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Forced to beg

Child trafficking from Guinea-Bissau to Senegal

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Summary

Taking children from Guinea-Bissau to Senegal and forcing them to beg on the streets has become the most visible form of human trafficking in both countries. Many Quranic teachers and intermediaries prey on vulnerable families in Guinea-Bissau. Offering religious instruction in Senegal, they take advantage of families' ignorance of the fate awaiting their children once they are handed over.

This criminal activity enables the teachers, who collect the money given to children as alms, to dispose of a large amount of illicit capital which they inject with impunity into important sectors of the economy such as real estate, trade and transport.

Key findings

- Deep poverty, religious fervour and ambition for their children drive many rural parents in Guinea-Bissau to place them in the care of Quranic teachers, or marabouts, based in Senegal.
- Once trafficked to Senegal, the children are not taught the Quran, as promised. Instead, they are forced to beg for alms and to hand the takings over to the marabouts.
- Although officials in both Senegal and Guinea-Bissau deplore the system, a combination of respect and fear of the marabouts' power forestalls action.
- It is left to non-governmental organisations to rescue the children and return them to their families.

Recommendations

- Guinea-Bissau should promote community development initiatives to reduce the vulnerability of parents and children in rural communities.
- Guinea-Bissau's government, in collaboration with local non-governmental organisations, should initiate awareness-raising campaigns in the villages of child-trafficking victims to show the reality of child begging in Senegal.
- Guinea-Bissau should put in place a monitoring and evaluation plan for the effective return and reintegration of child victims.
- Senegal's government should adopt its bill on the reform of Quranic schools.
- The governments of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau should establish a bilateral memorandum of understanding to exchange information, conduct cross-border investigations and provide capacity building to improve reporting methods and the identification of victims.

Introduction

With the promise of a religious education, thousands of children are being trafficked from Guinea-Bissau to Senegal, where they are forced to beg on the street.

Child trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal industries in West Africa.¹

The practice plays off the strong Islamic culture of giving alms to beggars, especially children. And while ENACT is aware of the existence of exemplary Quranic teachers, or marabouts, in Guinea-Bissau who strive to provide a good Islamic education, there are others who are only interested in recruiting child beggars. Preying on vulnerable families, they offer to teach the children in Senegal, but on arrival, the children are simply sent out to beg and forced to turn their takings over to the marabout.

This policy brief aims to examine the way trafficking children for the purpose of begging is organised. The study is not concerned with the phenomenon of child begging per se which, although not widely accepted, is a recognised practice in Islamic tradition. Rather it examines the exploitation of children by organised trafficking syndicates.

This practice, similar to slavery, systematically violates the fundamental rights of education, freedom of expression, shelter, protection and family. Trafficking children for forced begging negatively impacts on the

United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly targets 8.7, which calls for ending child labour, and 16.2, which prohibits child abuse, including torture and trafficking.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that child begging generates over US\$8 million annually for Quranic teachers in Senegal, while Human Rights Watch estimates that there are 100 000 child beggars – also known as talibés – in the country.² Most child beggars are reportedly locals, but the past decade has witnessed an increasing presence of child beggars from the sub-region, especially Guinea-Bissau.

Child trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal industries in West Africa

There is literature on child beggars in Senegal, but not much focus on the criminal industry that constitutes this practice. Moreover, no study has examined the nexus between illicit money generated from child begging and money laundering.

Research methodology and scope

This study adopted a qualitative methodology to examine the way the criminal industry of child begging is organised. Field research was conducted in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau between May and July 2019.

In Senegal, ENACT conducted research in five cities: Dakar, Saint-Louis, Thiès, Mbour and Kolda. The first four are the main destination of the children trafficked from Guinea-Bissau. Kolda is the main transit area.

There is no reliable data on the exact number of Guinea-Bissau child beggars. However, in Saint-Louis alone, they are estimated to number around 2 000, according to Maison de la Gare, a reception centre welcoming the largest number of Guinea-Bissau victims. For field research in Guinea-Bissau, three regions including Bissau (the capital city) and the eastern Gabu and Bafatá regions were visited. Predominantly Fulani, Gabu and Bafatá are the main regions of origin of almost all the trafficked children met and interviewed in Senegal.

In total 82 people were interviewed. The respondents comprised diplomats, United Nations officers, members of parliament, mayors, intermediaries, religious leaders, clerics, child protection specialists, former and current

child victims, parents of former and current victims, marabouts and journalists. The interviews with children were conducted in focus groups in different locations including Dakar, Saint-Louis and Kolda.

In Dakar, focus groups were organised in three different reception centres – Empire des Enfants, Yaakaaru Guneyi and the state-run Ginddi Centre. Participants were aged between five and 14. In Saint-Louis, one focus group was held at Maison de la Gare. The focus group in Kolda was held in the district of Sikilo. Participants there were aged between seven and 13.

All the victims of child trafficking who took part in the focus groups provided consent, and this was approved by the heads of the relevant reception centres. The children all willingly signed consent forms provided by the ENACT team.

The focus groups in Dakar were conducted in Wolof, and in Fulani in Saint-Louis and Kolda. The victims who we met in Dakar also spoke Fulani, but the ENACT team conducted the groups in Wolof to enable the centres' social workers to understand the discussions.

All the focus groups were conducted by ENACT without the help of an interpreter, as the team could speak both languages. The interviews were then translated into English.

For security reasons, the names of the children cited in this policy brief were changed.

This policy brief also draws from desktop research and a literature review of documents including policy papers and reports from various organisations dealing with child protection.

Definition of terms

Talibé: The term talibé is derived from the Arabic 'talib', which means a person seeking knowledge.³ The term is now associated more with child beggars.

Marabout: In Senegal the term 'marabout' can mean a religious leader, leading a community or a sect, with many disciples. It also can mean a witchdoctor with magical powers. In this policy brief, it means quranic teacher.

Daara: A Wolof word derived from the Arabic 'daar', which means house or yard. There are five types in Senegal,⁴ some teaching only the Quran, others also teaching French or Arabic. In this policy brief, daara refers to the Quranic school where children live with their marabouts.

Child trafficking: A child has been trafficked who has been moved within a country, or across borders, for exploitation.⁵

How learning segued into begging

Senegalese traditions of Quranic teaching date back to the arrival of Islam in the 11th century.⁶ Quranic schools have long been the only formal education system in Senegal.⁷

According to a Guinea-Bissau cleric, learners from Guinea-Bissau started attending Senegalese Quranic schools in the 18th century.⁸ Senegal's northern cities of Saint-Louis, Ourossogui, Matam and Kanel were their primary destinations. In those communities, alms giving and local families helping foreign learners were well-established practices.

Quranic schools have long been the only formal education system in Senegal

Alms-giving constitutes one of the main pillars of Islam.⁹ Young learners were initiated into begging to instil in them qualities such as humility, endurance and the spirit of sharing.¹⁰ However talibés spent most of their time studying the Quran, and they were not exploited by their marabouts.

Forced begging started in Senegal after independence. By the end of the 1970s, drought had shaken many West African countries, including Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, and rural populations moved towards the cities.¹¹ Marabouts migrated with their talibés. But due to the high living costs in urban areas, many began to ask their talibés to beg for their own survival.

When the marabouts realised the potential of child begging, they started demanding not only food, but money from their talibés. The profitability of begging has, according to Human Rights Watch, attracted many unscrupulous marabouts to engage in this practice,¹² moving to Senegal with their talibés and returning home only to recruit new children under the pretext of religious education.

A 2007 study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund¹³ found that the phenomenon affected around 7 600 children in the Dakar region, of whom 90% were child beggars.

While most were locals, 30% were from Guinea-Bissau. The study revealed that children were forced to beg for about six hours daily, and that income generated from child begging, on average 300 CFA (\$0.50) a day, was given to the Quranic master.

Since gaining independence in 1974, Guinea-Bissau has experienced four successful coups and 16 attempted, plotted or alleged.¹⁴ These upheavals have weakened public institutions, exacerbated social and political violence and seriously affected the economy. This has spread poverty on a large scale, wiped out basic social services and destroyed the economic foundations.

While 85% of the population depends on agriculture, the scarcity of rains in recent decades and the volatility of cashew nut prices¹⁵ have exacerbated the vulnerability of many families, particularly in the Gabú and Bafatá regions.

Finding themselves without an income, families entrust their children to marabouts.¹⁶

In Douma, a village in the Gabú region where there are no basic social services, all the children have reportedly been sent to Senegal and beg to support their parents back home.¹⁷ According to a Guinea-Bissau child protection expert, there are hundreds of villages in Guinea-Bissau similar to Douma.¹⁸ These populations don't feel the presence of the state. The little help they receive is from community development projects.¹⁹

Many parents cherish the dream of their children mastering the Quran and expect them to return with values such as humility, endurance and the spirit of sharing – and with a new social status. They never call to enquire about their children's living conditions in Senegal. Abdulaye, a 12-year-old boy at the Ginddi reception centre in Dakar, said: 'I never knew I would be begging in Senegal. My father does not know that I am currently begging.'²⁰

Impunity aids the traffickers

There has been a strengthened presence of officers from the Senegalese Border Police and the Guinea-Bissau National Guard on both sides of the border. But there are hundreds of kilometres between the two countries that are easy to cross.

Despite the interception of several traffickers with their victims in Guinea-Bissau, there has been no official imprisonment of criminals involved in child trafficking since the adoption of the law criminalising child trafficking in 2011.

In 2018, following strong pressure on the public prosecutor from civil society, two cases of child trafficking were prosecuted in Guinea-Bissau. In both cases, criminals transporting dozens of children were intercepted by the Guinea-Bissau National Guard at Cambadju on the Senegalese border. Although both cases were tried, none of the offenders was convicted or sentenced.

In November 2019 a marabout was arrested in the Louga region for tying up his talibés. His arrest sparked a wave of reaction from the population. Religious and political authorities requested his immediate release. He received a two-year suspended sentence instead of the custodial sentence called for by the penal code.

This support of impunity motivates child traffickers in Guinea-Bissau to continue their activities.

Smuggling children across a porous border

Trafficking children to Senegal for begging involves different actors who individually or through well-organised networks recruit, transport and exploit their victims.

Trafficking children to Senegal for begging involves different actors who recruit, transport and exploit their victims

Quranic teachers are the main recruiters. They first target the children of their own relatives. While some parents immediately give their children over to their 'uncle', others are coerced to let their children go – they cannot refuse the Quranic teacher's request.

Their vulnerability increases if one or both parents are deceased. Hamady, a 10-year-old boy, told researchers, 'When my father passed away, my uncle came and told my mom he wants to take me to Senegal. My mom did not want me to go but she finally accepted due to the respect she owes him.'²¹

Quranic teachers also take advantage of religious events such as Gamou to recruit additional children. During these events, the marabout comes to Guinea-Bissau with two or three children whom he has prepared to recite verses of the Quran. The verses are memorised only for

that event but the marabout tells parents that whoever sends his child will have the same reward.²²

This, according to a cleric interviewed for this study, 'is simply trickery which consists of publicly putting the child in the saddle to arouse the envy of parents, who are eager to see their sons acquire similar mastery of the Holy Quran'.²³

Recruiters also use false promises. Alpha, a 14-year-old victim at a reception centre called Empire des Enfants, told ENACT that, 'When the marabout came to our house, he showed us a photo of a nice house in Senegal and told me and my parents that if I go with him, it's where I am going to live and study Quran'.²⁴

After the recruitment campaign, the marabout returns to Dakar. His intermediaries transport the victims to Senegal. They can be either the marabout's eldest talibés and deputy, aged between 25 and 35, or his wife.

The intermediary is in charge of organising the trip and the logistics that allow him to smuggle the children once they arrive at the border. They inform the victims' parents of the day of departure to Senegal, the meeting point and their itinerary.²⁵

Children are loaded onto vehicles, carts or motorbikes and transported first through official routes and then secondary routes, usually from the village nearest to the border town with Senegal.

Two main routes have been identified: the Bafatá-Cambadju-Salikegne route and the Gabu-Pirada-Sare Bakar route. For those travelling from Bafatá, they first go through the official route until Sintcha Nhacore, a village near Cambadju (on the border with Senegal), where they disembark. From there, another intermediary takes the victims by motorbike through the bush to Salikegne, a Senegalese village. The intermediary in charge of smuggling the victims into Senegalese territory is paid around 2 000 CFA francs (\$3.38).²⁶

With the Gabu-Pirada-Sare Bakar route, traffickers transport the children until they cross the bridge over Pedigor, a river located near Pirada, a town on the Senegalese border. The intermediary then sneaks the children into Senegal in exchange for money, usually in a motorbike or cart.

Idrissa, a 12-year-old victim interviewed at Maison de la Gare, told ENACT: 'When we crossed Pirada and reached

Figure 1: The main trafficking routes of talibés from Guinea-Bissau



the Senegalese border, the police at the border asked us to return to Guinea-Bissau. The marabout then waited until late in the night and rented a motorbike which took us to Nianaou, a Senegalese town. From there, we took a car and headed to Diaobé, from where we took a bus to come to Saint-Louis.²⁷

Women play an important role in child trafficking. It is reported that criminals use fellow passengers who are female to smuggle the children. They are asked to pretend the children are theirs.

Aliou, a 13-year-old boy interviewed at Empire des Enfants in Dakar, said, 'When we arrived a few kilometres before the border with Senegal, the marabout asked some ladies travelling with us to take us with them and to introduce us as their own sons.'²⁸

Birth registration in Guinea-Bissau is very low – 39%, according to Unicef – and many children therefore don't have official citizenship. They are called 'ghost children'.²⁹

According to the chief of police of the border in Salikegne, 'Since the children do not have birth certificates, it is difficult to verify the veracity of the smuggler's statement' that the children belong to them. Therefore, officials are compelled to let traffickers go in compliance with the free movement principle for citizens of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).³⁰

Sending the trafficked children to the streets

While some children are trafficked directly to Senegal's big cities, others wait in the southern region of Kolda for six months to a year. This is meant to initiate the children into the practice of begging, and to introduce them into Senegal's socio-cultural environment.³¹ 'I arrived in Kolda two weeks ago. And it's my first time in my life to beg on the street,' said a nine-year-old.³²

The children are also introduced to the Wolof language, the national language of Senegal, and to the food. After initiation and socialisation, they are sent to Dakar or another big city.

And that is where their ordeal begins. In the Dakar region, where each marabout runs an average of 50 child beggars, victims are expected to bring their marabouts 500 CFA francs daily, while in Saint-Louis and other places, with half the number of beggars, the daily average quota is 350 CFA francs. On Friday's children are required to bring in double their usual amount as more people, going to mosque to perform the two raaka prayers, give alms on Fridays.

Victims are driven daily from the suburbs to the city centre. They can be spotted, dressed in rags and barefoot, carrying buckets for alms (rice or money), in front of restaurants, banks, gas stations, markets or mosques. They are usually accompanied by older talibé who supervise from a position out-of-sight.

In the evening they return to their respective daara to hand in their takings to the marabout's deputy, which he gives to the main marabout every week. Our study has found that a marabout operating in Dakar can earn up to 1 500 000 CFA francs a month (\$2 514), while another established in Saint-Louis can earn up to 375 000 CFA francs (\$628) a month. In Kolda, begging can generate up to 275 000 CFA francs (\$461) a month for Quranic teachers.

They can be spotted, dressed in rags and barefoot, carrying buckets for alms (rice or money)

Children who fail to meet the quota are severely beaten. Some spend the night on the street if they don't have the money, or find refuge in a reception centre for vulnerable children.

Life on the street pushes children to develop strategies for survival. Talibés sometimes sell the uncooked rice they receive as alms to shopkeepers in order to meet their quota.

Others engage in heavy and sometimes dangerous labour. ENACT learnt that in Saint-Louis, for example, instead of begging, many children go to the wharf to carry boxes of fish and pack them into trucks. Others go to the markets and offer to carry the women's containers full of products for 50 or 100 CFA francs (\$0,09 or \$0,18).

Victims of child trafficking are deeply affected, mentally and physically.

Separated from their parents at a very early age and sent thousands of kilometres from their homes, they are plunged into deep emotional shock.

Most of the children interviewed told ENACT that they had not been in contact with their parents for many years, that they miss their mother and that they would like to go home.

Their food depends on what they receive on the street. The money earned from begging doesn't help them –

instead it's used by the marabout who buys good food from markets to feed his family. Lamine, a 13-year-old child trafficking victim begging in Kolda, said: 'Our Quranic teacher uses the money we give him to prepare lunch with his wife. They never invite us to eat with them. The only time we eat their food is when it's left, or when we eat the crust.'

And their education is non-existent. Not only are they not taught religious knowledge, they also miss the opportunity to go to formal French or Portuguese schools. ENACT discovered that most victims, despite long years spent in the daara, do not memorise the Holy Quran. Adama, a former victim of child trafficking, said, 'I spent five years at the daara and only memorised the first chapter of the Quran.'³³

Because they spend most of their childhood on the streets begging to enrich others, they miss the opportunity to acquire skills to train them for working life.

The talibés live either in houses under construction, or in dilapidated and abandoned houses. They are crammed into cramped rooms where they sleep in large numbers. According to Human Rights Watch, from 2017 to 2018, at least four fires broke out in daaras in Senegal. In 2013, a daara located in the popular district of Medina in Dakar caught fire and nine children resident in this daara died. Three of them are said to have come from Douma.³⁴

Begging exposes children to physical violence and sexual abuse. Reception centre officials told ENACT that a main reason for the victims to flee their daara was physical violence.

ECOWAS considers trafficking in children to be a security problem. For example, child trafficking could be used as a source of funding for terrorism. In addition, ENACT has been informed that some child victims in Dakar are used as mules to transport drugs.³⁵

Impact on achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The United Nations's SDGs place great importance on the protection and well-being of children. Target 8.7 of the goals calls on states to 'secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms'.³⁶

Yet Human Rights Watch reports that Senegal's programme to remove street children has made little difference to the alarming number of young talibés who are victims of exploitation, abuse and neglect every day.

Child beggars are increasingly employed as domestic workers and rising numbers of trafficked children are being used as screamers in paddy fields. The children spend many hours shouting to chase away birds, an anonymous source told ENACT.

The United Nations's SDGs place great importance on the protection and well-being of children

Child trafficking further impacts the achievement of Target 16.2, which aims to end child abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture. According to a recent report jointly conducted by Human Rights Watch and Plateforme pour la Promotion et la Protection des Droits Humains, 16 child beggars were killed in 2016 and 2017 in Senegal because of negligence or torture by their Quranic teachers.³⁷ The report also highlights cases of rape and children being chained.³⁸

Marabouts launder the money given as alms

Child trafficking produces illicit capital, which is subsequently laundered in the legal economy.

ENACT field research has found that some marabout traffickers, especially those operating in Dakar and Saint-Louis, reinvest the dirty money in real estate, building houses for rent. They also reportedly own urban taxis, called clando in Senegal.

The illicit money is also laundered in various trading activities, especially trades in cashew nuts and charcoal. Marabouts' deputies go to Guinea-Bissau during the harvest period (April, May and June) to buy cashew nuts cheaply in large quantities. These are sold months later at a higher price.

The charcoal trade is mainly identified in the northern Senegalese region of Saint-Louis. The field study revealed that more than 50 marabouts from Guinea-Bissau have formed a business group specialising in the import of charcoal from their home country, using money collected from their child beggars.

Some marabouts, according to local sources, use the money generated from child begging to finance the illegal immigration of their own children to Europe via Libya.

What can be done?

The international community has set out a legal framework aimed at preventing and combating child trafficking. In 1989 the UN adopted its Convention on the Rights of the Child, strengthened in May 2009 by the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.

The ILO in 1999 adopted its Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, urging member states to eliminate child trafficking which it defines as 'all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict'. In 2000 several countries adopted the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol).³⁹

On the continent, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child came into force in 1999.⁴⁰ The charter is the primary legal response crafted for ending child trafficking for forced labour in Africa.

In its article 15, the charter states that, 'Every child shall be protected from all forms of economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.'

Two years later, the African Union added the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

At a regional level, ECOWAS has taken numerous steps to help end child trafficking, starting with a 2002-2003 action plan against trafficking in persons,⁴¹ and urging member states to ratify and implement the Palermo Protocol's recommendations.

The initial action plan also urges member states to ratify other major international and regional protocols regarding human trafficking. These include the ECOWAS Convention A/PI/7/92 on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters and ECOWAS Convention A/PI/8/94 on Extradition; the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, supplementing the Convention; the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. The protocol also urges West African states to share information.

The ECOWAS action was extended again in 2016 to cover another four years.

What about the countries involved?

Senegal has ratified numerous conventions and protocols. In 2003 the country ratified the Additional Protocol of the United Nations Convention on Transnational Crime to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, and incorporated Article 5 in its national law.⁴²

Senegal's 2005 Law No 2005-06 criminalises the exploitation of children through forced begging and severely punishes offences related to trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants. Article 3 provides that anyone who organises the begging of others to profit from it; hires, trains or diverts a person for the purpose of begging or exerts pressure on him or her to beg or continues to do so is punishable by imprisonment of two to five years and a fine of 500 000 to 2 000 000 francs (\$838 to \$3 352).⁴³

Besides the protocol, Senegal has adhered to the principles of other major conventions for the protection of children, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which it ratified in June 1990, and Convention No 182 of the ILO ratified in 2000.

Child protection committees have been set up in almost all Senegal's 45 departments

The country's anti-trafficking unit, the Cellule Nationale de Lutte contre la Traite des Personnes, has mainly a preventive and observation role.

Numerous temporary shelters are run by NGOs specialising in the protection of vulnerable children. Reception centres play a critical role. Victims who arrive at the centres – who either run away from their daara or are collected from the streets – are welcomed, and their return to their respective villages and countries is organised. This is done with the help of the West Africa Network for the Protection of Children.

Since 2005 this Network, with its partners in Senegal – Enda Jeunesse Action – has organised the return of over 1 250 trafficked children. According to Associação dos Amigos da Criança (AMIC), 95% of the children identified in Senegal were from Guinea-Bissau.

Child protection committees have been set up in almost all Senegal's 45 departments. At a community

level, village child protection committees and child protection stakeholder coalitions have been established as well. These units play a key role in preventing child trafficking.

Guinea Bissau ratified the Palermo Protocol in 2006 and adopted Law 12/2011 on Trafficking in Persons in 2011. It ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO's Convention No 182 in 1990 and 2008 respectively.

A National Committee for Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, is made up of different representatives of ministerial departments, including justice, security and social affairs, and non-state actors in the child-protection sector.

The Juvenile Justice Unit (Brigade des Mineurs) works at raising awareness, despite limited resources, and the Interpol National Central Bureau provides technical support to the anti-trafficking committee.

Guinea-Bissau's 2016 emergency action plan to provide children with birth certificates has helped improve control at the border by providing information to the National Guard. According to AMIC, over 91 interceptions have been made by the National Guard since 2016.

Civil society organisations, including SOS Talibés and AMIC, are present in all regions and play an active role in the fight against trafficking in persons. AMIC and SOS Talibés welcome back the children, providing them with shelter and ensuring their reintegration.

Yet children still beg on the streets

Most respondents believe that Senegal's government doesn't have the will to combat child trafficking.

Though a handful of religious leaders are aware of the changing character of child begging and call for an end to the practice, most religious leaders are very conservative, and reject the idea of reforming the child begging practice, as it is seen as a form of violation of their traditional and religious norms. Any act aimed at withdrawing children from the street or trying to prosecute a marabout who is exploiting children is seen as 'combating Islam'⁴⁴ or the daara.

In August 2010 Souleymane Ndéné N'diaye, then prime minister under Abdoulaye Wade,⁴⁵ announced the president's decision to ban the practice of child begging. The proposed ban sparked massive protests from the population, including religious leaders. Weeks

later, another communiqué was released to say that the president was not behind the initial ban and added that 'alms giving is recommended by the religion'.⁴⁶

Many officials, including prosecutors and judges, support this practice, considering begging as normal and compulsory for every Muslim child.

A bill to modernise the daara, adopted in June 2018 by the Council of Ministers, is an ambitious government project aimed at regulating traditional Quranic teaching with modern daaras and qualified Quranic teachers. It would allow children to combine both French and Quranic studies, which would guarantee them a better future. However, due to opposition from some marabout lobbies, the bill is yet to be adopted.

Most religious leaders are very conservative, and reject the idea of reforming the child begging practice

Some authorities are also reportedly reluctant to take action against forced begging because many of them reportedly consult Quranic teachers, including those from Guinea-Bissau, for protection and success in their projects.⁴⁷

Government's initiatives to stop child trafficking are often hampered by funding problems. After a cabinet meeting on 22 June 2016, Senegal's president instructed the government to 'take all necessary measures to ensure effective withdrawal of child beggars in major cities of the country'.

From 30 June 2016 to 25 January 2017, 976 children were taken off the street and placed in temporary reception centres. Of that number, 346 were from Guinea-Bissau, which is more than 35% of the total removed. However, the withdrawal project stopped due to a lack of funding.⁴⁸

There are numerous organisations and structures dealing with child trafficking victims in Senegal. However, there's a lack of coordination when organising their return to Guinea-Bissau. ENACT found that each structure organises its own return. This was meant to be coordinated by the West Africa Network for the Protection of Children, known as Réseau Afrique de l'Ouest (RAO), which has a focal point in each West African country.

ENACT learnt that many reception centres choose not to hand victims to RAO, preferring to organise returns themselves, as RAO is accused of not following up when children are sent back home. Some managers at reception centres who wished to remain anonymous said this was the reason children returned to Senegal after being sent to their respective villages.

Challenges in Guinea-Bissau

There is no real political will from the government to eradicate the problem of child trafficking or to prosecute criminals involved in it. The government has never imprisoned Quranic teachers involved in child trafficking.⁴⁹

According to a Guinea-Bissau high-ranking authority, 'This is because, unlike prosecutors who deal with drugs, and who get lots of incentives for motivation, prosecution authorities dealing with child trafficking don't receive any form of encouragement'.⁵⁰

Justice officials reportedly face pressure to drop cases involving marabouts.

In 2014 it was reported that a Gambian marabout was arrested at the border between Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia while transporting 52 Guinea-Bissau children in a refrigerated truck headed for The Gambia. The judge in charge of the case reportedly faced intense pressure from the prosecutor and threats from the state authorities, who wanted the case dismissed.⁵¹ According to anonymous sources, the marabout enjoyed immunity because he was a close relative of former Gambian president Yahya Jammeh.

There are also structural issues hampering the eradication of child trafficking in Guinea-Bissau. The national police's Juvenile Justice Unit (Brigade des Mineurs), responsible for investigating crimes against children, has an office only in Bissau, the capital. It is equipped with just three computers, while there are nine agents. UNICEF donated a vehicle but it is immobilised because of a lack of fuel.⁵²

In Bafatá, the epicentre of child trafficking, the police station has no vehicle at all. A police officer who wished to remain anonymous said, 'If we are reported a case of child trafficking, we are obliged to rent a car. If we do not have money to rent the car, we simply drop the mission'.⁵³

Moreover, an official said, 'We haven't received our salary for two months now'.⁵⁴

Most border officers are not trained to detect victims or to deal with child traffickers. And because most of

the traffickers are believed to possess mystical powers, officers are reluctant to intercept or arrest them.

When children are returned to Guinea-Bissau, they receive 25 000 CFA francs for reintegration. Younger children are sent to primary schools, while older ones are left on their own because of a lack of vocational schools.

AMIC follows up only the younger victims. And according to its executive officer, financial and logistical constraints lead to follow-ups being done only by phone with village heads or parents.

The older children who are left on their own often find it hard to cope with their families 'extreme poverty and many return to Senegal. According to a Senegalese expert on the protection of the rights of the child, the youngsters' return to Senegal is understandable because despite the harsh living conditions in Dakar, they live better in Senegal than in their villages in Guinea-Bissau.⁵⁵ In Senegal, they can at least earn some money, even if they have to give most of it away; while in Guinea-Bissau they don't have this opportunity.

Conclusion

Religion has a significant influence over politics in African societies. The impunity of traffickers who are marabouts is one of the major obstacles to the eradication of trafficking children for forced begging.

Yet, while this practice is the outcome of the convergence of religion and tradition, it is important to rethink response strategies by involving all parties, including moderate religious leaders, who could play a role in convincing radical colleagues to accept reforms.

This cannot be achieved without firm will from both countries. And the Senegalese bill reforming the daara offers the country an excellent opportunity to end the exploitation and suffering of children.

The Guinea-Bissau government should have a presence in rural communities, promoting development initiatives to lower poverty and reduce the vulnerability of parents and children. As long as poverty prevails in the communities of origin, parents will continue sending their children away and marabouts will continue to enrich themselves on the backs of their students.

It is crucial that Senegal and Guinea-Bissau establish formal cooperation, set up an extensive system for exchanging information between the two judiciary police forces and train agents in the identification of victims and their needs.

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About ENACT

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