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02.04.2013 - Education Sector

# "I rescued the textbooks before they raided my school." A teacher from Gao (Mali) speaks out.



UNESCO/Jean O'Sullivan - Maiga Hadizatou Hamzatou, Teacher in the northern Malian city of Gao, Mali

Maiga Hadizatou Hamzatou teaches at the Ouleimatou school in the northern Malian city of Gao, Mali. In an interview with UNESCO, she describes the disruption caused to schooling and everyday life when the city was invaded on 31 March 2012.

How was schooling disrupted?

The jihadists started ransacking the schools the day after the invasion. Not one book was left. They took furniture and computer equipment if any. The schools were still closed for the holidays.

A parent came to warn me. I set off with two of my children, opened the school, and rescued as many textbooks as I could before they came.

Girls and boys had to be taught apart, and we did not have the capacity to double all the classes. Many teachers fled to the south. So most classes closed down - but we kept the exam class going.

What exam were students preparing and how did you keep the class going?

Our director, Ms Ouleimatou, asked teachers and civil society to ensure the continuation of the DF (Diplôme du fin d'études fondamentales) school-leaving examination class. There were 160 students in the class, 90% of them were girls. 130 stayed. Ten girls continued their schooling in the south.

As a woman teacher, what were your main problems?

Women were forbidden to travel around without wearing a veil. All women and girls were forced to wear them – even baby girls as young as one year old. The jihadists threatened "correction" if they refused.

Also, transport to school and everywhere else was disrupted as all vehicles, including motorbikes, had been commandeered.

Did girls and women resist wearing the veil?

At first there was a spontaneous demonstration against it by about 100 women and girls of all ages. Many of my girl students were there. The spokesman for the jihadists, Abdulhakib, tried to reason with us, saying that soon all of West Africa would be under the same regime.

However, because of the atmosphere of intimidation, we later encouraged our girl students to wear the veil to school so as not to attract attention.

What form did the intimidation take?

They patrolled the streets with Khalashnikovs. Their black flag was everywhere. They transformed the town hall into a place of "correction". There were constant threats on the radio.

They punished women if they were seen with a man who was not a brother, husband or father. One of my students, Ailguaïchatou (aged 15) got a public whipping because she got a lift from a neighbour on his motorbike. He was whipped as well.

Were parents afraid to send their daughters to school?

Yes, parents kept girls at home for fear they would be assaulted. Another of my students, Bouchirza (aged 16) was raped by three of the extremists on her way to school. She never returned to class.

Did you have to modify the content of your teaching for the exam class?

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No: we were free to teach the prescribed programme. Apart from physical education, which they outlawed, the jihadists didn't look too closely at the curriculum. They didn't have the intellectual baggage. So for example, we continued teaching the students about sexually transmitted diseases.

Did the students complete their examination course?

Yes, in spite of all the obstacles they were finally able to sit their exams last October in Sevare, a 546-km journey from Gao. UNICEF helped with travel and accommodation as it took five days in all for a three-day exam.

Interview by Jean O'Sullivan



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