


 Comments on Africa

Number 9 ■ November 2010

'Begging for a better life': the plight of Talibés in Senegal

By **Nayanka Paquete Perdigao**

I have to bring money, rice, and sugar each day. When I can't bring everything, the marabout beats me. He beats me other times too, even when I do bring the sum. . . . I want to stop this, but I can't. I can't leave, I have nowhere to go.

Modou S., 12-year-old talibé in Saint-Louis
(Human Rights Watch, 2010 report)

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2011), sub-Saharan Africa has the greatest incidence of economically active children – 26.4 per cent of all 5–14 year-olds, compared to 18.8 per cent for Asia and the Pacific and 5.1 per cent for Latin America. It ranks second, after Asia, in absolute terms, with 49.3 million children working. In West Africa, extreme poverty can create conditions that are conducive to trafficking and abusive behaviour towards children. A small portion of trafficked children in West Africa are forced into sexual exploitation, while the majority become victims of labour exploitation in a variety of circumstances including domestic work, work on plantations, petty trade, soliciting and begging. The trafficking of children, internally in countries or across national borders is closely interlinked with the demand for cheap, compliant and docile labour. In particular, the challenge of child labour, as it relates to begging, is the subject of increasing attention from governments and international organizations.

In Senegal, where there is a predominantly Muslim population of about ninety-four percent (World Bank, 2010), begging has become an alarming issue. With deep-seated links to poverty, religion and politics, there have been very limited achievements in solving the problem.

Many Muslim families, from poorer backgrounds, tend to send their children to Qu'ranic schools, or *Daaras*, to provide them with free religious education under the guidance of highly revered religious leaders. Typically, at the *Daara*, the teacher or *marabout* in charge provides moral and religious education as well as shelter, food and health care. The children are Islamic students, more commonly known as *talibé*, and contribute labour in exchange for their education in the Qur'an. However international agencies and non-governmental organisations including the ILO and Human Rights Watch have observed that some *marabouts* take advantage of this situation by exploiting their wards. Many children are forced to beg on the streets for long hours, a practice that meets the International Labour Organization's definition of a worst form of child labor according to its Convention No. 182 against the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ILO, 1999).

In this form, begging has taken on a different meaning from its original context. Traditionally it was meant to be a collection of meals from communities and a practice of humility and modesty. However, in the exploitation of the Islamic students it has been transformed to a profit-making tool for many religious leaders. Human Rights Watch estimates *marabouts* to be earning around 300 CFA (\$0.65) from each *talibé* (HRW, 2010). Beyond this economic exploitation, it is estimated that the majority of the children in these circumstances are subjected to inhumane conditions and forced to endure often extreme forms of abuse and neglect.

In addition to the exploitation and abuse of the *talibés* in the very particular context of traditional religious education, trafficking emerges as an important dynamic. Both forced labour, in the form of begging, and child trafficking are serious violations of fundamental Human Rights and International Law. Trafficking of children in West Africa is on the rise. Although there are no exact figures, ILO estimates 980,000 to 1,250,000 children - both boys and girls - are in situations of forced labour as a result of trafficking (ILO, 2010). Several reasons have been put forward to explain this phenomenon, including the decline of the extended family system and the traditional forms of solidarity. Human Rights Watch (2010) assert that children

mainly come from rural and urban areas in Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry and Mauritania, to *daaras* in Dakar.

Neither the Senegalese nor the Guinea-Bissau governments have taken any meaningful action against the deteriorating *status quo* of both trafficking and forced labour. Although the Guinea-Bissau authorities have attempted to prevent the trafficking of children from Bissau to Dakar, they have refused to directly hold the *marabouts* accountable. This illustrates the reticence of authorities to deal with the religious authorities and their transgressions. This in turn highlights the complex link between trafficking, religion and politics in the sub-region.

Attention has been drawn in part to the strategic political use of religion. It is established knowledge that the *marabouts* have exerted some of their influence on local elections. Although Senegal is often hailed as a democratic model for others to follow, there is strong evidence that political and religious claims to power are intertwined. Gierczynski-Bocandé (2007) mentions how Senegal's political history illustrates the political elite's reliance on the religious leaders for electoral victory in exchange for political assistance in the form of prayers and electoral propaganda. Although most religious leaders are *apparently* apolitical, their religious influence on their disciples can drive election outcomes in many local elections (HRW, 2010). In effect, over the years a political system has formed in which there are no clear boundaries between religious and civic spheres.

With no regulations in place and an obvious lack of willingness to follow through with sanctions, thousands of children will continue to be forcefully moved across and within borders. Ratification of agreements and conventions are important, but these do not solve the problem entirely. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (2003) states that Senegal has indeed ratified all eight core ILO labour conventions including the ones against the worst forms of child labour. The ILO has been negotiating with the countries in the region affected by both trafficking and begging, yet not much progress has been observed since the process begun (HRW, 2010). Despite the joined efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), through their campaign known as **AU Commit** – a plan with actionable measures aimed at protecting those at risk of trafficking – no real change has taken place (Mwangi, 2010).

Conclusion

The eradication of the problem of child labour and trafficking requires increased action by the Senegalese and neighbouring governments. They should consider the role of religious leaders and take action against their abusive activities. Simple steps such as the regular inspection of *daaras* and their *marabouts*, by state officials, would be a step forward. Efforts to reduce the number of children sent to *daaras* should form part of a comprehensive approach. This would require improving access to education for all. Finally, an awareness campaign focussing on the rights of children across the region, in schools, churches, mosques

and *daaras*, could have a significant positive impact on people's views, particularly for parents. As part of this, the provision of safe spaces for those that have been abused by these systems to relay their experiences could encourage greater national and regional consciousness of the issue.

Child abuses of the kind described here are a serious violation of human rights and a substantial blight to the development of the region. The exploitation of children continues to perpetuate cycles of poverty and crime across the continent. The solution lies in tackling the conditions that encourage the practice of sending children away, the *marabouts* abuse and the traffickers, simultaneously. Although drafting, signing and passing laws aimed at eradicating child abuse are a step in the right direction, stronger measures are needed. A greater collaboration and coordination among all of the regional countries and civil society groups would be important for achieving this. ■

References

- International Labour Organization, 1999, *ILO Conventions on Child Labour*, <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/ILOconventionsonchildlabour/lang--en/>
- International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), 2003, *Internationally recognised core labour standards in Niger and Senegal*, Report for the WTO General Council Review of the trade policies of Niger and Senegal, Geneva.
- Gierczynski-Bocandé, 2007, *Islam and Democracy in Senegal*, International Reports.
- Human Rights Watch, 2010, *Off the Backs of the Children, forced begging and other abuses against Talibés in Senegal*, <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/92937> accessed on 25 of February 2011.
- Mwangi, 2010, *Combating child trafficking in Africa*, UNICEF, <http://www.unicefusa.org/news/news-from-the-field/combating-child-trafficking-in-africa.html> accessed on 15th of March 2011.
- World Bank, 2010, Country Brief, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/SENEGALEXTN/0,,menuPK:296312~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:296303,00.html> accessed on 15th of March 2011.

The Conflict, Security & Development Group's core mandate is to advance knowledge about the security and development challenges facing countries in the Global South, and to translate this knowledge into practical agendas, capacities and partnerships for change.

For further information on this publication, contact:
penda84_fr@yahoo.fr

Conflict, Security & Development Group
King's College London
Strand, London
WC2R 2LS, UK

Tel: +44(0)20 7848 1984
Fax: +44(0)20 7848 2748
www.securityanddevelopment.org

CSDG