

# ***SCHOOL ATTENDANCE, MARRIAGE, CHILD LABOR IN SAHEL REGION OF BURKINA FASO***

by  
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## **Summary:**

School attendance in Sahel Region of Burkina Faso remains low at approximately 39%. This situation affects both boys and girls, girls to a larger extent, mainly because of early marriage and heavy household chores, and boys due to involvement in agricultural, pastoral and commercial activities.

Schooling's perceived counter-productivity, as expressed in the combination of rising education costs and fewer job opportunities, seems to encourage this phenomenon of child labor outside family circles leading to non-school attendance and early drop-out.

While publicly condemning early marriages, most people in the region agree that cultural integration of their children is achieved through marriage. The school, viewed as an alien body, is not seen as guaranteeing the protection of values that the people consider fundamental. Now, the sociocultural importance of the marriage institution in Sahel Region is such that it conditions all family education with no regard to school syllabuses.

This is specially the situation of Muslim girls who either do not go to school at all, or drop out of it very early.

Though poverty is not an absolute excuse to that situation, economic factors and the rise in the cost of schooling in a context marred by rampant misery, contribute to non-school attendance, early drop out and increased resort to child labor. Besides, by ignoring local cultures and communities' essential values, the school institution has encouraged educational duplicity characterized by parallel and competitive educational programs between families and the school. It has given rise to increasingly unmet new expectations, thus leading to an accentuation of child labor to satisfy them. From all indications, it is clear that designers of strategies to combat underschooling and child labor have not fully understood the basis of the cultural conflict between the school and the milieu.

The present paper analyzes key elements of the « Marriage – Child labor – Education – » triptych using data collected in six of the country's regions, Sahelian Region included, in the context of a UNICEF-financed national survey on accelerating girls' education through the use of a comprehensive learning package. The analysis has led to the following observations and conclusions:

- 1) Children and mostly girls of the Muslim community and particularly those of the Peulh ethnic group either do not go to school at all, or leave school prematurely.
- 2) *Marriage is at the core of family education not only of Peulh girls, but of boys as well.* For girls, it is generally contracted early (precociously in order to protect family honor and respectability related to their womanhood at first marriage. For some families and some children brought up in that cultural context, earning money before marriage is a sign of responsibility. With girls in particular, it compares advantageously to a *family-based security plan* to equip them with some actual goods that symbolize a basic capital and a material asset to protect them against possible future marriage related misfortunes. *Working here is seen a preventive action, a proactive measure against a lurking misfortune.*

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- 3) Even though Muslim girls are involved in various types of risky child labor that distract them from school, Peulh girls are kept out of school more in reaction to the discordance between school content and the essential cultural values indispensable for group cohesion as well as a harmonious socio-cultural integration. The concept of autonomy developed as a school education gain has no meaning to their community and their culture. Not being in search for autonomy, and brought up to be dependent on their husbands, school hardly appeals to them, the essential skills indispensable for their social integration being right there by their mothers.
- 4) In other words, poverty or economic factors do not fully explain the poor schooling of both boys and girls in the Sahelian provinces of Burkina Faso. Children, including boys, of well to do families, are kept out of school whose economic and cultural return is doubtful. *They are not necessarily put to work by someone else at the expense of their schooling. They happen to willingly go to work or in apprenticeship* so as to prove their worth as sole future breadwinners of their would-be families. This must not be overlooked. By tradition, boys of the Peulh group can be expelled from the family home at a very early age as part of that educational process. While girls are kept by their mothers' side where they can acquire the essential practical training for the management of the resources (material and human) that will likely be put at their disposal by husbands expected to provide all for all. School education overlooks that concern, which creates a cleavage. But the pressure that derives from this situation weighs heavily on the school perspectives of the children of the community.
- 5) Ignoring these cultural factors, the discourse of public school promoters tends to hold families guilty of poor schooling of children. Considering the time-tested rationale for a largely illiterate community, the insistence of holding family education programs responsible for that situation in spite of their genuine concern with the future of children tends to reinforce the resistance to school instead of breaking it up. *They seem to ignore that the family precedes the school and that as a social component, the child, no matter what, and outlives the student.*
- 6) However, new integrative attitudes are emerging in that social component in Sahel Region. Indeed, the gradual shift from exclusively Coranic schools to Franco-Arabic and confessional private schools (mostly in urban areas) is observable. Those structures are considered more respectful of basic fundamental values which match the local cultural ones, as well as maintaining a greater balance between form (linguistic) and content of what they teach.
- 7) Moreover, mothers, but also fathers, and children themselves are developing a more positive attitude towards school. But the most interesting change of attitude to that regard is that of illiterate professional young Peulh males. For traders or cattle owners who have experienced some illiteracy-related limits in their activities in a challenging economic context, a more open attitude towards functional schooling of their future wives is in progress. Those functionally literate future wives are seen as their future assistants, practical assets for the protection of the family wealth. Existing empirical cases prove that although limited in scope, *some men do risk sending their wives back to school, or consider allowing their future wives to continue attending school even after marriage* so as to acquire the necessary skills/knowledge to that effect. The knowledge of this emerging practice in the area is a point of strategy during the marriage negotiation period both between the girl and her would-be husband, and/or between her parents and the young man. It could delay the marriage and make it less precocious, and in any case allow the girl to mature a lot more while being exposed to more aspects of school acquired basic education. In a well-organized school setup, this new situation necessarily equips the girl for a more achieving work output in her active life.
- 8) It is up to the school curriculum organizers not to stifle that state of mind and those newly expressed expectations. This *win-win concession* allows the man to consolidate his profit, and the woman to reinforce her intrinsic capital for a more informed future and a more proficient and socially valorizing working life. This new trend will probably help turn the usual exclusive perception of school, marriage and child labor into a rather original, dynamic, proactive and

inclusive combination of the three in the long process leading to the ideal situation of schooling for all, the suppression of early marriages and of risky child labor.