

Calling the good men of Mali #WomensRights

As the rights of Malian women look set to be further eroded, LSE's Dr Purna Sen reminds the good men of Mali of the essential role women can play in the social and economic development of the country.

“We commit to addressing the barriers that prevent the full political participation of women....In addition, we emphasise the need to invest much more in the continent's educational institutions to train and prepare the youth of today for the challenges of tomorrow. We note with special concern the importance of extending educational opportunities to girls, who are more often than boys denied access to primary and secondary schools.”



Thus spake 15 national leaders, all male, from fifteen African states, in Bamako, the capital of Mali in June 2005. The men acknowledged the essential role of women in the social and economic development of their countries but also gave a nod to the intrinsic good of democratic participation. Inherent in this must be the ability to decide whether, when and how to participate and in what, for women as well as men. The leaders expressed their gratitude to President Toure of Mali but he is not one of the signatories and we cannot tell his support or otherwise for the substance of the declaration.

On 1 May, the [Guardian reported that women's rights in Mali had been set back 50 years by a new family code](#) with content that, for example, replaced previous provisions allowing a woman to maintain custody of her children in the event of her husband's death with less egalitarian provisions. The law entered into force in January 2012. This comes amidst the political uncertainty faced by the country but it seems social dynamics have been in flux for some time.

In an anonymous interview given to Open Democracy, a women's rights activist^[1] in Mali talks of a cultural battle being fought where Malian traditions of tolerance and mutual support are being

challenged by more regressive, religiously-inspired forces that include in their agenda greater restrictions on the lives of women. Included in her overview is a concern about increasing discussion of enforced dress codes on women, through the adoption of the hijab.

Let's consider some of Mali's socio-economic statistics: life expectancy at birth in 2010 was 51 years; 8% of women aged 15-49 in unions currently use contraception; 15% of women were married before the age of 15 and 55% by the age of 18; 69% of women had undergone female genital mutilation (FGM) (1997-2010) and 46% of women aged 20-24 bore their first child before the age of 18 years (all data from UNICEF^[2]). Plan UK reports that half of all child brides reside in Asia and the rate for sub-Saharan Africa is 38%. Yet of the five countries with the highest rates of child marriage, four are in Africa: Niger at 75%, Chad at 72%, Mali with 71% and Guinea with 63%. [The fourth in rank is Bangladesh, at 66%].

International law, accepted by Mali for application domestically, defines a child as up to 18 years of age. Child marriage brings danger for girls – premature sexual activity with health and life/death consequences and removal from education are two of the most significant. Limited education for girls is now widely recognised as both constraining for the girl herself, her horizons, ability to hold her own both at home and in the world as well as bringing deleterious consequences for her children. FGM remains a scourge on the lives of millions of girls and communities, both men and women, are increasingly finding effective ways to reduce its prevalence including through establishing alternative rites of passage for girls and encouraging men to marry uncut girls.

In the age of the “war on terror”, it is perhaps too easy to polarise a backward Islam against an enlightened, Christian west. Such easy categorisations can then be followed through into solutions where the west would be a model for the rest and equality for all would abound. Yet, vaginoplasty, pornography and the sex industry are easily pointed at as indicators of the unequal treatment of women in the liberated west, by the detractors who have been subject to haughty and self-righteous criticism from outside. However, important and informed critics reside and work beside the more conservative proponents of the ill treatment of women, or of women's subjugation to men. Women activists in Mali, and everywhere else, resist backward steps that reverse gains made for girls and women to live increasingly dignified and autonomous lives. There are many who value this in and of itself and others, including African leaders in Bamako, who recognise that without women's full and active participation in social, economic and political life the countries will not develop effectively.

What women are realising, all over the world, is that gains won in their advancement are always fragile and must actively be defended. Just as in Mali, the family and the private domain elsewhere prove to be active sites of struggles over the roles and relative authority of women and men, sometimes proving to be violent. Women's access to education or the labour market have paralleled violent gender contestation over marriage norms or in the home. Male authority has typically shown itself to be overly attached to unequal practices of the past rather than visions of a more egalitarian future.

Women will continue to wage their rightful struggle in Mali (and beyond). Will the good men of Mali come forward to stand beside them?

[1] <http://www.wluml.org/news/mali-crisis-mali-fundamentalism-womens-rights-and-cultural-resistance>

[2] http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mali_statistics.html; all data is for 2010 except where stated

