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Mali, Education

### **Mali: Women Are Intellectuals, Too**

The country of Mali, officially established as *La République du Mali*, is located in Western Africa. Even though French is the official language, there are sixty-eight spoken languages and Bamanankan is more widely spoken throughout. The head of state, Assimi Goïta, manages this vast 479245 mi<sup>2</sup> country, large enough that it's surrounded by seven other countries which have allowed for a fair sense of multiculturalism (Britannica). One instance where we see this level of multiculturalism is in the fact that although approximately 98.4 percent of the population is a part of Islam, this comes in multiple forms such as Shi'a and, most commonly, Sunni Muslims. Fractions of the population also belong to other religions as listed: "2.37 percent Christianity, 2.02 percent Animist, 0.04 percent Other, 0.45 percent Atheist/Agnostic, and 0.28 percent Undeclared" (National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency). The population consists of around 21.25 million people as of 2020, although this increases by approximately three percent annually (World Bank). Mali is a dry, arid country, landlocked with broad stretches of desert and other forms of mostly dry, flat land. As a result of Mali's climate, their main crop and second-largest export is cotton, making way for jobs and partially explaining why agriculture represented 62.26% of Mali's employment in 2020 (World Bank). At a literacy rate of approximately only 35.47% for ages fifteen and above as of 2020, getting jobs that stretch beyond physical labor and require a strong education becomes an issue (Macrotrends).

It is important to consider that even though education in Mali is free from about age seven to sixteen, transportation costs, supply costs, and other commitments make it unaffordable anyway. As an example, one may consider the high demand for agriculture. There are malnutrition rates of nine percent for children under five, and about twenty-seven percent of the same group of children are stunted (US Aid). In addition to this, as previously mentioned, agriculture represents around 62.26% of employment in Mali (World Bank). One can safely say that this number is partially so high due to a resulting cycle of a lack of education, passing from parents to children. This cycle limits one's applicability for jobs of higher pay that do not involve labor but require intellect and factual knowledge that one can only acquire in school. This is happening because and as a result of this, so many children have to work. The more people in the family working, the more likely they'll be able to provide for their families, for the average family in Mali consists of approximately 5.8 people according to a survey from 2018 (The DHS Program). This almost accounts for a whole extra person when compared to the world's average family size of 4.9 people (Pew Research Center). One must also consider the fact that Mali is around the twenty-third poorest country in the world, and in a world of 195 countries, being the twenty-third poorest marks a bottom fraction of around twelve percent compared to the wealth of other countries (Business Insider Africa). One can see that this level of poverty doesn't allow for a high survival rate of children, as a study performed in 2018 showed that the average Malian woman has 6.3 children (The DHS Program). Compare this to the average family size in 2018 which, as previously mentioned, was 5.8 people.

Per the current situation, even one child attending school as opposed to providing direct support to their families daily could be detrimental to the family as a whole. Families are already desperate, as the average skilled worker's salary is only about 1500 dollars a year, meaning that about half of Malians struggle by living under the international poverty line of 1.25 dollars a day (Empower Mali). Additionally, some

children have problems beyond just the need to support their families to get access to education. In the case of a young woman, going to school may not even be safe. This level of unsafety along with a deeper sense of cultural pressure that discourages women to go to school is something that fosters a cycle of poverty. Knowing that education has a broad impact on all societal issues is why I have chosen to use it as the root of the problem I am trying to act upon.

Education is more than simply the facts one retains from it. It is more than having the ability to read, solve problems, and communicate. It is being given the opportunity to be inspired and be aware of other cultures and therefore the vast diversity of the world and the beauty inside of it. Getting educated is accumulating social strength and impact. It is knowing that desires are not simply distractions in the mind, but they are possible futures, and it solidifies the idea that we have a role to play in the future. Just as Malala Yousafzai, a strong advocate for education internationally, said, “One child, one teacher, one pen, and one book can change the world” (United Nations Foundation). Education inspires and physically resolves change through economics and both physical and mental health, stacked in line by everything else when a country is given intellectual leaders who can uncover solutions together.

The problem I have decided to focus on takes a more specific approach to education. For inspiration, I have already discovered organizations working to improve the poverty rates of Mali, consequently improving literacy rates with the opportunity to send more people to school. There are widespread organizations like this, including in my state residence. For example, the *Ouelessebouyou Utah Alliance* works to “partner with villagers to transform the quality of life in the region of Ouelessebouyou, Mali, West Africa, by delivering sustainable health and education programs” (Ouelessebouyou Alliance). However, while these organizations are extremely valuable, it takes them ample time to grow and target every aspect of need, and they are heavily based on funding. The education-based problem I have chosen to address highlights the safety aspect of a young woman’s education in Mali. While this may be one small issue out of many in the attempt to set a stable foundation for all children in Mali, I have discovered that this one aspect becomes essential to the entire country’s success through many fashions: food security, wages, mortality rates, quality of life, and more. The steps to getting there aren’t based on a constant flow of endowment but rather on a modified program structure. Even if people are provided with the financial means to go to school in Mali, they can’t participate if there are potential threats at school.

The school-based threats women are facing in Mali include but are not limited to physical and sexual violence, added to the renowned history of discrimination against women in regards to their educational liberties through the eyes of men. In fact, in a survey performed in 2012 investigating how often young women experience violence in their educational settings, it was reported that “357 girls were surveyed, of whom 336 experienced at least one form of violence. Of the girls who were abused, 52.4% experienced sexual violence, 77% experienced physical violence, and 47.4% experienced emotional abuse (Open Journal of Social Sciences). This indicates to us that abuse towards women is extremely common, and it also indicates the great sense of women’s disempowerment that exists in Mali. One can see that in addition to physical and sexual violence, women in Mali are faced with emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is composed of threats that drown confidence and further impel women to not come to school. While both sexual and physical violence is an obvious caution sign to not return to school, the effects of emotional abuse may be deadly as well; they do not only encourage the victim to never return, but they also demoralize lifetime morale to learn.

There is further evidence and concern for the effects that the treatment of women has in Mali in addition to further explanation for why it happens. It is one factor that helps explain why the literacy rate for ages

15+ for males in Mali in 2020 was approximately 46.18%, whereas women only showed a literacy rate of 25.74% (US Aid). Another reason for this drastic difference has to do with the cultural expectations of the women in Mali. The women are the ones who give birth and are expected to raise children, cook, and collect food for the family. Many of them have been set up to get married as teenagers, too. In fact, “One in two girls in Mali is married while still a child” (UNICEF). This occurs despite how “Mali ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets a minimum age of marriage of 18” (Girls Not Brides). In Mali’s current economic, climatic, and social situation, the strategy of wedding women young does not only prevent a sustainable and rich quality of life but also oppresses women. It deprives them of their education and financial, mental, and even physical stability. A woman’s self-confidence and stability become important, as there are cases in which a woman’s husband will abandon or ignore her, whether that’s because she had a child or because he “lost interest.” The fact that polygamy is permitted with a maximum of four wives further permits this sense of “abandonment” without the need to name it as such (Refworld). This strikes hard when in addition to young marriage, the average age at which a mother has her first child is about 19.2 years according to data collected in 2018 (The World Factbook). Having children at such a young age—something that is already a concern due to Mali’s poverty and malnutrition rates, even if the mother had her child at a more practical age—prevents the production of healthy children. It can also be physically harmful to the mother herself. In fact, “Compared to women between the ages of 20-35, pregnant women under 20 are at a greater risk for death and disease including bleeding during pregnancy, toxemia, hemorrhage, prolonged and difficult labor, severe anemia, and disability” (A Monroy De Velasco).

The push to continue this strategy—to continue placing women in this trapped position—helps explain why women are not safe at school. There remains an idea that women cannot rise in society. Although a woman's role may already seem determined and culturally presumed from a man-based perspective, it drops a toll on the country as a whole. If everyone was educated no matter their gender, the economy and quality of life could arise. Two parents could support one family, and even where that wasn’t the case, women would earn the ability to support themselves financially. This comes with motivation and courage for women to support and defend themselves, rising above what’s currently expected of them. There’s a history of women rising for their rights, whether that involves their voting rights or wages. However, the only way to do this is to get a large group of women on board with one another. It requires a diminishment of the fear and threats that exist, therefore requiring a sense of cooperation from the male half of their country. This helps map the model and principles of my solution. First, it is vital that men understand that women can be intellectuals, too. Starting young, boys need to be educated on the principles of consent and recognize how to become advocates for a more stable country—one that involves contributions a woman can bring when she is educated. This spreading of knowledge needs to be implemented into the teachers’ teaching priorities and training as well.

My solution contains various parts, as there are multiple obstacles involved to fully ensure that young women can safely go to school. First, to implement this mindset and respect towards women in all men, it should be a requirement for men to take a course on the meaning and principles of consent as well as more hastily incorporating women into the intellectual means of society to help the country rise from poverty. This course requirement will be enforced when men encounter government-based programs or healthcare, an efficient way to reach out to most men in Mali in a short period of time. This course will help advance a change in mindset for the population of men that have either finished or are not attending school. To ensure that a greater fraction of the male population is integrated into this course or training, we could also distribute books on gender violence throughout the country. Since not all Malians are government documented, some of them may not even take part in the government’s services, and it’s in those cases where progress in idealistic changes slows down. In consideration of the illiterate population, one would also just need to travel to small towns and villages to spread ideas against gender violence

verbally. Through programs like Girl Up, an organization founded by the UNF, one could partner up to bring a curriculum of gender-violence onto the men's side of the spectrum (Girl Up). While this program is based on empowering women, I believe that we could create a new sector in Mali focusing on the man's standpoint while potentially continuing to speak to girls in Mali as well. We could bring speakers to weekly or monthly community gatherings or send them along with smaller organizations such as the previously mentioned Ouelessebougou Alliance to make sure we reach even the smallest of communities.

Secondly, I'd like to propose that all educated women who do not rely on men for their support, whether Malian or not, volunteer at schools to work alongside Malian teachers to help teach children of all genders in Mali. They would help with general teaching material in addition to incorporating the principles of consent and women empowerment into the curriculum, and they would stay to do so under a contract of at least one year in service. In order to incentivize teachers to want to come volunteer in Mali, there would need to be certain benefits and perks. I would propose that the women be fed and housed by both charitable funds and by the government spending more on education. This would not affect the already existing teachers' pay, as there is still an alarmingly low amount of money spent on education by the Malian government—something that should not be the case when considering education's long-term effects. In a partnership with Girl Up as previously mentioned, the volunteers could receive the same gender-violence training as many of the speakers and contributors that are part of the organization. This would foster an environment where future men are exposed to women and can understand their vital role and contributions to society. Additionally, the women would be required to have, at the least, a high school diploma, although it would be preferable if they had participated in a system of higher education as well.

These volunteers would, without a doubt, have more roles than simply teaching a structured, school-based curriculum. Each volunteer should be closely interviewed, assessed for not only their knowledge, but their enthusiasm, commitment, and devotion to changing and enriching the lives of children. They need to be role models of empowerment and creators of (or the foundation of what should become) a safe space. Because there has been somewhat of a trend of harassment in schools by teachers, volunteers would also need to monitor teacher-student relationships and girl-boy relationships. As another perk, a summer mentorship program for girls and their volunteer teachers would be established. The program would teach girls how to become independent to the extent that they could live in a world without needing to rely on men. The students would also be taught how to teach, be provided with textbooks, and they'd spread their new knowledge to their families and communities, even after the volunteer leaves to go back home.

Without a doubt, putting this solution into place follows financial and cultural barriers. Partnering with the UN would be one of the best ways to push the first aspect of my solution. The UN's commitment to peace would help with negotiation towards any rejection that my first proposal might induce from men throughout Mali. Even though the group of women mentor-teachers would come as volunteers, that doesn't change the fact that children can't even go to school if they can't afford it. This is why I believe the government of Mali should put forth more money into education, as in 2019 it only represented 3.4% of government expenditure (World Bank). They could even provide a small financial incentive for the children that do go to school, as it would not only cover the cost of their supplies but would also help make a slight contribution to the child's family's income. In the long term, this money would not have gone to waste, as innovators and problem solvers would have been born from the dusk of something—a small trinket called education—that wasn't available to them before. With women involved, what used to be half an illiterate population can eventually become a whole population of intellectual contributions to Mali and the world.

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