

Fixing the future of Mali's child workers

In Mali, approximately two out of three children aged 5 to 17 work. This represents over 3 million children. Few of them go to school and 40 per cent of children aged 5 to 14 perform hazardous tasks. The situation of migrant girls is of particular concern. ILO Online reports.

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MOPTI, Mali (ILO Online) – The sun has only just risen, but it is already extremely hot: over 45 degrees in the shade. Fanta has been hard at work for over an hour.

This 15 year-old girl had to leave school at the age of 12. At the time, she had been preparing for an admission exam to be let into Year 7. Sent instead to Mopti by her parents where she works as a servant in a boarding house, she now works from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. without rest.

Her first task upon waking up is to cross the large courtyard to draw water from a well that has recently been re-dug. Due to extreme drought, water needs to be drawn from ever deeper underground. Fanta should know, as she is the one who has to heave up five full buckets with the 35 meter-long chain.

She then has to sweep the courtyard, and prepare meals for the house's eight occupants. Once the parents have left, she will be able to eat while taking care of the two youngest children. The older children all go to school. Every day, as she watches them leave wearing their canvas schoolbags filled with books, she regrets having given up on her own schooling.

The heat becomes increasingly sweltering and shade is rare around these parts. Before noon, Fanta will have to do the laundry and prepare lunch, all the while keeping an eye on the children. Her days are very, very long.

Fanta impatiently awaits night time. From 9 p.m. to midnight, she will be able to attend an evening at the AVES (Avenir Enfance Sahel) centre. Tonight, over 40 girls will be meeting, all of them domestic workers like herself. The youngest is barely 7 years old.

Hundreds of children and youths have migrated to the town of Mopti and are now subjected to such a life, made up of long tedious working days.

The International Labour Office (ILO) recently implemented the AVES program to change this state of affairs and try to improve the situation of these children. "Through this project, I have learned to read, but it has also taught me other things about day-to-day life, such as the importance of washing my hands before meals and after using the washroom to avoid spreading illnesses," says Fanta.

In 2009, over 900 advocacy sessions were held on various topics such as training, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation and the consequences of migration.

It has been observed that girls often fall victim to all sorts of abuses. 70 cases have been handled by the AVES program. Most of them involved issues of unpaid salary, while other cases dealt with unplanned pregnancies as well as one case of rape.

"We covered the costs of the three pregnancies. Unfortunately, the parents of the girl who had been raped chose to settle the matter amicably," explains Dr. Moussa Hamidou Traoré, head of the AVES program.

Thanks to the program, new centers have been set up, equipped with basic school supplies (notebooks, pens, bags, booklets, chalk, blackboard, etc). They act as welcome and support spaces, open for literacy-training, teaching and sometimes even treatment. Literacy-training sessions were held there, after which some of the children were able to return to their home villages thanks to assistance provided by the centre.

According to Dr. Traoré, the challenges are manifold: the large number of girls attending the centers, the working and living conditions forced upon them by their employers, tuition fees and the bureaucratic obstacles preventing girls from obtaining a mutual health insurance.

In Mali, more than 50 000 children, over 35 000 of whom are girls, have benefited from ILO action programs. Free schooling systems have been put in place for children working in agricultural areas, therefore

removing them from a dangerous work environment without adding an unbearable financial burden to their parents.

In Mali, IPEC also allowed children working in gold-washing sites to attend literacy classes or, for older children, to learn a less dangerous trade, such as carpentry.

Including child labour issues in development and poverty-fighting strategies is one of the central points of IPEC-Mali's activities. This approach has just been strengthened by the recent adoption of a National Framework on the Elimination of Child Labour in Mali. Its aim is to eradicate the worst forms of child labour in Mali by 2020. The process involves two phases: the first aims to eliminate the worst forms of child labour by 2015 (in accordance with the objective of the rest of the African continent). The second phase, spanning from 2016 to 2020, will focus on eliminating all forms of unauthorised child labour in Mali.

"While it is undeniable that encouraging results have been obtained, that the pilot projects have indicated that we can indeed fight against child labour, that mentalities evolve and that the government is more and more involved, poverty still remains a major factor. The fight against child labour in Mali must continue, if not increase," concludes Constance Thomas, director of the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC).