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Mali, Factor 15: Human Rights

Women in Mali: The Struggle For Human Rights

Introduction:

The fight for equal pay, rights, and treatment for women is a battle, which has continued for hundreds of years. In virtually all parts of the world, women have lived submissively to men whether because of culture, religion, tradition or convention. According to the Institute For Women's Policy Research, women make only 78 cents to the man's dollar in the United States, even though women make up nearly half of the workforce (Institute For Women's Policy Research). Gender roles have bound women to household jobs and other stereotypical female occupations worldwide. Over the past 100 years, the United States has made leaps and bounds toward gender equality; many women hold powerful positions in government, however, the U.S. is still working toward full equality. Women in the U.S. exercise the right to vote, the right to own land, and most importantly, the right to their own bodies. However, this is not the case for other developing nations across the world.

The Republic of Mali is located in Western Africa, just south of Algeria. Africa's 8th largest country, arid Mali has a growing population of 15,768,227 and a land area of over 480,000 square feet (WPR). The people of Mali comprise several Sub-Saharan Ethnic groups. The largest is Bambara, making up approximately 37% of Malians. While French is the official language of this country, 80% of Malians speak Bambara (WPR). Some other large ethnic groups include the Fula (17%), Voltaic (12%), Songhai (6%) and the Tuareg and Moor (10%) (WPR). Mali is ranked 176 out of 187 in the Human Development Index(UNDP).

Malian Living

According to the United Nations Development Programme, 51% of Malians live on less than one dollar per day. People in Mali face drought, outbursts of violent conflict, and recurrent poverty. Most Malian families are located in Southern Mali near the River Niger. 94.8 % of Malians are Muslim and polygamy is widely practiced (CIA World FactBook). A typical family in rural Mali consists of 3 or more mothers and a father. In Mali, the average woman will give birth to 6.3 children (UNICEF). Hence, an average Malian family will be supporting approximately 18 children. Mali's population has tripled over the past 50 years and is expected to triple over the next 50 years. Hence, a very young population constitutes a vast part of the Malian population. With the median age of 15.9 years, approximately half of the population is younger than 15 years of age.

For women, the responsibility of supporting a majority of the household needs is common in Mali. As most women are illiterate, carrying fire wood, retrieving water, or producing different items, such as shea butter or Karité, to sell at local markets are often jobs that will sustain families. Only the southern part of Mali is suitable for farming purposes and only 2% of Mali's land is cultivated ("Mali-Agriculture"). This makes small farm holding opportunities difficult for Malians who live in the north; small farms are a source of food security. Millet, rice, and corn are main crops, often serving as staple foods for many families. In a country where both education and health facilities are sparse, only 43.1% of males and

24.6% of females are literate (CIA World Factbook). Schooling is free in Mali, however schools are rare in rural areas of Mali; ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~limiting~~ in rural parts of the country.

Malian Women's Rights

In Mali, women experience a life no humans should have to experience and there are no specific laws to address violence against women. Female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, and sexual harassment all continue to reduce women to subhuman conditions, including young girls. Men are able to use these acts to oppress women into "objects" they want them to be. In this strong patriarchal society, in most situations, women must ask their husband to simply leave the house. This patriarchy is what is considered "cultural norm." Public opinion generally accepts men beating their wives. In the 2006 DHS, 75.2% of women questioned agreed with at least one of 5 "reasons" for a man to beat his wife. These cultural setbacks for women tie directly to food security. Feeding 9 billion people by the year 2050 will not be accomplished unless all persons are able to exercise all human rights. Women who are unable to leave their homes or receive an education because of the male hand which oppresses them, will prevent this country from reaching food security, much less flourishing as a food secure nation.

After forceful Islamic occupation in 2012, radicals ran over much of Northern Mali, pushing innocent men, women, and children out of their homes and into the capital city of Bamako in order to seek temporary housing and refuge. For nine months, Islamic rebels and Tuareg members imposed an extremely strict Shariah Law. Women were soon stripped of nearly all of the rights they had previously obtained as human beings. An article in the *New York Times* explained, "...women were forced to remain indoors and wear full body and face-covering veils. Infractions of the law, according to Human Rights Watch, reported forced marriage and rape also rose" (Richardson). This social change happened only 3 short years ago. It is appalling to know that, even in the 21st century, young women, girls my own age, cannot express their own human rights. Katie Orlinsky, a New York based photographer, had the opportunity to travel to Northern Mali for a month where she was able to talk with women who were directly affected by the new law. "The Jihadists inflicted so much on the women in the north of the country [...] It made just living almost illegal for women." Stories included a woman being jailed for several days for hitting a militant who had slapped her in the face for not covering her hair--in her own home. Women who chose not to flee the oppressive occupation in Northern Mali often endured home invasions. Almada Traore, a 25 year old young woman who chose to stay in her home in Timbuktu during this oppressive Islamic rule, was attacked during her baby-naming ceremony. She recounted how a group of radicals came into her home and punished her. "My hands weren't covered. So they came in and whipped my arms and forearms."

Maternal Mortality: Gender Based Discrimination Directly Affecting Food Security

Mali has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world; one death in ten births. Luisa Cabal and Morgan Stoffregen wrote an article entitled, *Calling a Spade a Spade: Maternal Mortality as a Human Rights Violation*. This article expresses the understanding that when maternal mortality threatens mothers there is a human rights violation. "Being pregnant should not be a game of Russian roulette.[...] Maternal death exposes a range of disparities and inequities. Of all health indicators, maternal mortality ratios reveal the greatest gap between developed and developing countries" (Cabal 2). This article goes on to explain that "no single threat to men aged 15 to 44 approaches the enormity of maternal death and disability" (Cabal 3). According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

Article 12 guarantees all persons “the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.” The UN agreed in 2004 stating, “sexual and reproductive health are integral elements of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.”

It is proven that the magnitude of maternal mortality reflects an image beyond a woman’s health. Maternal mortality has a direct correlation with systemic sexism that separates power between men and women. This separation of power is also proven to affect food security. The UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation claimed in its 2010-2011 State of Food and Agriculture report that equal access to agricultural resources could reduce world hunger by 12-17%.

Early Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation:

UNICEF argues child marriage is a death sentence for many young females. Where 71% of female Malians married before the age 18, child marriage is an accepted practice within this country. Early marriage directly reflects early pregnancy. It is projected that approximately 70,000 young girls will die in childbirth this year (UNICEF). Along with this daunting issue of maternal and prenatal mortalities, early marriage is also proven to result in abuse, education deprivation, a higher risk for HIV/AIDS, and other forms of domestic violence. Culturally, early marriage is deemed accepted. For the family of the young girl, benefits increase; socially and financially. However, child marriage has little to no benefits for the young girls themselves. An organization working to eradicate female genital mutilation (FGM) in the 28 African countries where FGM is practiced, *28 Too Many*, released a report that also explains early marriage is possibly the “greatest hindrance” to a woman’s education (*28 Too Many*).

An estimated 100-140 million girls and women in the world today have undergone some form of female genital mutilation, and 2 million girls are at risk of this practice each year. 85.2% to 91.6% of Malian women have had some form of female genital mutilation, performed on their bodies (Gender Index). 73% of girls 5 years of age or younger have FGM; consent is not even a question, these young girls have no say in what is happening to their bodies (Wilson). It is appalling to know that there are few laws that prohibit female genital mutilation, however it is illegal for government-run health centers to perform this surgery. The author of the *28 Too Many Report* I mentioned above felt it was his job to address the FGM situation in Africa. “I have visited twelve countries where FGM is practiced in Africa, in addition to diaspora communities across the world, and I have heard the stories of over two thousand survivors, not one of whom was pleased she was cut (*28 Too Many*).”

Female Education and Literacy: A Direct Correlation To Hunger:

According to Article 26 of the the 1948 *Universal Declarations of Human Rights* “everyone has the right to an education.” Education is proven to foster peace, promote democracy, expand a nation’s economy, improve health, and reduce poverty (UN). If all students left school with basic reading skills, 171 million people could be lifted from poverty. It is proven that one extra year of school can increase one person’s earnings by 10%. Education also has a direct correlation with gender equality. The UN released a study showing that women in Mali with a secondary education or higher will have, on average, 3 children. Women with little to no education will have, on average, 7 children. Education is also proven to improve maternal health. Women who have sufficient education are proven to delay/space out pregnancies and seek medical attention throughout their pregnancy (UN). The lack of education in Mali, especially for women, directly affects food security. A simple education for a young woman will give her the ability to

access a full range of occupations leading to more money generated for both the woman's family and the Malian economy, ensuring increased food security.

Women's Empowerment As A Tool Against Hunger:

Agnes R. Quisumbing and Ruth S Meinzen-Dick in their *20-20 Vision Report* entitled "Empowering Women to Achieve Food Security" explain we need to "empower women by strengthening their control over a range of assets (which) is critical for enhancing their welfare as well as improving the status of future generations" (Quisumbing). It is vital women have a say in their own natural and physical assets. Culturally in Mali, environments must be created so women can realize their full potential and then have the opportunity to work to reach this potential. Mali's population has tripled over the past 50 years and is expected to triple over the next 50 years. Hence, a very young population constitutes a significant section of the Malian population. With the median age of 15.9 years and approximately half of the population younger than 15 years of age, it is crucial women are empowered. Empowerment and subsequent change will be seen when education is recognized as a necessary component of practicing human rights. Programs such as Amka Afrika, AGE Africa, United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, and other successful NGOs have proven that education is very much the answer to empowerment. Bertha Mphinga, a young African female who has received an education from AGE Africa made a statement that proves how contagious empowerment is, "When girls see me they think that if they go to school, they can be like me. They say 'she is working, she is standing on her own, she is providing for her family'" (AGE Africa).

Solutions:

Solving human rights issues in Mali is extremely difficult and delicate. Interfering with culture, traditions, and religion has often resulted in extreme social unrest. Regardless of the risk of unrest, cultural practices and long standing traditions deemed cruel or unacceptable, such as FGM, must be ended. This is why education, which leads to social change is vital to the development of the country of Mali.

During my attendance at the 2014 World Food Prize, I was fortunate enough to hear Dr. Emma Naluyima speak about her life in Uganda. Her story simply amazed me. Dr. Emma lives on a one hectare piece of land with her husband and two daughters. With this very small piece of land, Dr. Emma integrates both farming and energy production. Dr. Emma has a self-sustaining farm with livestock, fodder production, a fishery, and crops as well as her family's home. Dr. Emma explained in an interview, "This system has hydroponics, which is a methodology of cultivation called "Soil-less Cultivation." With drought affecting much of the world, hydroponic fodder/farming is the way to go." Dr. Emma is a perfect example of how education and empowerment of women has proven change is able to occur even in a country where cultural traditions and genocide have oppressed women in the past. The Naluyima family is protected from most threats of food security because this one woman has embraced the challenges she faced, became educated and transformed her life as well as her family's life (MDG Report for Uganda 2013). Considering only 5.6% of Mali's land is arable, Dr. Emma's "Soil-less Cultivation" technique is a necessity in sustaining the rapidly growing population of Mali.

If a woman is educated, it is possible to educate an entire community. When a woman is denied an education for any reason, culturally or oppressively, a community is denied growth and prosperity. I believe that education is the key to solve gender inequalities. Education is such a powerful force, and where there is unequal power, development is not possible. Studies prove that educating women creates

prosperity for generations. A woman who receives an education is able to educate her own children who, in turn, will be more likely to receive their own education. Thus, "...the family will likely be healthier, with a lower prospect of infant mortality and better maternal nutrition, including while pregnant and nursing" (Gillard). Of course, new systems and educational facilities need to be established so that education is possible. Mali partnered with *The Global Partnership for Education in 2012*. This Foundation is in place specifically for facilitating financial support for developing nations across the world. Since 2012, Mali has received more than \$48 million in grants from this generous financial partner. In the future, part of this money must be used to establish schools in rural areas of Mali where schools do not exist.

In 2012, Africa adopted an inclusive education policy in attempt to address and break down education barriers that are prevalent in Africa. However, a lack of resources continue to hold the education system back. Organizations such as *GVI Volunteer Abroad* have adapted a system where teachers in the United States are able to travel to over 25 countries across the world in effort to create a sustainable education for those in need. *The Global Partnership for Education in 2012* and an organization such as *GVI Volunteer Abroad* could partner to fund more teachers and educators to travel to developing countries, including Mali, and introduce effective leadership, 21st century and crucial empowerment skills while respecting and abiding by the culture of Mali (GVI). This education will also be career based; teaching women in areas of crop production, water quality, and GMO education, as the world approaches GMO use to be a common and necessary practice in order to feed the 9 billion of 2050 (GVI). Today, the Malian Government is struggling after the 2012 Islamic Radical occupation. Restoring the law of the land and the judicial branch must occur simultaneously with education and equality for women.

A large percentage of Malians live in rural southern Mali, expanding access to education will benefit the inhabitants of these areas. Educating young women, not only on reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also on self defense, self awareness, and sustainable farming and agriculture techniques will create change in this country; Malians will be able to effectively sustain their rapidly growing population (IAC). It is vital that change is initiated in Mali, for Mali. Assistance from NGOs, the United Nations, WHO, can support the movement to eradicate human rights violations including FGM against women in Mali, however, focused efforts, initiatives, legislation and the reinstatement of a judicial branch by Africans in Mali will bring about the greatest success in ending negative traditions which deny women their most basic human rights. The work of the Inter-Africa Committee (IAC) on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children has pioneered visible policy programs and necessary actions in Mali to affect change. The mobilization of African communities to end FGM and other practices which oppress females, as well as the involvement of stakeholders including religious and community leaders, youth, media, health professionals and legislative policy makers will bring changes to communities allowing for increased education of girls and women (IAC).

Conclusion:

Food security is a daunting issue facing developing countries including Mali. Food security will not be attained unless rights for women are secured. Investigations and studies show that human rights are for all humans, regardless of gender, in order for nations to thrive. As Dr. Norman Borlaug stated time and again, "You cannot build peace on empty stomachs." The threat of hunger can only be solved if peace is made within ourselves, our families, and communities. Women and men can no longer live on two

opposite ends of the spectrum of power. Human rights are called “human rights” for a reason. When young girls are deprived of these rights, they will grow up thinking their existence is strictly one of servitude and repopulation. FGM, domestic violence, early marriage are not necessarily part of the culture; they have become accepted traditions. A lack of education for girls who are forced to marry early should not be tolerated. An integrated approach to bring change and an end to destructive traditions will in turn, result in food security. This will be possible with the recognition that all, regardless of gender, receive an education and with that education, the ability to make choices, which will bring about positive change impacting the individual, the family, community, country and ultimately the world for good.

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