school in the town of Gao. He paid a handsome dowry and gave lavish gifts to Titi, Aisseta's mother. Realising what was planned for her, and not wanting to marry, Aisseta fled from her home in the middle of the marriage preparations. Afraid of the scandal that Aisseta's flight might cause her family, the elderly Titi decided instead to give Fatimata, her 11-year-old daughter, to Sidiki. Fatimata, a jovial, bright pupil in Standard 2 in Bourem Primary School, was not happy about this, but she was accustomed to doing her mother's bidding.

Fatimata had an aunt, Djeneba, who lived some distance from the family and worked as an *animatrice* in one of the Oxfam-supported schools. Djeneba came to visit Titi, and her visit coincided with Fatimata's marriage preparations. On hearing of the intention to marry off the 11-year-old, Djeneba threatened to have Sidiki and Fatimata's father imprisoned. She quickly mobilised members of the local women's association, and together they went to see the headmaster of Fatimata's school and the school inspector to try to prevent this marriage. Djeneba had herself been a victim of an early forced marriage 20 years previously and she did not want the same fate to befall her niece.

Sidiki, seeing the trouble that this marriage was going to cause, and seized by fear, announced to the family that he would allow Fatimata to continue her education. But he did not renounce the marriage altogether. Titi reluctantly accepted this turn of events, but complained that '*the best school for a woman is getting married and having children*'. Fatimata was able to continue her studies in Bourem Primary School, and her aunt Djeneba continues to keep a close watch over her.

Fatimata's story³ is typical of the situation in which many schoolgirls find themselves, although not all are able to continue their education. It is not known how many girls have been forced into early marriage, nor how many have been able to escape. How long will Sidiki wait for Fatimata while she continues her education – or will he try to prise her away? Experiences like that of Fatimata provided the motivation for Oxfam and its partners to work with parents and the wider community to promote acceptance of girls' right to education, and to raise issues of gender equality. This led to the development of the '*animatrice* model' of working, an approach based on understanding the reasons why girls do not participate in formal schooling, and the expectations of the parents and the girl themselves. From this understanding, *animatrices* talk with and listen to parents and students and work together to find ways of encouraging parents to send their daughters to school.

This approach aims to link pastoralist women and girls and their schools with wider concerns and demands for girls' education. For example, the schools and *animatrices* were involved in activities during the Global Week of Action in April 2003, which provided the opportunity for developing broader understandings of the importance of girls' education. The activities of the Global Week of Action also brought an awareness that other communities in Mali were asking for better access and quality of education for their daughters. And not only in Mali but across West Africa and around the globe: parents, communities, and NGOs were demanding that their governments provide basic education for girls. This involvement raised many questions about why girls were not attending school, and eventually it led to the annulment of the marriages of three schoolgirls by

their parents in Menaka district. The three girls were re-integrated into the school system and were allowed to continue their education.

The *animatrices* model

In order to develop models of schooling which meet the lifestyle needs of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralist peoples, Oxfam and its partners decided to work with *animatrices* (female community mobilisers). An *animatrice* is appointed to each school to work with parents, telling them about the importance and value of schooling for both girls and boys. They monitor girls' attendance, and they work with the teacher to ensure safe and girl-friendly school environments, so parents are more likely to allow their daughters to make the long daily walk to school or stay in the school itself during their families' long treks in search of pasture. When girls drop out of school, the *animatrices* follow up with families to find out the reasons and try to encourage the girls to return.

The *animatrices* are local women, most of whom, but not all, have completed Grade 6 of primary education. Most of them have previously been social workers or community mobilisers for health projects, cereal banks, micro-credit schemes, or other projects. The programme has given them some training in community mobilisation and, most recently, in gender awareness. One of the first successes of the programme was to find and contract *animatrices* for the schools in a region where women's education rates are very low, and few have the skills or capacity to perform this role. This success was in large part due to the commitment and expertise of the local partner organisations, which have been working with these communities for many years, themselves pastoralists and engaged with the communities in a range of interrelated activities and programmes, including livelihood support, food-security planning, and conflict reduction.⁴ With a minimum of training, the *animatrices* have quickly created strong links between school and parents and communities.

The *animatrices* lobby for changes in attitudes towards girls' abilities and their right to attend school, both in the community, with parents and community members, and in the school, with teachers and head teachers. As relatively well-educated women in paid employment, promoting schooling, the *animatrices* serve as positive role models for local girls (Sanou 2003). Another important dimension of their work is with the Parents' Associations. In the recently decentralised Malian education system, Parents' Associations provide a great deal of support to the School Management Committees which run the schools. The *animatrices* carry out training with members of the Parents' Associations to develop their capacity to take on this role. Their work includes supporting literacy and numeracy classes, organised for parents and for the women's associations which are engaged in small-scale income-generation activities.

Challenges

A peer review of the Mali Education Programme, conducted in 2003 by Plan International, confirmed that there have been important changes in the communities' attitudes to girls' education, and the changes can be attributed to the work of the *animatrices*. The review drew attention to a greater awareness of girls' right to attend school and the fact that, contrary to widely held beliefs, girls and women are not less intellectually able than boys and men (Alainchar 2003). Recent discussions with mothers and young women indicated that they highly value the literacy and numeracy training, and the opportunity to socialise and discuss issues important to them. They also stressed that their daughters were learning valuable skills at school which they could later put to use for generating their own sources of income.

Constant dialogue between the *animatrices* and the members of the communities has also influenced attitudes and had an impact on early marriage practices. One *animatrice* told of how an old man and 20 young girls walked for miles, determined to find a school which they could attend. She reported also that in the district of Menaka three girls have completed primary school. They are the first girls in their community to do so, encouraged not to drop out by the sensitisation work of the *animatrice*. *Animatrices* have also managed to reintegrate five girls into the school system after they were forced into marriage by their parents (Oxfam GB 2003). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the average age of marriage is rising from 10–12 years old to 14–16 years of age.

Despite their obvious successes, *animatrices* are also confronted with challenges, including tensions with school directors (all men), who feel that the *animatrices* are encroaching on their own rightful responsibilities, such as the supervision of supplies for the school canteen (Terry 2002: 13). Similarly, parent–teacher associations are predominantly male, and some *animatrices* have reported difficulties in working with them; even where women are members, they do not participate to the same degree as the men (*ibid.*: 16). *Animatrices* often have to travel very long distances to reach parents and girls, especially in the season when pastoralists move with their herds. One *animatrice* in Gao had to walk for 16 km with a baby on her back to catch up with a moving community (*ibid.*: 14).

Animatrices work closely with communities and have had great success in increasing the numbers of girls attending school. Within the first two years of the pilot phase, the number of girls in schools in the Gao programme had increased from 749 in 1999–2001 to 1260 in 2001–02, and 1423 in 2002–03. However, the programme has not been long established, and the sustainability of these gains is still to be tested. In addition, *animatrices* have had limited training in gender issues and analysis. Some held attitudes which actually compounded gender

inequalities, and their promotion of girl-friendly classrooms in some cases led to increased work loads for women, such as keeping the school clean; targeting only women and girls with messages about hygiene and sanitation, the *animatrices* have reinforced the traditional gendered division of labour. In schools, girls carry out more of the tasks such as cleaning, fetching water, and washing dishes that are traditionally seen as ‘women’s work’ (Terry 2002).

More research is needed to improve understanding of the messages used by *animatrices* in their sensitisation work, and to ensure that these communicate the need for equity and the right to education, rather than emphasising purely instrumental arguments that may be unsustainable and inequitable in the long term. Training conducted with local government officials in Mali indicated a familiarity with the ‘instrumental’ arguments for girls’ education, where it is seen as a contribution to the well-being of the girls’ future family and children. However, Terry (2002) found that the ‘equity/rights’ rationale was less likely to be accepted, and that, moreover, *animatrices* did not mention gender-equity arguments during the review interviews.

Earlier initiatives in the region to promote schooling for pastoralists have included the provision of mobile schools. These were short-lived, however, because few teachers came from nomadic backgrounds, owing to the lack of formal education requirements among pastoralists. The teachers, finding the challenge of moving with pastoralist communities difficult, dropped out in order to work in towns and in settled, permanent schools. The government discontinued the mobile schools programme, because it was too expensive: teachers had to be paid incentives over and above their salaries.⁵ In-school feeding programmes have been implemented and have proved successful in attracting pastoralist children to schools. However, they are often short-lived and dependent on external funding, so that when a donor withdraws its support, the supply of foodstuffs – and the programme – comes to an end.

These experiences suggest that, rather than the government imposing one model of schooling for the whole country, there is a need for flexibility and a diversity of approaches to cater for and support the fragile demand for schooling in different contexts (see also Leggett’s chapter in this volume). The *animatrice* model is one approach which appears to be achieving success with Touareg communities in the Gao region. But it is not a panacea for all the problems involved in providing a good-quality basic education for girls. There are other models, other initiatives, that should complement the work of the *animatrices* in order to ensure that, for the increasing numbers of girls attending school, their experience of schooling and their learning is of value for them.

Animatrices are lobbyists within the local communities and schools in which they work. The Oxfam project is concerned to make an impact at several levels, so that

change can be sustainable. Therefore the programme needs to be working and lobbying for change at other levels simultaneously. For the *animatrices* to succeed in making schools 'girl-friendly', there need to be changes in other areas of education, including the curriculum. Curriculum reform is strongly influenced by processes at the national level. A new curriculum is being trialled by the Centre for National Education in some select schools throughout the country, though not yet in the Gao area. The Oxfam programme has been working to influence the national curriculum-reform process. The next section of this chapter examines the complementary and parallel work being carried out to influence gender equity and quality in the design of curriculum materials.

Curriculum reform in Mali

Mali is one of the countries in the sub-region to have embarked on a process to reform the 'classical' French-derived curriculum. (Niger is another, more recent, example.) This reform challenges the current *status quo* whereby all children throughout the country are taught in French as the exclusive medium of instruction. The fact is that only 10 per cent of Malians speak French (Public World 2004). As a Malian NGO commented: 'Children go to school and are taught in a language that they do not think in'.⁶ There are two reform processes currently taking place: bilingual education (*pedagogique convergente*) and curriculum reform. A new competency-based curriculum has been developed, based on the principle that children need a less theoretical way of learning and a more practical curriculum, and that they should develop skills to equip them to live and work in their communities and in Malian society. The curriculum recognises the cultural, geographical, and linguistic diversity of the country.

The curriculum-development process started in 2000 with a series of consultations throughout the country. The government then opted for a competency-based and skills-based curriculum, aiming to cater for academically inclined students whose aim is to pursue higher studies and, at the same time, offer relevant skills to children who wish to or are obliged to terminate their education at the end of the primary-school cycle and find work. Hence the result is a curriculum which offers a 'common core' of subjects for all students – including academic subjects – as well as practical subjects which are designed to cater for people living in different contexts and with different needs. These practical subjects are intended to be flexible, so that teachers themselves can design lessons in their own schools to suit the cultural and geographical realities.⁷

A practical module known as 'familial economy' (home economics) includes topics related to environment, health, and sewing, which are taught to all pupils and are intended to be 'gender-sensitive'. But the Forum for African Women's Education

Mali (FAWE/Mali) challenges the extent to which the module and curriculum materials are indeed gender-sensitive. FAWE insists that both the module and the representation of women in textbooks 'fail[s] to empower girls and will in the long run contribute to gender inequalities' (quoted in Public World 2004). The Public World research also indicates that the quality or quantity of gender training for teachers is not sufficient to challenge conventional assumptions, and teachers are unable to apply the principles of gender equality to their teaching to create an environment more conducive to girls' participation (*ibid.*).

Women's and girls' roles

In order to address these weaknesses and the gender-blindness of the new curriculum, Oxfam and the Institute for Popular Education (IEP: Institut pour l'Education Populaire) launched a study in 2002 to analyse community attitudes towards change, and the images (visibility and roles) of women and girls, and boys and men, contained in school textbooks. The study examined 18 textbooks used in Malian schools, and draft learning units being produced by the National Centre for Education. The project also collected data on attitudes towards change and gender equity among Oxfam GB programme personnel, community groups, community stakeholders, and NGOs in the Gao Region and Menaka District. The research was carried out to survey the extent to which the curriculum reform was contributing to a larger project of social change, moving Malian society from dictatorship to democracy. Because gender equity is a fundamental dimension of a democratic society, Malian schools and curriculum have a role to play in orienting young people towards a democratic, gender-equitable society, built on respect for human rights (IEP 2002).

Data were collected by means of a range of survey tools and questions, and structured and semi-structured interviews with parents, NGOs fieldworkers, educators, and local government officials. A survey based on attitudes to the roles and relationships of women and men and girls and boys was used to form a picture of the kind of world that participants would like to live in. Participants fell into one of three categories:

- those who maintain present realities (the current role and *status quo* and parameters of possibility for women and girls)
- those who seek to reform present realities (institute modest changes which would make current realities more 'liveable', or would change individuals without changing the system that keeps the present realities in place)
- those who seek to transform present realities (make systematic change that reconfigures the roles, status, and parameters of possibility for women and girls) (IEP 2002: 12).

One such survey question presented three representational drawings, and participants were asked to choose the world that they would like to live in. One drawing showed a man standing on two women, the second showed a woman standing on two men, and a third a man and woman standing side by side. In a society where many men have several wives, the majority of respondents chose the first picture, which most closely represented the *status quo*. The few who chose the second picture were interpreted as indicating a willingness for reform of a situation where men dominated women. However, this choice – a woman standing on two men – was not an elimination of domination, but a transfer of domination from the man to the woman. Only one participant (a local government official) out of 75 participants chose the man and woman standing side by side, a ‘transformist’ position, where domination was not present (IEP 2002: 21).

The overall analysis of attitudes towards change concluded that most participants had firmly held views that did not challenge existing conditions. The women field workers (*animatrices*) were not concerned with transformation, a fact which raised important questions about the extent to which they are able to change attitudes and beliefs about girls’ education and girls’ and women’s roles. It was reasoned that if the *animatrices* promote girls’ access to education but do not fundamentally challenge the *status quo* – when their role is intended to be that of ‘change agent’ – then it is unlikely that parents, teachers, and school head teachers would support reform (IEP 2002: 6-7). However, the study notes: ‘The very presence of the *animatrices* is motivating to parents who see that these women who have not even completed high school have jobs and are receiving training. Parents look to them and think that possibly their daughters could have such a chance with schooling’ (*ibid.* 18).

Women’s and girls’ representation in the school curriculum

The analysis of education materials indicated that while women and girls are visible in school textbooks, the images offered overwhelmingly portray current gender realities. That is, women are visible when they appear in traditional roles, but the teaching materials do not offer images of behaviour or attitudes which could break the routine patterns of gender inequality that characterise these roles and activities (such as cleaning, cooking, and maintenance tasks). An example in the textbook *Flamboyant* depicts a sick mother with her daughter, pounding millet while her brother stands by, looking on with his hands in his pockets (IEP 2002: 21). The study concluded that the materials are at best gender-blind, reflecting images which keep Mali women locked into inequalities.

In addition, the visibility of women and girls in text and illustrations varies. In several instances, women are visible in the illustrations but absent from the text

that accompanies the illustrations. Similarly, any egalitarian messages are submerged in structurally sexist language.⁸ Pastoralist women are always pictured 'behind' their men, and their destiny as wives and mothers appears unalterable.

In conclusion, the study showed that the attitudes of teachers, parents, and policy makers and the textbooks currently available for schools in Mali reinforce the gender inequalities present in Malian society today. The challenge for those seeking change in both school and society is to use the environment created by Mali's Ten-Year Plan for Transforming Education and the curriculum-reform process as an opportunity to enable children – girls and boys – to begin to experience a different reality (in terms of gender relations) from the day they enter school. The IEP study concludes that legally mandated processes – particularly government decentralisation and the education reform – are causing significant social change in all sectors of Malian society. 'In the same way that decentralisation is taking over traditional structures of governance, public discourse and community control, education reform is threatening to replace classic colonial-model schooling with the classroom as a more democratic and relevant to life space' (IEP 2002: 19). However, it remains to be seen whether the national plans and reforms will be implemented on a scale that will ensure impact, and with a strong enough commitment to gender equality, which will not only promote reform of present education inequalities but transform both educational and societal realities. The work of NGOs and *animatrices* at the grassroots level needs to take place within a broader context of dialogue, discussion, and debate about gender equality in relation to citizenship, democracy, and cultural and geographical diversity. For this to begin to happen, there needs to be a greater level of awareness of gender inequalities and ways of addressing them through training for teachers and education officials, with sufficient resources committed to ensure that transformative change happens.

Conclusion: a joined-up sustainable approach

The overall conclusion from the work of Oxfam's programme for Gender Equitable Education in West Africa is that more girls are attending school – a fact which suggests improvements in terms of gender parity in basic education. However, this chapter has raised questions about the need for more fundamental change in terms of the nature of education that girls are offered, their experience of education, and their academic achievements. It also raises the question of what girls can do with their learning and skills in the wider social environment in which they live.

Animatrices have a strong focus on increasing access and retention in schools, but they are not sufficiently engaged with questions about the quality of the education that girls are receiving. This is also true of teachers. The IEP study demonstrated that teachers prioritise access/retention without questioning their own practices within the classroom. Any changes introduced into the school system that may affect relevance or quality (for example, replacing French with mother tongue as the medium of instruction in classrooms) were resisted by schoolteachers for both boys and girls (IEP 2002:11). It would seem, therefore, that a recurring effect of the decade-old movement in Mali for girls' education is little more than an appropriation of slogans – Education For All and Girls' Education. Education for girls is still about gender parity – equal numbers of girls and boys – and falls short of being about equality and quality education for all. It does not ask what this means in terms of classroom relations, learning and teaching practices, and curriculum content. To move beyond access, the *animatrices* need to promote understanding and commitment to girls' rights to a good-quality education which challenges pastoralists' patriarchal gender relations and those of the wider Malian society.

Great steps have been taken in Mali at the national level to develop a skills-based curriculum, but the reformers do not propose specific measures that target girls' needs. Moreover, the locally developed practical subjects do not question gender inequalities in the pastoralist context. For pastoralist girls in the Gao region, the teaching continues in French under the 'classic' system, which is gender-blind and instrumental, reinforcing rather than challenging gender inequalities.

The Oxfam programme, with its partners, Adessah, Tassaght, and GARI, is nevertheless attempting to unravel the web of inequalities and discrimination that girls experience, by working through *animatrices* to achieve increased enrolment, through working with teachers, parents, and policy makers to provide more girl-friendly schools, and through influencing change in the education system through curriculum reform. This analysis of the *animatrice* model illustrates that gender inequalities need to be tackled through several different interventions and a diversity of approaches simultaneously: inside and outside the school, at both the local and national levels. It illustrates that change can and does take place, and that girls are now attending school in greater numbers than before. However, we need to understand why this is so, in order to sustain the trend. It illustrates furthermore that the changes in national legal frameworks and institutional organisation – such as decentralisation and education reforms – also need to be part of gendered processes. The active engagement of girls and women in their own schooling, promoted by the *animatrices*, is an important starting point.

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Notes

- 1 In the Gao Region, Oxfam supports partner schools in three districts: Bourem, Gao Central, and Menaka. The NGO partners in these districts are Adessah, Tassaght and GARI respectively.
- 2 Fatimata's story is part of a series of stories documented by Adessah, Oxfam's partner in Bourem.
- 3 Story documented in Oxfam's impact report, 2003. All names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.
- 4 The Gao programme has a total number of 20 schools. Each school is supposed to have an *animatrice*; but, given these difficult conditions, partners were able to recruit only 18 *animatrices* and two animators.
- 5 Interview with Abou Diarra, the Director of the National Center for Education, Ministry of Education. For discussion of mobility and pastoralist schooling see for example, Aikman and El Haj forthcoming; Carr-Hill and Peart 2002.
- 6 Interview with Debra Fredo, IEP, Kati.
- 7 Interview with Abou Diarra, the Director of the National Center for Education, Ministry of Education.
- 8 The school textbooks analysed in the IEP study include *Flamboyant*, *Mamadou and Bineta*, *Horizons d'Afrique*, *Djoliba Collection*, and *La Pédagogie Convergente Rencontre 4&5*. All these texts illustrate the point that women are less visible in textbooks than men, but the visibility that they are given reinforces roles that conform to current gender realities.

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