

The Changing Status of Women in West Africa

Women's rights are being increasingly eroded and threatened in Mali
under the guise of tradition and religious conservatism.

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http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Women_of_Mali#mediaviewer/File:Mali1974-146_hg.jpg

Abstract:

This report examines the declining status of Women in West Africa, with a particular focus on Mali, and how tradition and the ancient slave route across the Sahara are exacerbating the dehumanization of women. Concerted inter-national efforts must be made to ensure such practices are eradicated and young girls given equal opportunities in life.

Introduction

On gaining independence from France in 1960 Mali adopted the French model of political governance in separating religion from state politics; a policy which allowed both civil and religious structures, communities and institutions to grow and flourish. Indeed, in the early 1990s Mali was being widely praised both for its embracing of democracy and for its successful economic and social development. However, since the coup d'état in 2012, when the military overthrew the elected government leaving a complex political landscape in which formal religion has increasingly filled the void, left by the state, in supporting and enabling the everyday function of civil society such as education and healthcare and support in resolving local issues. Whilst it cannot be disputed that the input from the formal religious sector has been valuable, it has also been detrimental to certain sectors of society; women, in particular, have seen their position in society weakened by the encroaching religious conservatism.

Background

Historically Mali has been a predominantly Muslim country, albeit with a small Christian minority, and interpretations of Islam have often fused with local religious practices with this plurality existing peacefully. A notable exception is that of the Tuareg people

inhabiting parts of Northern Mali, Niger, Algeria who have, historically, felt disadvantaged by the government in Bamako citing them as akin to France in terms of acting like a colonial power. Since independence the Tuareg have rebelled four times, fighting for greater political representation and development opportunities in the north. The most recent rebellion came in January 2012

when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) overran army barracks in the north and took the towns of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal.

Emboldened by fighters from the likes of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar al-Dine the rebels swept south causing the displacement of at least 30,000 people internally while 20,000 people are thought to have crossed the border into neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

In March 2012, the perceived failure on the part of the government to deal with the growing crisis in the north led the army, headed by General Sanogo, to overthrow the government of President Toure. Emboldened by this coup the northern rebels continued on their path to Bamako and were only stopped by a French military intervention in January 2013 which, at the time, was warmly received by the Malian people. Since then, however, sentiments towards the intervention have soured as perceptions of French sympathies for the MNLA have grown. The refusal of French

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troops to remove the MNLA from Kidal has only served to support these rumours, yet France has been wary of involving itself in internal Malian politics and has rigidly stuck to its counter terrorism mandate in targeting AQIM and Ansar al-Dine fighters. The presence of the UN mission to Mali-MINUSMA has further complicated the internal dynamics as, similar to the French intervention, they were initially welcomed with open arms but are now resented for purportedly supporting the MNLA's claims to an independent state in the north. Unlike the French forces, MINUSMA does not have a counter terrorism mandate and as such its peace keeping operations have stagnated the situation.

Their presence has also created inflation in Bamako where rents have trebled and the price of meat in Kidal has increased five-fold.

Since the coup, the state's ability to provide basic services for its citizens has diminished; whereas previously it was only able to offer very basic services even this has been eroded by the instability caused by the coup and the resulting political landscape. As a result, religious institutions, such as the High Islamic Counsel of Mali, have often stepped in providing basic services including education and food aid. However, after the reinstatement of an elected government, as the government begins to regain its political footing the power balance appears to have shifted. Examples of

the religious elites new found power can be seen in their endorsements of political candidates and in the backlash over the family courts where, following intense pressure from the HIC and public demonstrations in Bamako, the government changed certain laws pertaining to family life. While it is a positive that elected lawmakers are listening to the electorate, questions need to be asked about the role that Islam can and should play in the political arena and more specifically the interpretation of Islam that will predominate.

Women

The conservative interpretations of Islam preached in the north in areas held by AQIM, Ansar al-Dine and their affiliates have largely been rejected by the local Malians. However, while these groups may have failed to penetrate southern Mali, conservatism clearly has.

Women in the North typically enjoyed a higher social status than those in the south due to Taureg cultural traditions which afforded women an equal place in the household. However, since the outbreak of fighting in the north, the women that remained faced increased pressure to conform to interpretations of Islam that had previously been foreign to their way of life. This has spread south as when we spoke to members of civil society on a recent research trip to Mali concerns were voiced over the growing erosion of independence and autonomy experienced by many women in Bamako and the surrounding area. Examples

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were given where women who had been married for many years were suddenly being asked to wear hijabs and prevented from leaving the house without their husbands' permission. There is undoubtedly interplay between religion and culture so it is difficult to attribute this rise in conservatism solely to the rise in religious conservatism. A key cause for concern raised by women whom we met on the recent trip to Mali seems to be the disconnect between the Quran's teachings and its practice in everyday life. Misinterpretation of the text has led to a negative effect on the status of women. Members of the High Islamic Counsel acknowledged that the recruitment process for imams is difficult to regulate and as such there are times when the newly recruited imams preach a more Salafist interpretation of Islam, interpretations which diminish female social standing in society, a process which ultimately will be detrimental to society as a whole for it has been widely proven that societies that are more gender equal tend to be more peaceful and prosperous, attributes that Mali needs (World Bank 2003). Furthermore conservative practices such as Female Genital Mutilation remain widespread with rates estimated to be around 92%. In 2009 the government attempted to change laws pertaining to women's rights including extending equal inheritance rights to girls and setting the minimum age for marriage to 18, yet the law was met with strong protest from the HIC which mobilised communities against it demanding it

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be abandoned. Some women's groups were dismayed at this change to the bill since they believe that the political system should either remain secular or have Islam by choice. Identifying the issue of uneducated imams has been recognised by the HIC, but identification of the issue is only the first step in combating the wider issue. Thus ultra conservative interpretation of religious texts seems to be a primary concern for women and the intertwining nature of culture and religion serves to further complicate the issue, an issue which few seem willing to engage in. Secondly, the power that religious institutions have in pressuring the government into changing legislature needs to be observed and kept to a democratic nature.

Trends in the wider region.

Mali is not alone in experiencing this creeping erosion of women's civil liberties. The topic was discussed at a recent conference for women in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, where a number of the attendees told similar stories of how they were increasingly being asked to cover up and conform to certain behaviours such as asking permission to leave the house or not being able to leave the house unaccompanied. It was interesting to note that one attendee wore the hijab in the first morning session but after the lunch recess she returned without it on. While it is of course every woman's right to follow their religion however they chose to do so, the autonomy and choice of the individual must be

respected and not forced upon them. In order to foster true respect and understanding for one another, according to the true teaching of Islam, education must be equal between the genders. More must be done to empower women in society and their concerns incorporated into the building of civil social structures.

The Saharan Slave route

Nowhere is the erosion of the status of women more obvious than in the growing trafficking of women in the region. The reduction of a human being to a commodity shows the extent to which human beings dehumanise one another be it under the guise of tradition, culture or religion.

While men also suffer at the hands of human traffickers the trade disproportionately affects women more. Older girls are particularly at risk as they are targeted, mainly from Nigeria, for abduction

and trafficking and then transported across the Sahara via old trade routes to Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria from where they are shipped to Europe. Hundreds of women do not survive the arduous journey across the desert, a journey which has been made by human traffickers and their quarries for centuries. The town of Gao in Mali is becoming a hub for the journey across the Sahara and should be highlighted as a key location in focussing anti-trafficking energies.

Once in Europe, women are in a cycle of debt servitude to their captors, often exacerbated by the use of illegal drugs. During a three month

period in 2003, 4,835 Nigerian women were deported from Italy for crimes relating to drug possession and prostitution. However, deportation often sustains the cycle of exploitation for human beings, unlike illegal narcotics or weapons, can be repeatedly sold and exploited. Once returned to their country of origin these women are at an even greater risk than before from human traffickers. Isolated and often struggling with the ramifications of the abuse they have been subjected to, these women are picked up and re-trafficked back to Europe. 79% of women who are trafficked are done so for the sex trade (IRIN News 2003). Those who are not trafficked to Europe are sold

as “wives”, a fate that Boko Haram has said will befall the Nigerian girls they kidnapped. For approximately £200, the girls then become the property of their new male

captors. Stripped of all legal status they are committed to a life of servitude.

Human traffickers exploit states with weak and corrupt security services and porous borders which is why the sector of the UN responsible for combating human trafficking, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), focuses its response on up-skilling security forces and border agencies in order to spot vulnerable people being trafficked. Given the lack of border security between states such as Nigeria, Niger, Mali and states along the Gold Coast, this style of response is needed particularly in West Africa and the wider Sahel

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region. In spite of this concerted effort UNICEF, the International Labour Organisation, the UN and NGOs based in West Africa believe that over the past decade the trend has been growing despite efforts to the contrary.

The emergence of Boko Haram has contributed to this trend particularly as a result of their role in preventing the education of women in Nigeria; an ideology that must not be allowed to spread to the surrounding states. While it is of paramount importance to rescue the more than 200 girls still missing, provisions need to be made to allow for girls to continue their schooling in safety.

Hundreds of schools remain closed across Nigeria's northern states with no plan to reopen. Thus while Boko Haram have directly prevented the

education of those in their possession, through their very presence and threat of reprisals they are preventing the education of thousands more, stifling lives and crippling future prospects. Former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown called upon the British Parliament this week to assist in the guarding and fortification of 5,000 schools across northern Nigeria to create a safe environment for girls to learn in once again. The proposal has been formulated with the assistance of military and civilian experts including counter terrorism specialists (Brown 2014). This is a much-needed strategy in combating Boko Haram's wider ambitions to impose Salafist interpretations of Islam across

northern Nigeria. Their use of women has recently evolved from their simply being used to lure fighters to their cause and offered as brides to active participants in the reign of terror they are bringing across Nigeria. The attempted attack on army barracks in Gombe state was carried out by a woman with the group now claiming to have a female wing. Subsequent women have been arrested for recruiting women to join Boko Haram (BBC News) showing further exploitation.

Fighting the trend

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across the region. A human trafficking ring was recently disbanded and those responsible arrested. Babies were being trafficked from Nigeria to Benin and Niger where

they were being sold to wealthy couples unable to have children. The children had been forcibly taken from women who were treated like "baby factories" (Al Jazeera 2014) forcibly impregnated and then separated from their children within days of their births. The inter country task force which broke down the trafficking ring shows how vital regional cooperation is when it comes to tackling such barbaric practices.

In May, in its first slavery case, Niger successfully prosecuted a man. The 63 year old was charged and convicted for taking a fifth wife in a practice where the wife, known as a

“wahaya”, effectively becomes the man’s property after his having purchased her for around 200,000 CFA francs, the equivalent of £250 (The Economist). The “wife” is then consigned to a life of servitude and systematic rape, unable to claim any of the legal protection afforded to his other wives since local custom restricts a man to having a maximum of four wives (Mark 2014). Hopefully, this prosecution will serve as a catalyst leading to further convictions and challenging the “commodification” of women prevalent throughout the Sahel region, particularly in rural areas where an estimated 100,000 women and girls are bought and sold through such practices. Tackling such issues remains contentious, as it may be deeply culturally ingrained. However, with increased awareness

and the threat of prosecution, the situation may begin to change.

Conclusion

The dehumanisation of women in this way must not be allowed to proliferate under the guise of conservatism or preservation of cultural traditions. Governments, civil and religious society institutions need to present a united front on the meaningful inclusion of women in religious and political life and recognise the unacceptable use of religion and tradition in eroding the rights of others for, as Kofi Annan said, “When women thrive, all of society benefits, and succeeding generations are given a better start in life”.

About resources, militancy and organised crime in West and Horn of Africa programme

Brief Background and Scope:

Africa's GDP is the most rapidly growing of any continent but corruption, crime, and militancy are rife. Much of this centres on the continent's wealth of natural resources, including petroleum etc. Foreign investment in Africa has grown exponentially over the last decade and will continue to rise. Consequently, foreign & African governments and criminal/militant groups' interests and sphere of influences will clash with increasing intensity over the coming years. This will have direct implications on energy, regional and global security agendas. Furthermore, areas such as West and Horn of Africa regions are strategically located which enhances their role in the international trade system through shipping routes and trans-national linkages etc. The creation of AFRICOM reflects the rising global importance of the region, with the export of oil from the continent expected to increase drastically by 2025. Yet, with the region still lacking institutions of effective governance and reliable security structures, the levels of violent insurgency have jeopardised economic development in countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Mali and Nigeria. Different militant groups finance their operations through employment of traditional criminal enterprises, such as smuggling and drug sales. Resources are also exploited for revenue by both criminal organisation and militant groups. Militant organisations such as Al-Shabab and other Jihadists and nationalist movement operating primarily in Somalia & Sahel – have exploited the security vacuum that exists in the regions. In addition, issues such as piracy continue to effect maritime security whilst increasing costs for counter-piracy measures.

The implications of this are severe on all three fronts - energy security, regional security and global security. While to address these problems and develop solutions, we must confront all three now and holistically, with due appreciation and regard to their interrelated attributes.

Programme's Deliverables:

1. Mapping the interplay between resources, militant groups and the dynamics of organised crime in West/Horn of Africa.
2. Conflict forecasting and risk analysis of the current and future dynamics of militancy, resources, organised crimes and their repercussions on energy security, regional and global security.
3. Situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.

4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Creating a useful guide and knowledge base for stakeholders and public for future oil, gas and aid endeavours in West/Horn of Africa.

About Us

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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