



Education and Vulnerability: The Case of the *Talibés* in Senegal

Among Senegal's large youth population (more than half of the population of 13.2 million is less than 20 years old)¹, a particular group of children stands out. During the day, these young boys weave through the congested roadways and sidewalks asking for rice, sugar, and coins. The boys are often barefoot and wear dirty, tattered clothing. Their most recognizable feature is the old tin tomato cans that many of them carry for their collections. These boys are *talibés*, meaning "students" in Arabic. They all attend *daaras*, or Qur'anic schools.

In recent years, *talibé* boys have attracted much attention both within Senegal and at the international level. Many documentaries, articles, news broadcasts, reports, and books have portrayed *daaras* as part of an exploitative system in which Qur'anic instructors send *talibés* into the streets to beg rather than teach them the Qur'an. The situation is not so simple or universal, however, and concerned people close to the issue suggest a more complex and nuanced view with various opportunities for intervention or monitoring. In order to better understand *talibés* and *daaras* in Senegal, World Faiths Development Dialogue and the Berkley Center for Peace, Religion, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, conducted interviews and research in Senegal, meeting leading organizations working on the issue, as well as senior Muslim religious leaders; this brief is informed by those interviews and is part of a larger study to map the intersection of religion and development in Senegal.

A RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR MUSLIM BOYS

Islam, the religion of an estimated 94 percent of Senegalese, is an integral part of everyday lives. Most Muslims in Senegal affiliate with one of the country's four main Sufi *confréries*, or brotherhoods, and accord much importance to their teachings. Each *confrérie* has its own hierarchical leadership, and these leaders have substantial influence in many domains.

Islamic traditions emphasize that education, and especially religious education, is a central obligation for Muslims. In Senegal, there are several options for religious education; however, many parents choose to send their sons away to live in *daaras* for several years, where they are expected to study and memorize the Qur'an to shape them into moral, pious adults. Muslim girls

in Senegal also receive Qur'anic education, but it is traditionally boys who are sent to live in *daaras* under the guidance of the Qur'anic instructor.² The *daara* system has existed in Senegal for generations. Estimates of the total schools and pupils within this system vary; however, the number of exploited children within *daaras* in Senegal is cited at 50,000 children in the 2010 report "Off the Backs of the Children".³

THE IDEAL FOR DAARAS

"The *daara* is the place where the child learns the Qur'an. It is an institution of Qur'anic education. At the beginning, the goal was to instill children with Islamic values, to help them to memorize the Qur'anic verses, and also to be trained. I think that this was the role of the *daara* at its root: to educate, to train, and to instill religious values in children."

-Maimouna Tounkara, Program Coordinator of And Taxawu Talibé, Saint-Louis, Senegal, August 2014

As for all schools, **the quality of education and the resources available to the children vary enormously from one *daara* to the next.** In many *daaras*, children memorize the Qur'an over the course of a few years and complete their religious training at the school. In other schools, though, children can stay several years without receiving much Qur'anic training or even gaining basic literacy skills. As with quality of education, living conditions for children also vary greatly. In general, *daara* conditions are very simple, and sometimes harsh; many Senegalese maintain that a certain level of suffering or difficulty is acceptable because it teaches humility. Humility is seen as an important quality; however, senior Muslim religious leaders from Senegal agree that children should be protected from suffering.

International discourse about the *talibé* issue in Senegal tends to portray many of Senegal's *daaras* as sites of abuse and exploitation. Some influential international entities go so far as to say that the conditions of certain *daaras* are approaching modern-day slavery.⁴ Human Rights Watch's 2010 and 2014 reports on *talibé* are widely considered the most comprehensive on the issue.⁵ However, these reports are not without their critics. Dr. Rudolph T. Ware III, a scholar on Islam in Africa, states that

“HRW indulges in unsubstantiated claims about the quality of Qur’anic education...More troubling is that nowhere does HRW seriously ask why parents send their boys away to learn the Qur’an in this way....Nowhere in ‘Off the Backs of the Children’ does HRW come to terms with the fact that many parents are sending their sons to such schools because they want them to suffer significant hardship in their pursuit of Islamic knowledge.”⁶

RESPONSIBILITY OF CARE

Daaras in Senegal typically provide room and board for their *talibés*. Often, parents from rural areas send their sons to study and live in *daaras* located in urban areas. Consequently, parents usually have limited contact with their children, let alone the ability to monitor their progress and welfare. Indeed, it is not only Senegalese who send their children to *daaras* within Senegal; children also come from several nearby countries, such as The Gambia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau.

Among development actors working with *talibés*, **there are mixed opinions regarding parents’ awareness of what occurs in *daaras*.** Some, such as Imam Mouhamed Cherif Diop of Senegal-based NGO Tostan, argue that extensive outreach and publicity in Senegal about problems at particular *daaras* means that parents should be aware of potential risks. Others believe that parents naturally trust instructors they know personally, thereby overlooking any shortcomings that may exist. In some cases, it is thought that parents who are unable to afford proper care for their many children will send some to *daaras*, where they expect that their children will receive food, shelter, and religious education.

PROVIDING FOR STUDENTS’ DAILY NEEDS

Within the *daara* system, proper care and nutrition of the children becomes the responsibility of the instructors; in some instances, parents pay a nominal tuition fee that usually does not fully cover expenses. In the past, most *daaras* were in rural areas where farmland provided a means of sustenance, and produce was used by the heads of the *daaras* to barter for goods needed to run the school and provide for the students. However, today, *daaras* located in urban areas lack farmland and need money to acquire any necessary goods and supplies. As *daaras* may host upwards of 50 boys, appropriate care for these children can be costly. This has resulted in students being tasked with collecting alms as a main source of income for some schools.

WHY ARE SO MANY BOYS ON THE STREETS?

The countless *talibé* boys in the streets of Senegal are for some visible reminders of the presence of a corrupt, exploitative system in which Qur’anic instructors send boys to collect donations, doling out punishments to those boys who do not meet quotas. Others, though, believe that the instructors are doing the best with what they have: these people believe that the problem is not the Qur’anic instructors themselves—for they have the best of intentions—but rather their lack of means and their lack of official recognition by the government.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO PROTECT CHILDREN

Largely in response to increasing pressure at both the local and international levels, **Senegal has taken measures to improve child welfare and decrease child exploitation.** In May 2005, the government passed LOI n° 2005-06 outlawing all begging.⁷ Even though it did not explicitly mention the *talibés*, the law was seen as specifically targeting these boys in order to improve their situation. However, this law was not without its critics. In a primarily Muslim country, the act of giving alms is an essential part of life, and some maintain that the boys are merely requesting charity. Those who consider that the *talibés* are seeking alms argue that the government did not properly distinguish between begging and receiving charity. Therefore, some Muslims see the law as interfering with their religious obligation to provide for the vulnerable.⁸

There is a large group of actors on the ground who are involved in addressing the protection of children within the *daara* system, including both Senegalese and foreigners, services providers and advocates, large organizations and grassroots movements. Despite wide differences in their approaches and perspectives, most seem to agree on one point: the Senegalese government needs to do more. There is a lack of coordination, and the government needs to be organizing and spearheading the charge. Senegal has signed numerous international charters on the protection of children, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁹ The government repeatedly affirms its commitment to child welfare, but many child advocates in Senegal believe that these promises have been largely in word; the government is not enforcing the protections it guarantees. Without central leadership, attempts to improve conditions remain disjointed, perhaps exacerbated by strong differences of opinion among the actors.

FILLING THE GAPS

Given the wide differences among *daaras*, **various Senegalese and foreigners have established support centers offering direct services to *talibés*.** Typically, these centers provide for the boys' basic needs, such as food, showers, laundry, and medical treatment. Most centers, regardless of philosophy, begin by identifying the needs of the boys in the *daaras*. For example, many centers have agreements to provide medical care for children when *daaras* do not provide it. Some centers provide supplies to *daaras*, such as sleeping mats so that the boys do not have to sleep directly on the ground. The extent of these services is typically dependent on budget and means.

These centers work in a precarious space and must negotiate relations carefully to gain and maintain trust and access. Generally, centers maintain relations with the heads of local *daaras*, and in instances where exploitation may exist, this must be handled very delicately. They explain that the permission of the head of the *daara* is critical; without this approval, children may be afraid to come to the center out of fear of punishment. Most centers do not seem to advocate for or engage in changing the system, but rather aim to provide for the needs of the children. It is large advocacy organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, UNICEF, and Anti-Slavery International, that aim directly and explicitly to change attitudes and legislation.¹⁰

Talibé support centers are not the only means of ensuring care for these children. Some organizations in Senegal employ an approach called *Ndeyou daara*, meaning “mother of the *daara*” in Wolof. Originally developed by UNICEF, *Ndeyou daara* brings together Senegalese women who work to provide for the well-being of the *talibés*. Each woman becomes a mother figure for certain *talibés*; she visits them in the *daara* and makes sure that they are receiving adequate care, especially in the areas of nutrition and health.¹¹ Even this effort is suspect for some. For example Serigne Mbaye, a prefect in Saint-Louis, Senegal questions whether the women are truly focused on the welfare of the children or whether they are attempting to exploit them.¹²

Actors advocating for and providing services to *talibé* have various faith affiliations and motivations. The Senegalese pride themselves on positive relations between Muslims and the Christian minority. Nonetheless, some Christians are uneasy about the sensitivity of working on what tends to be perceived as a Muslim issue. Christian organizations that serve *talibés* were troubled by the 2013 arrest of a Christian missionary who was working with these

RENEWED ATTENTION

In 2013, a fire in the capital city neighborhood of Medina brought renewed focus to the issue as nine young *talibés* at a *daara* were killed in the fire. They had been living in cramped quarters, and the head of the *daara* had locked them inside during the night, which prevented them from escaping the fire. Following the incident, government officials visited the site. When they saw the conditions at the *daara*, they declared that they would not allow another such tragedy to happen. They vowed to redouble their efforts to prevent children from living in unsafe and unsatisfactory conditions. Senegal's President, Macky Sall, promised to hold all *daaras* to government-created standards and stated that “[v]ery strong measures [would] be taken to put an end to the exploitation of children under the pretext that they are *talibés*.”¹³ Senegal's government, though, does not have the resources to ensure that all *daaras* meet these basic standards.

boys. Concern for the welfare of the students can arise from personal religious beliefs, even among those working at organizations that are not faith-inspired. Notwithstanding the concerns about both propriety and risks involved in direct engagement with a Muslim practice, activists pressing for reform say their motivation is to help others and see this work as their humble contribution to society.

LOOKING AHEAD

- **Muslim Senegalese parents have the right to obtain a religious education for their children; however, the quality of that education is also important**, both for the family and the nation. Many parents tend to trust religious leaders without much question and are unaware of their children's well-being or quality of education within a *daara*. Greater involvement or regular reporting would bring accountability to teachers.
- **The welfare and education of *talibés* is not consistent across Senegal.** Many *daaras* provide sound education but others do not. Identifying and changing exploitative practices, as well as supporting children's immediate needs, calls for better diagnosis of the situation and coordination of the various actors. At present, inadequate monitoring and evaluation of *daaras* allows abuses to occur, but also encourages rumors that accentuate negative experiences. Immediate responses are also sporadic and often overlook underlying issues.

- **The government has passed sound legislation, but has not yet implemented it fully or consistently.** Significant groups in Senegal—national and international—argue that the government’s political will is insufficient to effect change. It is important to understand what obstacles discourage political leaders from protecting children within religious school systems.
- Given the sensitivity of direct involvement in what is seen as religious or cultural practice, concerned actors hesitate to interfere or investigate *daaras*. These concerns are important; therefore, **senior religious leaders can be key actors in monitoring quality, ensuring child welfare, and ending exploitation.** These religious leaders can also guide parents in selecting reputable *daaras* and educating the public regarding beneficial charity that does not perpetuate exploitation.

¹ Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie, “Enquête Démographique et de Santé Continue au Sénégal,” The DHS Program: Demographic and Health Surveys, July 2013.

² Wells, Matthew, “Off the Backs of the Children,” Human Rights Watch, 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Larson, Krista, “Fatal fire again highlights Senegal child beggary,” Associated Press, 2013; Tamba, Jean Matthew III, “Senegal children face modern-day slavery,” Aljazeera, 2014; Wells, Matthew, “Exploitation in the Name of Education,” Human Rights Watch, 2014.

⁵ Wells, Matthew, “Exploitation in the Name of Education,” Human Rights Watch, 2014; Wells, Matthew, “Off the Backs of the Children,” Human Rights Watch, 2010.

⁶ Ware III, Rudolph T. *The Walking Qur’an*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 40.

⁷ Gouvernement du Sénégal, “LOI n° 2005-06 du 10 mai 2005 relatif à la lutte contre la traite des personnes et pratiques assimilées et à la protection des victimes,” Journal Officiel, 2005.

⁸ Quist-Arceton, Ofeibea, *Senegal’s Poor Hurt by Begging Ban Meant to Help*, NPR, 2010.

⁹ Krueger, Alexander and Emma de Vise-Lewis, “Cartographie et analyse des systèmes de protection de l’enfance au Sénégal,” Child Frontiers Ltd., 2011.

¹⁰ Cissokho, L., “Contre la maltraitance des enfants talibés : L’Unicef invite le gouvernement à agir,” Cellule d’Appui à la Protection de l’Enfance, 2010; “Time for Change: A call for urgent action to end the forced child begging of talibés in Senegal,” Anti-Slavery International, 2011; Wells, Matthew, “Off the Backs of the Children,” Human Rights Watch, 2010.

¹¹ Based on an interview with a high-level Senegalese female religious in November 2014; Perry, Donna L., “Muslim Child Disciples, Global Civil Society, and Children’s Rights in Senegal: The Discourses of Strategic Structuralism,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (Winter, 2004), pp. 47-86; “Putting Education first: Communities in Kaolack meet to promote modern Koranic schools,” Tostan, 2014.

¹² Diouf Ly, Adama, “Saint-Louis: le travail des ‘Ndeyou Daara’ passé à la loupe,” Agence de Presse Sénégalaise, 2010.

¹³ “Des mesures très fortes seront prises pour mettre un terme à l’exploitation des enfants, sous le prétexte qu’ils sont des talibés.” Ama, “Neuf « talibés » meurent dans un incendie à la médina; Macky Sall : « Il faut fermer les « daraas » qui ne sont pas aux normes,” *Le Soleil*, 2013.

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