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The Limitations of Girls' Formal Education in Benin

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The Limitations of Girls' Formal Education in Benin

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Preface

While beginning my preliminary research and literature review for this research project, I became fascinated by the rate of illiteracy in Benin, an otherwise exemplary model of what African countries, (or all countries, really,) should strive for: democratic, peaceful and diverse yet tolerant. What was especially shocking to me was the gap between the literacy rates of women and men. Why, in a country that seems to value a peaceful national ideology and democracy, would this be so? This thesis project was heavily influenced by what I perceived as a systemic lack of justice in Benin.

My three months spent interning at a grassroots NGO and interviewing a sample of Beninese women, both young and old, formally-educated and not, from different socioeconomic backgrounds and family situations bore witness to a breadth of attitudes. I was given some valuable advice after one interview. *“Do not do your research from a perspective of criticism of how things are here. Instead, try to understand where we are coming from, and why things are the way they are¹.”* (Personal communication, August 11, 2011) This seems like obvious advice, but ridding myself of preconceived notions, initial culture shock and upset at some of the things I witnessed had a tendency to cloud my perceptions. That piece of wisdom was a turning point in my outlook.

After that interview, I did my best to heed this advice. Besides extensive reading prior to leaving for Benin, I had no first-hand knowledge of what to expect in terms of realities on the ground. What I hope to accomplish with this thesis is not, then, to criticize those realities I observed, but rather to address what seems to work and what does not seem to work within Benin's formal education system for girls, and to propose a

¹ All French to English translations throughout this thesis are my own.

few solutions that might be a step towards progress and also to add to what other researchers have already identified to that regard. I performed my research in hopes of providing further understanding that could potentially be useful to NGO's, policy-makers or other researchers.

I was fortunate to work for an NGO with an incredibly warm, supportive and welcoming staff that was more than willing to help me locate and interview subjects, give me advice (both solicited and unsolicited) and suggest additional documentation on the subject. I was very grateful for the amount of support provided to me by my colleagues, as well as the willingness of my interview subjects to share with me, openly, the details of their lives. I can only hope to serve them well by telling their stories through this thesis.

Chapter One: Introduction

Benin: An Overview

Before approaching the subject of girls' education in Benin, it would be helpful to examine Benin briefly in its historical and cultural context. This section will focus on basic historical and demographic information, the situational poverty of the majority of Beninese citizens, as well as information about my whereabouts during the duration of my fieldwork in order to provide an understanding of the conditions under which my original data was collected.

Benin, formerly known as the kingdom of Dahomey, is a former French colony that gained its independence from France in 1960. It is a small West African country, with a population of about 9.3 million and is about the same size as the American state of New Jersey (CIA Factbook, 2011). The northern portion of the country is extremely agriculturally oriented economically whereas the Southern tip has a more concentrated population that is relatively more industrially based. The major economic capital is Cotonou, located on the Atlantic Ocean, though the political capital is Porto-Novo, about nineteen miles east of Cotonou. Life expectancy in Benin is relatively low, at 59 years of age (CIA Factbook, 2002; 2011).

It is surprising to many that Benin faces such severe challenges, as it is not only democratic, but also politically stable with a vast range of ethnicities and fifty-four spoken local languages represented within such a small territory (Lewis, 2009). The leadership that emerged post-independence was a thirty-year Marxist quasi-dictatorship led by Mathieu Kérékou. His policies proved ineffective, resulting in economic disaster.

After the fall of Kérékou's regime in 1989, a series of "democratically-elected" presidents led Benin through the past twenty years (Welmond, 2002). Jogwu (2010) speaks much of corruption within the democratic process, which has favored certain candidates over others; this is why the democratic nature of Benin's political system is debatable. Wantchekon (2003) as well as Bierschenk (2009) also provide numerous examples of political clientelism within Benin's electoral process and demonstrate that voters tend to align themselves with candidates either hailing from their own region or ethnic group. So, the objectivity of Benin's elections is not ever truly guaranteed.

Currently, Benin finds itself in the economic shadow, so to speak, of neighboring Nigeria, although the relative lack of widespread political corruption has protected Benin's citizens from political oppression. Although I earlier mentioned the presence of corruption within Beninese politics, its system is still comparatively better off politically than many neighboring nations. Even so, Benin is an extremely traditional society in other ways, where cultural norms are based around the rhythm of village life and strong ethnic identifications, although it is true that generally, urban life is much more progressive and Westernized. Old-fashioned gender roles are also very pervasive; it was clear that, even among more progressive thinkers, women tend to be categorized and pigeonholed to a very pronounced degree (Personal Communication, July-August 2011). For a democracy that has, in some ways, set an example for other Sub-Saharan African countries, the attitudes of many regarding women remain old-fashioned. I will address these viewpoints further when discussing the educational prospects of women living in a staunchly patriarchal society.

The women I interviewed came from four different geographic zones in Benin, but I interviewed all of them within twenty miles of Porto-Novo, where I completed my internship. The majority of interviewees were local to Porto-Novo, although six of them lived outside of the city limits of Porto-Novo in surrounding villages. Five village women interviewed hailed from a village in the commune of Aguégué, while one came from Missérété. One was from a village near the city of Natitingou, in the North of Benin and another was from Lokossa, to the West of Porto-Novo².

² The North of Benin lags behind the South developmentally, as it is more agriculturally based and less accessible to NGO's and aid organizations. It is also less likely for its educational statistics to have been accurately accessed by NGO's or the government due to a deficiency in infrastructure, such as the fact that roads are non-existent or unreliable (Ghionda, 2004). The answers of the interviewee from the North may differ from others' responses due to these constraints that she encountered during her youth.

Statement of the Problem

To be educated, in our Western society, generally connotes that one has participated in some type of formal classroom schooling. Education's might increases with each level of schooling obtained; the more years of school one has completed, the more one's opinions are valued by society. The more theorizing one does and the more original one's ideas, the more likely it becomes that one's ideas will be published and studied by others. "Higher education", then, means college and post-secondary studies. What "education" does not necessarily connote outside of a previously contextualized domain is the home life and socialization of a child. In Benin, the French word « éducation » comprises within its meaning all elements of a child's upbringing. A better English equivalent could be "upbringing". With that in mind, it was with a bit of difficulty, translation-wise, that I began to explore girls' education and its societal importance in Benin. When I spoke of "éducation", people were likely to begin to address the ins and outs of child rearing, how one instructs a child in the ways of manners, societal norms and customs. I was advised to narrow my research to only "scolarisation," meaning formal education.

I was in fact interested in the kind of education that the English word connotes: formal schooling and classroom learning. Reading, writing, mathematics, science and history are the likes of what a child learns only in a formal, organized environment, usually among peers. There are various reasons for which this type of learning should be universal and I expect that the vast majority of the Beninese public would now agree with that sentiment. However, diverse realities that the population lives with on a daily basis have a tendency to encumber or limit their children's access to formal schooling. In spite

of actions taken by the government to promote education, especially for girls, archaic mentalities and familial obligations, as well as unscrupulousness by those in power continue to hinder progress in that realm (Ghionda, 2004; Bellamy, 2004; Sedel and Coulibaly, 2001).

The problem around which I centered my research was the unfortunate reality of educational insufficiency for Beninese girls, both from a young age, upon entering elementary school, up through university level. The tragic reality is such that Benin finds its literacy rates among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, literacy rates sat at a total of 52.2%. Of those literate, only 23.6% of women were literate (Aboh, 2006). When examined superficially, this reality makes little sense, since Benin is a stable democracy upon which many nations have based their developmental aspirations (The Economist, 2006). Unfortunately, an examination of girls' formal education rates will demonstrate that Benin is not an admirable example of progress in that regard. This thesis will address which factors have supported and detracted from girls' progress in formal education.

Currently, Beninese girls are facing a variety of challenges that prevent them from achieving their full academic potential. Poverty and economic issues along with cultural barriers and familial obligations, as well as a lack of governmental support are all among the factors impeding the evolution of Beninese women's minds in an academic sense. This context is the scenario in which I have situated my research as well as my review of relevant literature. Educating the audience about the current underdeveloped situation is meant to ensure a greater understanding of the predicament surrounding many Beninese girls' lives. Oftentimes, Benin is overlooked by Western academics. The absence of

major political conflict, armed warfare and famine may render it uninteresting to those studying African tragedy. Nonetheless, Benin's vast spectrum of social problems (such as violence against women, forced marriage, etc.) that the population is ill equipped to rectify is rooted in a lack of formal education, especially among females (Jogwu 2010; Aboh 2006; Ghionda, 2004 et. al.).

Purpose of the Project

Although a previous research paper discussing the current state of the public education system in Benin spawned my initial curiosity about this subject, my present project focus revolves around the problems not only within formal education itself, but the social constraints that have perpetuated corruption within the system and allowed systemic errors to repeat themselves for such a long period of time. My purpose in this research project was to provide a voice to Beninese women who have either experienced the educational system first-hand, or missed out on it entirely due to blockages beyond their immediate control. It is meant to compile a sampling of their opinions into an understandable format, which will shine a light on Beninese attitudes about women's rights to self-determination and the systemic successes and failures within the educational system.

This paper will include qualitative interviews with women of varying age groups, of varying educational backgrounds and of diverse ethnicities from several different parts of the country. The interviews are meant to demonstrate the commonalities linking what the Beninese consider as totally different ways of raising girls in different ethnic and

religious contexts⁴. It is my hope that this project will contribute to future research and academia concerning not only Benin, but the African continent as a whole as well as women's position within Sub-Saharan African society and their role in the development of their countries. Awareness of the situations of others in our ever-changing global society will promote advancement and innovation in the social sector, which is what demands the most attention by governments and NGO's for the progress of nation states. That is the ultimate purpose of this research project.

The Components of the Project

My research project consists of two key elements. These two elements are a literature review and a series of qualitative interviews. I completed both of these two research methods because information gleaned from one method may support or conflict with information obtained from another. Statistical analyses conducted by Western researchers may not always consistently reflect the realities lived by Beninese citizens. Numbers alone do not do justice to the oftentimes disastrously inadequate scenarios lived by human beings. When Benin is clumped together with other West African countries in comparative graphs, or referred-to briefly by academics discussing the successes of the democracy there (Brown, 2004), it is easy to overlook its individuality within a West-African context and its unique societal setting. Benin's history of democratic stability points to the more progressive mindset of its elected officials, but there is much work to

⁴ My interviewees consistently told me that each ethnicity and village has its own "façon à faire", or way of doing things. To me, an outsider, these differences seemed marginal, at most.

be done both by the government and by the population, aided by the international community to work towards progress.

I found only a few studies (Aboh, 2006; Legonou 2001) centered on opinions and perceptions of Beninese women themselves, which is why I chose to shed light on their worldviews by conducting qualitative interviews in various demographics. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to a statement by an interviewee and support their claims with documentation gathered by an external assessment body, or challenge them through the use of other factual support. This is meant to reinforce or to downplay certain commonly held beliefs that have penetrated the norms of Western thought as it pertains to the realities lived by African women.

The Research Question and Thesis Statement

My thesis question evolved from “What are the societal perceptions of the value of girls’ education in Benin?” to “What encourages and or hinders girls from receiving a formal education in Benin?” I did my best to get a female perspective on this issue, so as to hear from them their own mouths what kinds of issues pose a threat to their scholastic success and development. My methodological approach, additionally, evolved with the help of co-workers and new contacts in Porto-Novo. My findings led me to the following thesis statement: A combination of factors including situational poverty, traditional attitudes about gender roles and a lack of governmental attention have all contributed to the multi-faceted problem of Beninese girls missing out on formal education.

The first section of this thesis will address the context of African conceptions of women in general. It should suffice to say that Benin has not evolved ideologically to a

point of equality between men and women, though this is not a condition unique to Benin, or even the developing world. The majority of Beninese elected officials are men and more classroom teachers are men than women as well. So then, it is also important to contextualize the current manner in which women are regarded in Benin, and their traditional role in society. It is this role, in part, that has prevented their advancement in the greater scheme of academic life.

Chapter two will be a review of relevant literature which explains what others have already said on the subject of women's formal education in the developing world and in Benin, more specifically. Chapter three will give an overview of my research project so as to situate the arguments within the realities I faced while performing research. In chapter four, I will give some insight into the cultural and attitudinal circumstances restricting women in Benin and chapter five will elaborate upon these, focusing on pregnancies and classroom abuses facing teenaged girls. From there, in chapter six, I will address the role of poverty and in discouraging girls' education as well as the role of socioeconomic status in determining access to formal education. For girls, access to financial means is a critical, determining factor in whether or not they will advance scholastically or be prevented from doing so. Finally, I will conclude my discussion in chapter seven with a few proposed recommendations and modifications of the current system that I believe will enhance future educational opportunities for Beninese women and girls.

Overall, my research has demonstrated that although Beninese girls are still inhibited from progressing as far as boys scholastically, their future prospects have been brightened due to awareness campaigns and changing societal attitudes. The systemic

problems within Beninese education and governmental inaction are some of the greatest obstacles for girls in their pursuit of academia.

Chapter Two: A Project Overview

Methodology

Prior to beginning my research regarding the educational obstacles facing Beninese young women, I was unsure of how circumstances on the ground would permit me to conduct my interviews. For this purpose, I provided a somewhat open-ended research format to the IRPBHS committee. Due to the fact that I was unable to plan the logistics of my fieldwork prior to my arrival in Benin, I was unsure of how I would gain access to the population that I wished to interrogate. My thesis question was about the hindrances and encouragements that Beninese girls encounter in the pursuit of a formal education. Therefore, I decided to conduct interviews exclusively with women, in order to get their perspective on the matter. Women are the subordinated sex in Beninese society, so I felt that it was necessary to hear their voices loud and clear for the purposes of this thesis. They are the ones most affected by a lack of educational opportunities.

My Internship Experience

I completed an internship in Benin from the start of June through the end of August 2011. ONG Autre Vie (or “Another Life NGO” in English) is a grassroots nongovernmental organization, headquartered in Porto-Novo, Benin and directed by Romuald Djivoessoun. Their mission is “to promote the rights of women, children and youth” and their programs are diverse, targeting both rural and urban communities.

Programs funded and staffed by Autre Vie range from apprenticeship placements for underprivileged youth, donation of farming equipment to rural villages in need of supplies and many collaborative efforts with international NGO's such as CARE International and the World Food Program. A self-proclaimed "human rights organization", Autre Vie pledges its aid to any woman, child, or young person in need of assistance (ONG Autre Vie, 2011).

My own role working at Autre Vie allowed me to witness first-hand the realities of poverty and violence against women in the area; victims seeking aid came to Autre Vie and I took notes on the details of their plights and we traveled to surrounding villages to evaluate the impact of implemented programs. I read through Autre Vie's documentation including reports from adolescent rape victims, information on the common forms of violence against women in Benin and NGO programs to support victims. Since Autre Vie defines itself as an organization that is dedicated to the *autonomisation* of women (women's empowerment), my coworkers had much to say on the subject of women's education, although much of their knowledge was confined to technical learning and apprenticeships, which is the sort of education most often supported by NGO's. I will further elaborate upon alternative educational options for women in a later section. Working at Autre Vie was overall an extremely positive experience that enhanced my understanding of my thesis subject matter monumentally.

The Circumstances of the Interviews

When beginning to map out my qualitative interviews, I planned to utilize the snowball method in order to find a group of willing interview respondents. I befriended

various contacts, within and outside of Autre Vie that offered to introduce me to women to interview. My co-workers were quite helpful in the process of seeking out interviewees and sorting out what interview questions would be most helpful and relevant to my research topic⁵. Once my research question was solidified, I wrote up slightly different questions for different demographics of women based on their level of education. My questions were all based upon the original questions I had planned prior to arriving in Benin, but altered to the individual interviewee,⁶ (e.g., I would ask younger women questions about their own upbringing and older women about how they raise their children so as to obtain a general idea of current Beninese norms).

I did not know which modes of transportation would be immediately available to me, nor how much time I would be allowed off of work if necessary to pursue interview subjects⁷. For these reasons I had originally projected to focus my research on Porto-Novo exclusively as that was where I would be located for the summer. I also was not aware of how far neighboring villages to Porto-Novo are if local infrastructures do not support or allow for much rapid traffic or vehicle passage. For example, the neighboring commune of Aguégué was not on a main thoroughfare and, though it was probably only ten miles from Porto-Novo, took about 45 minutes to arrive there by car. Heavy rains were often a factor in preventing me to travel to nearby villages, as were mechanical difficulties with vehicles that were meant to take me to various destinations. Fortunately, I was ultimately able to gather information from interview respondents from various

⁵ Refer to acknowledgements on page 3 for a list of co-workers who provided help with my project.

⁶ Refer to Appendix B for a list of interview questions.

⁷ I took either *zemidjans* (motorcycle taxis) or communal bush taxis from place to place if I did not go on foot.

villages and parts of the country. Although the majority of my interviews took place within Porto-Novo itself, some respondents hailed from elsewhere. Finally, six of my interviews took place in neighboring communes within fifteen kilometers of Porto-Novo⁸.

The first five interviews I conducted were with local college students. Three of the five took place within an office at the Autre Vie headquarters during working hours, and the other two occurred in the evening in an empty classroom at the students' college campus, located in Porto-Novo. I interviewed one nun at my place of residence at the convent, and one at Autre Vie. The two professional women were both interviewed in their offices, one at Glo Mobile (a telecommunications company) and one at the administrative building for regional secondary education. Of the six interviews of uneducated women, the five interviews performed in Aguégué took place outside during an awareness campaign that was simultaneously being facilitated by Autre Vie and one took place at a Missérété community center.

Every interviewee was willing to converse openly with me and provided the necessary verbal consent. All of the educated respondents resided in Porto-Novo, an urban area. All of the uneducated respondents came from surrounding rural zones. Of the educated respondents, all but one provided lengthy, detailed answers with tangential information and anecdotal evidence, while the uneducated women were more likely to respond briefly to my questions, either in one word answers or by stating that they did not have enough information to respond, as they were not sufficiently familiar with the educational system. Another trend that I identified among uneducated respondents was

⁸ Only two communes besides Porto-Novo served as interview locations: Missérété and Aguégué. See map for locations relative to Porto-Novo.

that, when asked at the end if they had any questions for me, they either had no questions or asked for my proposed solution to a given problem, such as the severity of poverty within their communities. In contrast, the educated interviewees were likely to inquire as to the reasons behind my interest in girls' education as a thesis topic or about my own field of study.

Opportunities and Challenges of the Field Research

In addition to qualitative interviewing of women aged 18 and older, my goal was also to perform a document review of any documentation I was able to find regarding girls' education in Benin currently and over the past ten to twelve years. The pursuit of documentation proved to be a greater challenge than the qualitative interviews. Obstacles arose at various inopportune occasions and I was forced to forgo what would have otherwise been extremely helpful information. These sundry obstacles included broken interview appointments and no-shows, confusion with scheduling and miscommunications, often due to inadequate Internet connectivity throughout the city. The unreliability of such necessities prevented me from completing my research in the manner that I had initially foreseen. The difference in culture also proved to be a large factor in the timeliness of subjects⁹. However, the logistics of the document review that I had planned were just as much of a challenge for me as the interviews¹⁰.

⁹ That is, things ran on local time, which tended to be at least two hours after a given pre-arranged time.

¹⁰ A trip to the UNICEF library in Cotonou proved exciting. I arrived there at 9 am, shortly after they opened their doors. However, no one had informed me that the staff would be leaving at 12:30 for the daily 2.5-hour midday pause. So, I found myself in the library, having locked my personal belongings in the library director's

Fortunately, I did not experience difficulties in gaining the trust of my interview respondents. Rather, my colleagues tended to question my research methods. Interestingly enough, the standpoint of an exclusive emphasis on female interview respondents was eventually challenged by several of my male colleagues during my summer internship at the Porto-Novo based NGO. I was told that the women working in the office were not equipped to offer opinions or advice related to my research question during a meeting that was held for the purpose of sharing ideas for my thesis outline and approach to writing. I took this meeting as a helpful example of the patriarchy that continues to exist within the professional world, even at human rights NGO's that mean to address women's rights and autonomy. I found this incredibly ironic. Here we were, discussing the need for women to receive formal education. In this same forum I was told that the women working at the NGO were not educated enough to contribute a valid opinion to the discussion of women's education.

If nothing else, this group brainstorming session helped to reinforce my perceptions of the gender roles that I had witnessed upon entering the societal context as an outsider. Although my coworkers' views were different from my own during this discussion, I appreciated that they were so willing to provide me some insight and perspective on the topic. The session allowed me to contextualize the opinions of my interviewees, providing a more or less traditional point of view than those of my male coworkers. Since *Autre Vie* is a secular, relatively progressive organization compared

office, without a way to access them. There was also no way to check out items and return them, and no photocopy machine available for public use. I furiously took notes by hand in a notebook until my ride returned for me, at which point I had to scramble to find a security guard to permit me access to my belongings.

with those NGO's in the area, fighting in part for women's rights, I was able to comprehend what this meant to the understanding of my colleagues.

Chapter Three: Review of Literature

Introduction

The troubles facing women in modern African society can be partially attributed to traditional culturally accepted gender roles and partially attributed to abysmal execution of reforms, spearheaded either by governments or NGO's. In particular, the educational situation currently facing women in Benin is multi-faceted. Many authors have made significant contributions to existing literature regarding the challenges adult Sub-Saharan African women face, while others have narrowed their focus to classroom and home life-related challenges facing young girls. I will first broadly address literature regarding common developing world and African educational obstacles, later narrowing my focus to the literature specific to women's formal education in Benin. I will conclude with a description of what my research will contribute to existing documentation and literature on the topic of Beninese girls' education.

As I mentioned, the position of women in the developing world is generally very different from that of Western women. I wish to explore this concept further in terms of education through this review of literature. Some researchers (Welmond, 2002; Brown, 2004) have overlooked this question because they have viewed Sub-Saharan African societies largely through a Western lens, without much regard for socio-cultural norms, including familial and other obligations, which girls must incorporate into their lives while simultaneously bearing the burden of obtaining formal schooling. Beninese researchers (such as Legonou, 2001; Guinginido Gaye, 2005) have been able to include this largely gendered concept of norms and expectations within their writings, as they are

fully aware of their own society's constraints and realities. However, the shortcoming of existing literature is that research is either narrowly targeted, focusing on the viewpoints of only one demographic or commune, (such as Aboh's female secondary school students, 2006) or very broadly targeted, comparing the situations of several neighboring countries in addition to Benin (Jogwu, 2010; Sedel and Coulibaly, 2001). Through the following review of literature focusing on different perspectives towards women's education in Sub-Saharan Africa, I hope to present several angles within which to situate my research question, which is as follows: What are the factors that prevent and/or encourage Beninese girls to receive a formal education?

In the first section of this literature review I will analyze some general existing perspectives around the challenges facing women in the developing world, especially in Africa. It is vital to understand if and how government and NGO programs, life circumstances or other factors have played a role in augmenting general accessibility to formal education in Sub-Saharan African nations. The second section will focus on literature that addresses Benin more specifically and some of the many reforms implemented over the past years as well as how these reforms have attempted to remedy the dire situation of girls' formal education. In a third section and conclusion, I will situate my research project and data within the context of these existing topics and draw attention to several focused studies (Aboh 2006; Legonou 2001) that did not quite address the same populations as mine.

Educating Women in the Developing World

In his article “Democracy and Gender Inequality in Education: A Cross-National Examination,” Brown (2004) elaborates a theory about whether or not democracy influences a nation's education of women and whether democracy is a central theme in the success of education for women. Many Sub-Saharan nation-states (such as Nigeria) operate under broken regimes, or cope with warlord politics, which prevent formal education systems from being successful (Jogwu, 2010). Brown devised a model to test the theory that stable democratic governance improves the likelihood of women being educated in various third world nations, and his findings seemed to support the theory that “female political leaders may be more sensitive to the problems that produce a wide gap between men and women in education, resulting in more rigorous attempts to address the problem” (Brown, 2004). These “problems” are certain patriarchal attitudes and behaviors that lead to fewer women being formally educated, and thus qualified to work in civil service positions (Raymonde Agossou, as quoted in *Le Trait de l'Union*, 2002). Benin was not specifically included in the group studied, though other Sub-Saharan African nations such as Lesotho and Senegal were included.

Brown concludes that political participation by women at an executive level of government within democracy is one key factor that will help to close the educational disparity between men and women (2004). It must be noted here as well that since its transition to democratic governance from a Marxist-Leninist regime, Benin has provided other Sub-Saharan African nations with a model to emulate, having been stable as a

democracy since 1989 (Le Trait de l'Union, 2002). Even so, men continue to considerably outnumber women in political positions. By Brown's logic, Benin, as a country exemplifying democracy, should also take a progressive role in the advancement of girls' education, just as is the case in other stable democracies such as Argentina. The current state of affairs in Benin does not demonstrate this democratic objective of egalitarian education. That is to say that a proportionally larger amount of women should, ideally, be actively representing the population in elected political positions. Although the proportion of women in office has grown over the past several years, there is still a large disparity between how many women are actually in office and how many should proportionally be in office (Le Trait de l'Union, 2002). A 2005 UNFPA document points out, "the very weak implication of women in the political life and in decision-making instances is brought about by the majority [of women's] weak level of instruction."

Brown's analysis of the potential for girls to achieve agreed largely with that of Bowman and Anderson's article "The Participation of Women in Education in the Third World" (1980), which compares boys and girls' fields of study and the levels of education that they eventually obtain. Like Brown, Bowman and Anderson draw attention to the fact that girls lag behind boys in the developing world as far as literacy and education is concerned. They emphasize the crucial role of perceptions however, which may play a central part in the access a girl is granted to schooling. That is, it may appear that since a girl has "access" to schooling, she can be considered among those who are able to take advantage of this opportunity. They differentiate between "participation" and "access" saying that simply because educational facilities are

available does not mean that the communities will choose to benefit from them. “Participation” is meant to signify that students are able to take advantage of educational opportunities, whereas “access” refers to the presence of educational facilities within their communities or immediate surroundings. The authors wish to emphasize that there are several examples of families opting out of educating their girls, such as the Masai in Kenya, certain groups in India and also Appalachia (Bowman and Anderson, 1980).

The reasons for which families may opt out of formally educating their daughters are varied, but in the many Sub-Saharan African instances, available literature tends to identify educational costs, infrastructural issues (such as distance to school and lack of adequate transportation) and early marriage as three elements detracting from girls’ formal education. Even if schools exist that would normally cater to students living in the surrounding areas, authors (such as Sedel and Coulibaly, 2001) identify financial difficulties and infrastructural constraints as continually diminishing opportunity. Sedel and Coulibaly (2001) remark that in Mauritania and Guinea, rural students of all ages must travel long distances in order to arrive at school. They indicate that in Mauritania, 96% of children attending school can arrive at the classroom in roughly 45 minutes or less, but only 70% of children not attending school could feasibly reach the classroom in the same amount of time. The 26% disparity points to distance from home as a deterrent for students to attend school.

For a young child, a 45-minute walk each way to school and back may be a daunting distance for parents to grapple with, especially with regards to their younger children who may or may not have older siblings to look after them along the way. Parents may fear for their children’s safety in walking such a distance, which may

ultimately dissuade them from wanting to send their girls to school. Even if a 45-minute walk may seem brief, the rainy season or extremely hot temperatures can quickly produce hazardous conditions for children walking far from home.

Sedel and Coulibaly (2001) also address high educational costs for families, (that is to say the price of school supplies and supplementary classroom materials) stating in many rural areas that there is a lack of classrooms, “rudimentary equipment such as a chalkboard, chalk or tables and benches” (31). Legonou (2001) elaborates on this notion, explaining that some children in her study of a rural Beninese community affirmed to her that their parents were unable to pay for their educational costs including books, uniforms and supplies (48). Legonou explains that more often than not, if a family has multiple children, the girls are selected to discontinue their schooling first should the family be financially unable to provide the necessary school supplies. This is a culturally based phenomenon to which I will return in section two.

The tendency of parents to devalue the schooling of their daughters leads me to the issue of early, forced or coerced marriage of young girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has a major effect on the formal educational pursuits of these young women. *Le Trait de l'Union*, a document put together by the United Nations in Benin, draws attention to this issue that facilitates the “déscolarisation” of girls (2002). To quote:

Those girls whose parents are not able to provide for them are placed with host families...or simply to acquaintances [of their families] and used as domestics. At that time, they learn especially to do domestic work correctly or to help their masters with market commerce (6).

Here is an example of girls being treated as objects for trade, required to do as others instruct them. Desperate parents may even choose to sell their daughters into marriage in order to elevate their own social status or to relieve themselves of the financial burden of

their daughters. Prior to 1997, women were legally considered to be minors under Beninese law (Le Trait de l'Union, 2002). This is a testament to the fact that women, even today and in the very recent past, continue to struggle in their plight for legal, constitutional and social equality. It is true that the symbolic passage of such a piece of legislation does not automatically change the attitudes of the entire population; discriminatory attitudes against women have not disappeared from Beninese culture since the 1990's.

Culturally speaking, African girls may be entrusted with a bounty of household and familial responsibilities with which schooling, at a certain point, is bound to interfere (Le Trait de l'Union, 2002). "The dualist conception of traditional upbringing distinguishes the education of the boy from that of the girl," (UNICEF, 1992). The latter two United Nations documents address the generally-held societal view of the value of education for girls, which is based on the perceptions of parents and whether they feel that their daughters' schooling will contribute to the family in a positive way or not. This particular notion of family contribution was also a critical part of Bowman and Anderson's article (1980) because it demonstrated that family perceptions have a great impact on the girls' educational access from the start. If parents choose to withhold their daughters from school for whatever reason, there is little to be done to remedy the girls' situations. However, Bowman and Anderson did not back up this statement with any data or actual research into the importance of educating daughters for third-world parents. The reasons for which parents withhold their daughters from schooling still need to be explored. The theoretical notions raised by this article will still be helpful; my qualitative interviews provide an overview of how important formal education is when compared to

the exigency of household obligations and societal pressures to maintain the gender status quo.

My critiques of Bowman and Anderson's argument as well as UNICEF's arguments are their lack of direct evidence from parents of disadvantaged girls and young women themselves. The study I have performed also addresses that very element of this discourse: how mothers view the importance of their daughters' education, because I interviewed women from varying economic situations.

The Specific Case of Benin

Equally important to address in discussing female education is the influence of local communities and the governance of their own geographic milieu. Benin, in particular, has undergone various educational reforms prior to and after democratization that shaped the manner in which education has been executed and the resources provided to girls, especially in rural areas. One prominent perspective regarding education in general in Benin is that no real progress is possible without the collaborative participation of teachers and government, creating a positive environment for students and quality education across the board (Welmond, 2002; Jogwu 2010; Aboh, 2006 et. al.). There is much evidence within existing literature of poorly qualified or completely unqualified instructors taking too much of a leadership role which is beyond their capability. Michel Welmond, in his 2002 article entitled "Globalization Viewed from the Periphery: The Dynamics of Teacher Identity in the Republic of Benin", explores this problem of teacher qualifications. He states

From 1995 through 1998, Benin faced a tremendous teacher shortage. With a hiring freeze in place, class sizes ballooned in urban areas, and one or two

teachers ran many rural schools...Also, the social status of teachers has steadily declined (15).

The hiring freeze and instructor deficit that Welmond references was a very much a politically motivated problem¹¹. With few teachers available and fewer students pursuing this occupation due to its poor remuneration and little-respected as a profession, the quality of education is, in turn, destined to decline. Furthermore, Aboh (2006) explains that teachers do not tend to maintain healthy rapports with their students. Educators are somewhat resentful of their marginal government salaries and do not put forth the required effort within a classroom setting. Distrust of educators dramatically influences a student's willingness, or lack thereof, to attend school. Ghionda (2004) explains the lack of qualified teachers and poor educational retention rates in numerical terms. There are roughly 50 to 55 students per teacher in primary school in Benin, and the retention rate in primary school from CI to CM2 (the equivalents of kindergarten and first grade) are only at 40% of the total students enrolled. The high dropout rates are due to poverty, mostly; I will explore this element of the educational crisis in further detail later on. This is definitely problematic for education rates; Benin, in spite of changes to its educational system, is not quickly approaching a healthy average of student retention from year to year. Ghionda also emphasizes that the distribution of qualified teachers is deficient; there seem to be more teachers concentrated in urban areas than in the rural sectors that are in the direst need of such instructors.

¹¹ Teachers had mobilized to bring about the fall of Kérékou's Leninist-Marxist regime in 1989, so when he ran for president of the democratic republic in 1996, teachers rallied behind Nicephore Soglo of the opposition party. Welmond says "new leaders were unable or unwilling to reverse the slide in teachers' status and power," which resulted in a cycle of instructor deficiency.

Another 2004 report on Benin's educational situation demonstrated the same findings. According to Guinguido Gaye, "the percentage of qualified instructors is weak and tends to diminish: 91.9% in 1994 to 71.3% in 1998." (3) As NGO and government efforts to get children into schools increase, so does the number of children who do go to school. Unfortunately, there are not enough qualified teachers to cater to the needs of Beninese students and the teachers performing these jobs often fall short of being fully qualified. Welmond insists that their lack of qualifications is actually institutionally supported. He quotes an official in the Beninese Ministry of Education, who stated:

The Beninese are fundamentally elitist. They understand that not everyone will make it through school, that only a small minority will be able to become civil servants. They just want to be sure that the process is transparent and based on merit. This idea that everyone should attain a certain minimal qualification is just completely foreign to Benin. (Welmond, 2002, quoting a 1998 interview)

Clearly, the problem is cultural and attitudinal; many Beninese fail to see the greater necessity for qualified instructors, perhaps preferring to keep the status quo between the influential elite and the commoner. It is true that often, wealthy families will elect to send their children to private schools, or abroad, often to the West, to pursue higher education (Personal Communication, August 2011).

In his article "Democratization without Development", Bierschenk attributes Benin's larger economic situation partially to an overabundance of external aid since 1989. Citing Kohnert and Preuss (2002) Bierschenk states:

In 1991, Benin featured for the first time on the list of recipients of USAID and in the same year, a second installment of the SAP was granted although the objectives of the first phase had not actually been reached. In fact, following the Democratic Renewal, the country became increasingly "over-assisted."

He goes on to explain that the Beninese political system has allowed for a poor, misdirected distribution of aid, "with each donor pursuing its own agenda...[which has

been] a major factor in limiting the coherence of government action.” It is precisely this problem, which manifests itself within the Beninese educational system. The bounty of foreign aid is not being put to appropriate use for women’s advancement.

Aid dollars are not only misallocated, but the programs to which they are allocated are also strongly influenced by Western ideas. The external aid (such as that from UNICEF or USAID) referenced by Ouane and Amon-Tanoh is criticized by Yoloeye, who continues the narrative encouraging local direction of educational content in order to cater it to the “national needs of Africa” based on locale. Yoloeye is trying to make the point that external aid is bound to influence the way in which the Beninese go about public Education; any external funds will come with conditions and recommendations from the West that may not consider the students’ best interest. The main argument of this particular author is that the “heavy dependence on foreign funding for educational reform...has already built-in mechanisms that militate against true relevance.” (171) This is to say that the systemic issue with curricula is that they are based on Western notions of education rather than local needs. If curricula were revamped and molded to fit local communities, they would be much more effective. In this case, courses would be catered to the histories of Benin’s diverse populations. Local curricula would correspond to regional history, post and prior to Beninese independence. Yoloeye goes on to give the example of Benin's educational reform in 1975, citing their philosophy for education:

There is no schooling problem to be solved in isolation, the problem is one of development of which the schooling program is an important element (Educational Reforms and Innovations in Education, 1978).

Education, then, must be merely one component of a greater approach to societal development as a whole. The educational aspect of social development must go hand-in-hand with all other areas of development, including economic, ideological and infrastructural, among others. Yoloye makes a very pertinent point in this quote, because it is impossible to focus on education without also focusing on the problems that keep girls from receiving formal schooling.

How do Beninese Girls Perceive their Educational Prospects?

One main theme that seems to be unanimously agreed-upon by authors is that education of the masses is central to development and furthering of opportunity and career advancement for all, particularly young Beninese women. One researcher, Sessi S. F. Aboh, claimed from his qualitative interviews that education for young women was extremely highly valued in Cotonou, Benin. Among his sample of young women were girls either pursuing secondary education or girls who would have had that option had they elected to continue their studies instead of entering the work force at a young age. The girls all were currently attending or had previously attended a public high school in Cotonou. The ones that opted to end their high school careers prior to obtaining the BAC either did so to pursue apprenticeships or to work in the informal economy such as market sales (Aboh, 2006). Their parents were generally extremely supportive of their educational endeavors, although the girls did not necessarily see the value in pursuing post-secondary degrees. So then, I must theorize that the value of education for Beninese girls is contextual. In the interviews conducted by Aboh, the girls were all from similar backgrounds, generally able to afford education and supported by their families. If Aboh

had conducted interviews with families unable to send their daughters to school, or with girls lacking in educational opportunities, his results would have been quite different.

The only girls interviewed in Aboh's study were urban dwellers with the possibility of continuing education. Though Aboh states that he had trouble obtaining specifics regarding the socio-economic statuses of the girls, none of them indicated that they were forced to quit school due to a lack of finances. He explains that their parents' professions ranged from professional civil servants to informal market women.

Since academia tends to thrive more readily within cities, those living in rural areas may suffer from lack of physical access to education. Not every family is able to easily afford to send their children to school and pay for uniforms, textbooks and so forth. The costs incurred with school attendance in Benin are also worth examination; although much literature addressed the education reforms of the 1970's, it did not explain or highlight any current or ongoing efforts to reduce the price of schooling for families. In 2002, Beninese legislation eliminated school fees for girls (OECD, 2009). My research will focus on the importance of putting financial resources towards costs such as these for girls when compared with other costs that an already impoverished family may incur. I explained that Benin's poverty rates are quite elevated, so fees associated with education would prove burdensome for families struggling financially. I also explored, in my research, whether or not poor families prioritize the formal educations of their daughters over other needs. These factors all contributed to whether or not a girl would stand a chance academically, or if she would be destined to live be deprived of a formal education while working in the agricultural or informal commercial sector.

Conclusion

I have found that scholars have attributed low education rates among women to a marked lack of access for those in rural areas, an historical preference for educating boys over girls and financial necessity influencing the decision for girls to enter the work force at a younger age. There are only a few studies dealing with the opinions of the populace; Aboh's study is limited to only one demographic. Many studies deal with statistics furnished by the United Nations or external NGO's rather than interviews dealing with perceptions of the girls themselves. Research is based overwhelmingly on the assumption that formal education is absolutely necessary for every girl in Benin. My goal is to find out what factors impact how staunchly the girls tend to value this formal education for themselves and also if society as a whole feels as they do. There is a need for research that articulates the perceptions of Beninese women themselves, as much of the literature in my research was speaking from the perspective of an outsider from the West and not that of a recipient of educational programs in a developing nation. This is where my research could become useful; I will be conducting interviews with diverse demographics of both educated and uneducated Beninese women.

Chapter Four: Why Educate a Woman? The Challenge of Traditional Attitudes

Time and time again, as I interviewed women from different backgrounds with different skill sets, a common, recurring theme continued to be reiterated. “On pense que les filles sont faites pour le foyer, et qu’elles doivent rester a la maison,” (Personal communication, July-August 2011). That is, certain people (often older generations and those with a more rural way of life are the strongest adherents to these attitudes) think that girls are made for the household, and that they should stay at home. Each time, the interviewee would state the fact simply. Women are thought of as primarily responsible for the home. They are “created for the home.” Women are deemed responsible for all elements of domestic life. They need to cook, clean, sew, take care of the children and do “women’s work.”¹² Frequently, they are also expected to work outside of the home as well, contributing financially to the household’s upkeep. I will return to the kinds of professions that unschooled women tend to have, but at this point I would like to draw attention to the fairly widespread attitudes surrounding the role of a woman primarily as a homemaker.

Education as a Human Right

Although traditional gender roles may confine girls to a home-making role, the UN recognizes that children have the fundamental right to an education (Bellamy, 2004; Le Trait de l’Union, 2002). This is a human right acknowledged by almost every one of

¹² Women’s work is not the most eloquent way of putting it, but basically any domestic chore or child-rearing task is categorized as “women’s work”.

my literary sources and by many of my interviewees. So then, stopping a girl from going to school for whatever reason is, by definition, a human rights violation. However, the governments of many developing African nations do not view education in this light. According to a 2004 UNICEF report, there are four major categories of factors preventing the education of girls in Sub-Saharan African nations such as Benin. Among these is one element described in French as “incompréhension”, which, most simply put, is that “the contribution that formally educated women can bring to the development of a country is still far from being admitted by all.” The word “admitted” in this declaration is what strikes me as most important. Perhaps men are aware that women are equally competent and have the same amount of potential as men do within a classroom setting, but the strength of tradition inhibits the free expression of this mentality (Personal communication, August 18, 2011). If historically, women have not had the right to attend school until fairly recent history, it is not a surprise that women’s roles in the development of society as a whole have been largely overlooked. Not many women have held political office in the history of Benin’s newer democracy, although this number has steadily increased since the formation of the new government (Personal Communication, August 2011).

Further review of documentation on the subject proved to more concretely demonstrate the explanations that girls gave me for their perceptions of their own femininity and roles in society. The concept of “education for girls” has evolved, according to a 2002 United Nations report, but there are still many obstacles to overcome in the realm of new approaches to old traditional practices.

Before colonization and well after, the education of girls was limited to the learning of a social or domestic life, to the maintenance of a household. The girl

had to learn to be like her mother, to take care of her future family and to her future children. Her entire education was oriented towards this objective (Le Trait de l'Union, 2002).

This passage illustrates the realities of a young Beninese girl's upbringing within the confines of a traditional, Beninese home. Her future roles as wife and mother as well as the primary homemaker were and continue to be most emphasized, although certain Beninese attitudes are slowly changing, as is reflected in official reports to which I will refer in a later section.

Without tearing down too many societally held beliefs and without imposing my Western point of view on everything that I disagreed with or was surprised at, it proved difficult to progress in this particular element of my research. The initial advice given to me, which was that I must "try to understand things as they are, from [their] point of view" became increasingly challenging to follow. My privileged Western background would not ever permit me to fully sympathize with the attitudes or mentalities of my interview subjects. It was often necessary to put their responses in perspective within the confines of their cultural realities, which required more domestic labor of girls than of boys. Though it is true that girls they do bear this responsibility in general, even in the West, many would argue that it would be unjust to state that it is natural that women are expected to perform more domestic labor than men not be a requirement of daily household life. As my country of origin had already undergone its own women's rights revolution decades prior to my time, the oft-held traditional outlooks regarding gender roles are a tricky topic to continue revisiting. However, even a superficial glance at the state of Beninese society will blatantly demonstrate that misogyny and patriarchy are the norms in Benin, both in the North as well as in the South of the country, the differences

between which I will address in a later section (Personal communication, July-August, 2011).

This archaic, traditional outlook is changing and shifting with each new generation. My interviews showed that educated women seemed to agree almost unanimously about regarding the degree of importance of domesticity for a girl. Conversely, uneducated women were more likely to disagree amongst themselves about how important “scolarisation” is for young women. When interviewing a rural, illiterate 18 year old subject about her perspective about formal education and the responsibilities of boys and girls within and outside of the household, this young woman told me that it was only natural that women complete more domestic work than men. It is only fitting and normal, then, that girls should be taught to do women’s work. They ought to cook and clean, do all of the washing. Furthermore, boys should not have to learn to cook, or do any of the “women’s work”. That simply was not their role as future men. And why? I asked her. Because that is just the way things are, and they should be that way. According to her, the unequal distribution of household labor was a simple fact of life. She planned to continue this tradition with the raising of her own family as well. When I asked her to comment on the differences between raising girls and boys, she told me that her boys would not be expected to do “women’s work.” Domestic labor was for women alone (Personal communication, August 11, 2011). This same young woman seemed to have quite a different perspective of how her own life ought to be, compared with many views of educated Beninese women. When she was eight or nine years old¹³, her family had sent her to work for a wealthier woman as a domestic and also in order to help her

¹³ The girl was not completely sure if she was eight or nine years old, due to her lack of birth certificate.

with her market activities. She is a classic example of a girl who was deprived of her right to education¹⁴ due to the economic misfortune of her parents as well as their traditional mindset. However, this type of situation is also imposed on girls who do not succeed in their studies.

On the other hand, men and boys had their own clearly defined roles, according to this same young woman. Boys should go to school and learn in order to later earn a living and provide for their future wives and families. Boys were not expected to participate in household chores such as cleaning and cooking and men expected dinner ready for them upon their return from work that day. This was typically the norm within the Beninese households that were described to me (Personal Communication, July-August 2011). Benin's own legislation has, as I stated earlier, been altered to proclaim that women possess the same legal rights as men (Le Trait de l'Union, 2002). In 1993, they even ratified the International Convention on the Eradication of Discrimination against Women, which was meant to promote women's rights (Le Trait de l'Union, 2002).

Evidently the aforementioned girl's situation was a textbook example of how girls are used and expected to perform if they are prevented from attempting to succeed scholastically, regardless of any symbolically ratified United Nations treaty or Beninese legislation. What is tragic is the fact that even those that may have succeeded academically are often denied the opportunity to reach their full potential due to their parents' decisions. I observed that young women, even those presumed to be of a legal age, often are treated like children unable to make their own decisions. Uneducated

¹⁴ The "right to an education" is outlined by UNICEF documents (UNICEF, 2002; 1992, etc.)

interviewees tended to be quite accepting of their own situations, knowing that, if their parents chose not to send them to school, they must have had good reasons for keeping them home or sending them to work. They seemed obedient by nature, unwilling to question their fate. Conversely, educated women were more likely to be outspoken and to express their objections to attitudes that ultimately kept other women out of classrooms.

The Opinions of Educated Girls

In stark contrast to the point of view of the rural, uneducated young woman, an urban college student of the same age told me that, regarding her own future, she had her own ambitions and ideas about her path. She directly told me that she was proud of her chosen field of study, local community development, and that in high school she had fought with her parents over her choice of *filière*, or course of study. “My parents wanted me to study math and science, but I know my own strengths better than anyone,” she explained. Instead of struggling through countless science courses in order to be a doctor, she preferred to stick to the domain in which she already knew she would be successful. As a result, her parents are proud of what she has accomplished and she is certain that she will excel in her future career (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011).

This same interviewee expected to have children in the future and said that she would require both sexes to complete household chores and equal amounts of household chores at that. She did not appreciate the way in which her brothers were allowed to return home from school, rest and watch TV or perhaps begin their homework directly. Meanwhile, she and her sisters were required to help their mother prepare dinner, as well as finish up any chores leftover from that day's work. Only after that were they allowed

to begin their homework or begin reviewing the lessons for the following day. It was not right that boys had so much extra time to simply amuse themselves, or to get a head start on the following day's lesson. This system gives the boys an unfair advantage over girls within the classroom (Personal communication, July 5, 2011). This interview confirmed, within my own data, the examples given by much of the literature of what hinders young girls from excelling academically (Bowman and Anderson, 1980; Guingnido Gaye, 2005; UNICEF, 1992 et.al.)

The custom of requiring girls to perform more domestic work than boys proved to be a trend among my interviewees. As a rule, the young women themselves did not seem to draw a link between the importance placed on the domestic labor of girls and the disproportionately high dropout rates among girls. Although some girls did consider it to be unjust that so much more was expected of them at home than of their brothers, only five interviewees drew the conclusion, independently, that this contributed to dropouts among girls. All five had been granted access to formal education. All of this is to demonstrate that girls, required to perform an excessive amount of chores in addition to completing their studies, have less of a chance of succeeding in both domains simultaneously.

Domestic Responsibilities vs. Formal Education

Some village women explained that they were reluctant to send their girls to school due to the fact that the girls help them more at home. If the girls all leave and go to school every day, there is no one left to help them care for the other children and to do all of the things expected of them at home. This was a question that arose on multiple

occasions. How, after all, is one woman to do the work of two or three people? The lack of modern conveniences means that being a stay-at-home mother is more than a full-time job. Laundry must be washed and food must be prepared from scratch, often for a family of seven or eight children. The overwhelming burden of domesticity often plays a major role in the decision of a rural family to prevent their daughter(s) from attending school; I will develop this idea further when I discuss more interviews with un-schooled women.

How important, then, is school when one must place it amidst all of life's other responsibilities? Perhaps it isn't at all, depending on one's station in society and the luck of which family one is born into. When the chances of economic advancement are slim regardless, there is little motivation for families to decide to take a chance on girls when there is so much other work to be done. Besides, girls who have been to school are more likely to "raise their voices to their in-laws" (Akpaka, 1991). If the ultimate goal for a girl is to raise her own family, she might as well avoid becoming independent-minded by staying at home and helping her mother.

For the girls receiving formal education, on the other hand, it was the single most important thing in life. Each admired her parents' sacrifice and was completely determined to make them proud of her academic achievements by becoming successful later in life, either by getting multiple Ph.D.'s, beginning her own NGO, or going abroad to study. One 19-year-old student in Community Development explained her perspective to me, as well as that of her parents. "I am from a family of 7 [children]. My parents don't have the means to support all of us, but somehow we get by. I don't know how they do it. My father is a photographer, and my mother is a homemaker." On one salary,

for the entire household, she explained that her father is doing his best to support the academic endeavors of his daughter.

This interview demonstrated that such attitudes of devaluing girls' education are starting to change gradually. After all, her father was doing his best to ensure that his daughter would have better than he and his wife had. Regardless of the fact that he himself had not been formally educated beyond an elementary level, he was determined to begin a family tradition of emphasizing education for girls. This is precisely the type of attitude that will remain with each successive generation if reinforced within the *foyer* (household). Upon witnessing the dedication of their parents to their formal educations, girls who work hard will strive to do the same for their families in the future. If this cycle continues itself with each subsequent generation, the country's development will occur in that progressive manner.

Whether or not women have been afforded the opportunity for formal schooling, women will often elect to "faire une petite commerce", that is, do smalltime business either from home or at the market. Or, they will elect to be more mobile, selling produce, prepared food, or other merchandise that they carry on top of their heads. This profession seems to span the various levels of formal education; women of all education levels work in the informal economy. Some businesswomen, both formally educated and illiterate, do a fantastic job selling their goods, preparing food to sell and selling it alongside the road, or taking the fish that their husbands catch to the market for sale.

Even so, market life and an economy that is heavily based around the informal exchange of francs can only adequately support a few. The illiterate village women that I interviewed each explained to me that they would go day to day, not knowing whether

they would earn enough to eat on a given day. It is perhaps a reflection of their lack of business- savvy or that they are not suited well to market life, but they truly struggled economically while involved in such a profession. Their situations were such that they were so busy surviving that they were unable or unaware of how to think about methods of improvement or alternatives to their commerce. Fortunately, the majority of women were now able to understand the importance of education for their female children as well as the males. Many wish to see their daughters succeed in the classroom so as to get good jobs, advancing their families socially as well as economically.

The Influence of Role Models

I asked what had made the women who do send their girls to school what was the factor that had changed their minds about it. In response, I heard that on numerous occasions, the “evolved” children of their friends or acquaintances would return to the village after having gone to college. They would tell each other about their experiences in universities in the city. Perhaps these students had received a scholarship, perhaps not. Regardless, their uneducated parents were proud of their children’s successes when they were able to break out of the cycle of poverty.

UNICEF and other international organizations perceive providing girls with a formal education as “the necessary means of development of the country” (UNICEF, 2004). By receiving a formal education, they will not only learn to read and write, but to raise their children in a manner that supports the overall intellectual development of their country. The precedent set by women will encourage others to follow in their footsteps as leaders of their nation and a sustainable basis of development will naturally fall into

place. This is the hope of development theorists and aid workers who have born witness to the catastrophe of Beninese literacy rates.

Chapter 5: Social Taboos and Their Effects on Girls

Especially in rural areas, my interviews and reviewed documentation both indicated that Beninese girls are dealing not only with the pressures of measuring up academically to the boys, but also with a group of stereotypes fostered by a tradition of sexism (Ghionda, 2004; Guingido Gaye, 2010; Jogwu, 2010). That is to say that, since girls are understood differently than boys by their parents, they are found guilty of things that would, in the West, be considered outside of their control. Many female interviewees faulted girls themselves for the harassment they faced in schools, saying that girls were overly flirtatious with the instructors (Personal Communication, August 2011). Sexual harassment of female students by both peers and teachers, impregnation of female students by the latter parties and the dropout rates that result from these instances need to be considered in their entirety when discussing the formal schooling of Beninese girls. This is because all of these problems interrupt schooling as well as lead to other social and familial problems. While it is expected for girls to assume the role of motherhood should a pregnancy occur, there are few resources established for them to cope with their newfound responsibilities while also pursuing their own academic advancement¹⁵ (Personal Communication August 2011).

¹⁵ Village women explained that once pregnancy occurs, there are not affordable child care options for girls. The only option is for the girl to drop out of school to care for her child.

Pregnancy and Adolescence

When I spoke with several unschooled women in the village of Avokpota, near Porto-Novo, the theme of premature pregnancy arose on numerous occasions. Parents seem to fear that, in sending their girls to school, they are much more likely to become pregnant than if the girls were kept at home. Indeed, the problem of teen pregnancy is a societal issue that spans across cultures, but the resources available to cope with such a circumstance vary from society to society. Several women asked me how people generally deal with such instances in my country. After all, how is an already impoverished family to continue to nourish every unexpected mouth that should arrive while also paying the school fees of their other children? I explained to the women that, in the case of high school pregnancies, there are a variety of options available, depending on the public school district's funding and programs¹⁶.

On occasion, high schools may even be equipped with daycare centers that are free of charge or relatively inexpensive in order to support the continuing education of teen mothers who choose to raise their children. Affordable childcare can still be difficult to come by, however, and teen motherhood is not an easy undertaking for any girl. The concept of state-sponsored childcare was totally foreign to the women. They are aware that such a program is far from being developed by their government. Village women explained that once pregnancy occurs, there are no real affordable childcare options for girls. The realities vary greatly with socio-economic circumstance, so women in urban areas may have an easier time of it, although I personally did not gather data

¹⁶ My own school district in Olympia, WA had an alternative school for this very purpose, to enable teen mothers to work during the day and attend night classes.

asserting that claim. This is in fact true; family and social issues are often disregarded when it comes to the federal government's budgeting. Village women have a heightened awareness of the extent to which government and NGO programs will reach to help them get by, and childcare is not a service to which they have ever been entitled (Personal Communication, August 2011). For example, village women who had received food aid from the World Food Programme after flooding in 2010 destroyed their crops were accustomed to interacting with aid workers from various NGO's. Conversely, they stated that they seldom, if ever, interacted with government officials and thus felt neglected by the government, who failed to come to their aid both in times of crisis and otherwise (Personal Communication, August 2011). Though childcare is a struggle for mothers in the West as well, governments make a larger effort to allow lower-income families access to childcare at a reduced cost. For example, the Head Start program in the United States provides economically disadvantaged families an opportunity for pre-school and daycare which they would otherwise be unable to afford (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

The women in the village seemed overwhelmingly concerned by the instances of pregnancy in young girls who go to school versus those who do not; girls of this age are judged, after all, to be foolhardy and even promiscuous¹⁷. There is an irony within this mentality, however. Those girls who go to school could become educated about how to defend themselves against unwanted pregnancies, but such a topic is taboo. Instead, their parents might opt to keep them sheltered at home where they do not come in contact with boys of their same age. "When a girl reaches a certain age, she changes", I was told.

¹⁷ Mothers of teen-aged girls were the most likely to highlight the foolhardy tendencies of their daughters in interviews.

Puberty does something to a girl, psychologically as well as physically and she ceases to heed the advice of her parents like she did before. According to a well-educated, middle-aged mother of two daughters, the upbringing of daughters is more delicate than that of a son. Girls are moody, emotional, secretive; they are likely to do as they wish without any regard for the potential consequences of their actions. They can be manipulative and try to hide things from their parents. Boys are more straightforward about things. It was an unlucky misfortune for her when she lost the special, mutual confidant-type relationship she had with one daughter when the daughter passed the Baccalaureate and began college. "I realized that she was beginning to play little games with me when she went to college. She wasn't being honest with me anymore. Our relationship hasn't been the same since then" (Personal communication, August 15, 2011). Neither of the daughters of this particular interviewee had become pregnant, but as a mother she felt that girls are difficult to read and may become rebellious at a certain age, even if they used to be obedient and delightful.

It is interesting to note the enormous differences of opinion between those women who had not set foot in a school, and those college students I interviewed. One respondent explained that in general, pregnancy is a huge factor in hindering girls' education. Pressure from their families to marry quickly and become homemakers once they discover that they are pregnant can present a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for these young women. I asked the same respondent why it is that so many girls become pregnant when enrolled in high school. She answered that early sexual activity in high school-aged girls was a direct result of poor parenting in their families. It is not, then, the girls themselves who presented the problem, but their parents, who must have failed them

somewhere along the line. She herself had received a good upbringing and had no intention of becoming pregnant before establishing a career and getting married. She took her studies far too seriously for such nonsense and possessed an ample amount of ambition and wisdom, knowing that an unplanned pregnancy would prevent her from achieving her goals in the way that she desired (Personal communication, July 1, 2011). The girls who did become pregnant were, according to many, those who did not take their schooling seriously and generally lacked parental guidance. So then, it seems as though girls face many obstacles post-puberty. They are already perceived as conniving and deceitful, predisposed to imprudence and going awry.

A Lack of Mother-Daughter Dialogue

What baffled me, however, was that parents expected their sensible daughters to make the correct sexual decisions without ever having discussed the subject with them. I was informed early on in my research by a coworker that dialogue about sexual activity and “the birds and the bees” as we colloquially refer to it in the west, is not a common occurrence in Beninese households, at least judging from the example of the Porto-Novo area that I investigated. The same coworker laughed when I inquired as to whether or not his father had sat down with him and explained to him where babies come from. I told him that I had had this discussion with my mother at a young age, prior to puberty. When the subject was again broached in my public elementary school classroom in fifth grade, the facts of life were no surprise to me. He was shocked at this, exclaiming that such a conversation would be quite embarrassing for both parties and that children, after all, will figure these things out eventually (Personal communication, July 18, 2011). Could it be

the lack of knowledge about how to protect oneself that causes these pregnancies? My research findings pointed to an affirmative answer this question. If sex is not discussed at home or in the classroom, there is no forum for girls to receive accurate information on the subject in order to make wise decisions. The seemingly tangential subject of pregnancy is quite pertinent to a discussion of the education of young girls, for it is a factor that often bars a girl from furthering her academic pursuits in favor of full-time domestic life.

To situate my perceptions in a comparative framework, I wish to point out that open dialogue about sexuality and pregnancy prevention, abstinence and everything surrounding this issue is generally thought of as progressive and positive in the west, especially in Western Europe. For example, sex education has been mandatory in German schools since 1992 and as a result, Germany has a very low teen pregnancy rate (Knerr, 2006). Surprisingly enough, the coworker who was scandalized by the notion of discussing such a thing between parent and child also was a fairly modern, untraditional thinker himself, though two parents who had never received a formal education raised him. Neither of his sisters had ever discussed the issue with their mother, to his knowledge (Personal Communication, July 18, 2011). It must be observed that the link between home life and the continuation of studies by young girls is, in this way, unavoidably present. Severe parenting and a firm emphasis on respect for the wishes of one's parents is definitely a central element in the direction a girl's sexual decisions will take. Perhaps then, although the parents might not have directly addressed the subject of sex, this particular interviewee had such a firm desire to please her parents that she was not about to engage in sexual activity regardless of the activities of her peers.

Who is Most Susceptible to Early Pregnancy?

One nineteen-year-old college student interviewed brought up the subject of sexual relationships without any prompting at all, in response to the question “Have you achieved the goals of your childhood?” Specifying that she had not yet become sexually active, this young lady was adamant about her own values regarding sexual morality and her own relationship with a young man who she eventually intended to marry. Taking her education seriously and prioritizing her studies above all else, this girl told me that her parents had raised her with a Christian mindset. This conception of right and wrong was driving her resolution and was keeping her focused on her studies, although she retained hope for a future with her current boyfriend, even marriage and children when the time was right. (Personal Communication, July 1, 2011) Valuing her sexuality and preserving her virginity were both things that she felt were childhood objectives that she had obtained successfully.

All in all, however, I found that religion played a minimal role in whether or not a girl would become pregnant. With such a religiously diverse population, Benin combines imported ideologies with traditional voodoo and animism (Personal Communication, July 2011). In each household, then, the morals of a given religion may or may not be reinforced and respected to varying degrees of adherence. This simple fact points to the reason why religion has little to do with a girl's likelihood of becoming pregnant before having completed her studies.

Really then, pregnancies occur in girls who were raised religiously all of the time, since it is rare to find a household that does not subscribe to some sort of religious

ideology. One woman I interviewed, a Yoruba¹⁸ Muslim, had completed her master's degree and worked for a successful company. Though she had avoided pregnancy throughout her schooling, she became pregnant out of wedlock and gave birth to a baby girl after her career had already been established. I was impressed at the progressive outlook of this single mother, a successful, strong woman who had a supportive family and a good outlook for the future. Throughout the interview, which took place in her private office, several men who worked under her came in to ask questions or to inquire about what she would like them to do next. It was evident that she had no qualms about working in a male-dominated workplace as a higher-up employee; she spoke authoritatively and decisively when giving instruction to others. She is an example of a woman who evidently took her studies seriously. There may really be no direct correlation between whether a girl takes her studies seriously and whether she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. This woman was a testament to that and had also been raised to value her education (Personal communication, August 6, 2011.)

The examples of opinions that I encountered pointed to a general concern about what to do with these pregnancy crises. It seemed to me, however, that pregnancies were much more common in teenaged girls born to unschooled parents, or at least more traditional households. This is, I realize, a sweeping generalization, but the more driven, scholastically inclined young women each expressed a desire to finish their studies before focusing on beginning a family. As I mentioned earlier, one 22-year-old college student expressed her point of view that the occurrence of pregnancy in young girls is a direct reflection on her upbringing. Obviously, such a girl was not taught to avoid inappropriate

¹⁸ Yoruba is a West African ethnicity (and language) that comprises about 12.3% of Beninese citizens (CIA World Factbook, 2011).

interactions with male peers. It is most common that the pregnancies are attributed to wrongdoing on the part of the girl, and never, it seemed, on the part of the offending boy. He, after all, is not responsible for the upbringing of the child; all of that falls to the woman. He is free to continue his formal schooling as scheduled. I asked if the boy's parents were ever angry with him for impregnating a girl. I was told repeatedly that they did not face the same sorts of consequences as the girls; it was a much more minor offense than to fall pregnant.

Abuse in the Classroom

One element of this particular controversy surrounding abuse must be noted with regards to factors that keep girls from achieving high levels of education. It is a fairly common happening in Benin that a high school aged girl will become pregnant by her male teacher. Generally, at least in the cases discussed by interviewees, the girls are about 15-17 years of age at the time of impregnation (Personal Communication, August 2011). The potential threat or possibility of abuse by educators is present to such a degree that parents fear sending their daughters to be instructed by a man. In fact, one study showed that two thirds of parents of girls surveyed preferred that the educational system be segregated by sex so as to avoid impregnation by male teachers (Akakpa, 1991). I was unable to find exact numbers of female vs. male secondary school teachers, but was informed that men comprise the strong majority of them (Personal Communication, August 2011). It was disclosed to me by an official source that this brand of occurrence was so widely spread, so common that the public education system was at a loss for how to cope with it (Personal Communication August 15, 2011). In fact,

a lack of qualified instructors in the system meant that, upon the discovery of such an inappropriate relationship between a teacher and student, the system was likely to look the other way rather than taking swift disciplinary action against the teacher.

One 2001 investigation that took place within the sub-prefecture of Za-kpota demonstrated that the fears of abuse are cardinal reasons for which parents refuse to allow their daughters formal schooling.

That is to say that, teachers, directors of education for these girls, have inappropriate relationships with these girls with impunity. For the students' parents, it is a capital complaint against the educational system. One man declared that the behavior of teachers related to girls is contrary to morality and doesn't encourage him to send his daughters to school. That is why all of his sons go to school, but none of his daughters goes presently because he has already lived this case [of abuse]. (Legonou, 2001)

This passage demonstrates that such cases of abuse are not a recent development in the history of the Beninese educational system. They persist today, as my interviews with numerous women clearly illustrated. How then, are parents to entrust their daughters' guardianship to men if such cases go unpunished? It is understandable that parents may fear for the safety of their daughters and keep them from going to school as a result, but the fact that some parents direct the blame towards their own daughters rather than the perpetrators of sex offenses, their instructors, points to the work to be done in the domain of societal attitudes about these transgressions.

Oftentimes, the Beninese system simply looks the other way in the face of such a scandal. Under similar circumstances in the west, the media sensationalizes such instances of statutory rape, as we label it and teachers are not only banned from teaching, but required to register as sex offenders if found guilty of such a transgression. Conversely, a sexual encounter between an adolescent girl and her grown teacher is not

even considered rape as a general rule in Benin; the notion of “statutory rape” as a phenomenon never arose in my interviews. Instead of being understood as victimized minors, speaking with women revealed to me that oftentimes the girls are demonized as hormonal, seductive fiends who mislead their instructors into inappropriate relationships. Overwhelmingly, the women interviewed expressed to me that men will be men regardless, acting on their desires. They have little self-control, according to the women I spoke with (Personal Communication, August 15, 2011).

The girls may sometimes not only be blamed for seducing the teacher, but even beaten or otherwise disciplined by their families when the situation is brought to light. I was told of one instance in which a sixteen-year-old girl had become pregnant as a result of relations with her teacher. Upon the discovery of this revelation, her father beat her so severely that the unborn child was killed. The fact that these types of occurrences are not uncommon was stressed to me, but it was also highlighted that it is difficult to find solid evidence and data to study the frequency of these events. (Personal Communication, August 15, 2011)

Concerning the disciplinary procedures for any offending faculty members, I was told that it is often the case that the teachers will continue their work in the classroom. Western norms would dictate that, because of the likelihood of re-offense, an offending instructor would be barred from continuing to work as a teacher. It would be totally inappropriate for a sex offender to continue working in a high school after he or she had victimized a student. Nonetheless, a good number of Beninese feel, as I mentioned before, that the girl is the party responsible for the inappropriate actions of her teacher. The only interviewee who openly objected to the practice of blaming girls for their

impregnation by faculty members was an official at the regional ministry of education (Personal Communication, August 2011). Girls are not often presumed to be innocent victims, but rather collaborators, even the instigators of such a relationship. Even the women themselves seemed to agree with this mentality; I was speaking once with a 30 year old woman who said something to the effect of “the girls are not innocent in those situations. They wanted them to happen as well. Men will be men,” (Personal Communication August 11, 2011)

It is clear that this attitude will obstruct any progress to be envisioned. It must change, and quickly at that, if development in the realm of education is to be obtained for Beninese girls. Obviously, there is a double standard surrounding expected actions of boys and girls. While boys are perceived as more inclined to take their studies seriously, girls are seen as likely distractions to boys who would otherwise be totally dedicated. With their parents fearing the actions of their teachers, girls will continue to be prevented from advancing and excelling scholastically.

A Lack of Educators

One factor contributing to bureaucratic neglect of these cases is a deficiency of educators. In an interview with a school administration representative, it became clear to me that there is a desperate need for qualified teachers in Beninese classrooms, and a giant lack of personnel to fill these positions. Study after study that I examined during my research drew the same conclusion. This finding seemed to be inconsistent with the overabundance of college graduates for the current economic state. Perhaps more

Beninese college students would ensure future employment by pursuing careers in teaching rather than business, as there is such a dire need for educators.

Benin is suffering cruelly from a lack of educators. The contractors or community teachers are occasionally trained only two months prior to the start of the school year. The quality of instruction suffers as a result. Little by little, populations subscribe to the cause of schooling, awareness campaigns function, the students come but if the teaching is not at the level of the parents' expectations, they take their child out of school and the retention rates plunge.

Another recurring theme in my interviews was that of disciplinary action, not merely for offending faculty members, but for parents who refuse to send their children to school. The concept of truancy is not readily recognized in Beninese society. With the large amount of children wandering around in the streets during what should, in theory, be school hours, it seems as though the public turns a blind eye to the fact that children are being prevented from attending school. This is most likely because everyone is aware of the financial struggle facing poorer families, as well as the fact that it is a normal action in Beninese society to send off a child to be raised by another family member or acquaintance.

One unschooled interviewee explained to me that at the age of about 9 years old, she had been sent to assist a businesswoman with her commerce at the market in Porto-Novo. She had left her family and village in order to help them make a living for herself and six siblings. This particular girl was with the woman at the market for a total of roughly four years, to her recollection. All the while, she was deprived of a classroom education. She explained that during her young childhood, her parents did not understand fully the importance of school for their children. They were thinking of short-term objectives, i.e., providing food for their children, rather than the long-term

development of their children and the sustainability of what a formal education could provide.

“I would have liked to go to school,” she explained to me. Unfortunately, eighteen was already too old to begin anew with the first scholastic cycle. Instead, she was learning to earn a living as a seamstress, a respectable alternative to the pursuit of classroom studies (Personal Communication, August 11, 2011). Many girls do opt to pursue apprenticeships as alternatives to formal education, either after dropping out or being forced to quit school prematurely due to familial circumstances, finances or other factors (Le Trait de l’Union, 2002; Ghionda, 2004). This thesis is not meant to discuss informal education such as this in length, but it is imperative to note several components of the informal education system that are related to domestic life and have penetrated, to some degree, the mentalities of the Beninese regarding women’s roles, career-wise.

According to some young girls interviewed in another study, school is very useful in order for girls to have a higher place in society. However, they think that school should “be able to prepare them for their lives as wives and mothers” and that it would be preferable to introduce subjects such as home economics-type courses and sewing within the formal education system (Legonou, 46). So, some of the girls interviewed primarily saw school as an avenue to an elevated social status that may as well also prepare them for their assigned domestic roles in the process.

The limitations to this manner of viewing education are obvious when examining how true development is to be obtained. Clearly, that kind of attitude towards classroom achievement is evidence that girls have been conditioned to find their principle value within the household, likely without acknowledging their intellectual potential if they

were to value mathematics and history, for example, to the same degree as a sound knowledge of domestic life and household chores. All of this is not meant to indicate that domesticity and child rearing are not a crucial component of a nation's development. I mean to simply express that Beninese girls are not reaching their full potential as long as they are barred from exercising their human right to an education because of their sex. The goal must be to change the environments in which these girls are raised so that they will be conscious, contributing citizens to the development of their country, and if this is going to change then commonly held attitudes must first change.

Chapter 6: The Influence of Poverty and Socio-Economic Status on Education

“In certain families, a girl’s education is a secondary need” (Akpaka, 1991). When families are dealing with stressful financial concerns and the upbringing of numerous children, the formal schooling of girls is all the more likely to fall by the wayside. This is more of an occurrence in less economically secure families, however. There is an enormous ideological divide between those middle or upper class Beninese citizens and those impoverished Beninese citizens when it comes to prioritizing education, especially for girls. That is not to say that no impoverished parents choose to formally educate their daughters. I only wish to express that education fuels a cycle of more education. In fact, studies have shown that educated parents are more likely to favor education for their children. One early 1990’s study demonstrated that out of 25 educated parents surveyed, 17 believed that formal schooling was just as important for girls as for boys whereas 6 out of 14 uneducated parents believed that education was not as important for girls as for boys (Akpaka, 1991). The time in which this study was conducted, just after the transition to democracy, may be a bit relevant to mention at this point. That is because the government had become so bankrupt prior to Mathieu Kérékou’s removal that teachers, along with other government employees, stopped receiving their salaries (Welmond, 2002).

Viewpoints of the Privileged

I would like to point out that the common opinion among young Beninese girls who are granted access to scholastic achievement seems to be that school is not an unattainable luxury. It is, for them and their families, easy to afford education, even in today's economic climate. Their realities are such that they are stopped by little, even nothing. They have the full support of their parents, economically and emotionally. When I asked the five young college students what sorts of things enable them to pursue their studies, I received similar responses from each. Although the professions of their parents varied, I found that each girl was quite grateful for the economic support of her parents, in spite of the fact that school was not expensive. After all, there is the "gratuité" (freeness) of primary school for all Beninese girls, enacted by the government in 2002 (OECD, 2009). So, school is not really an economic hardship for their own families. Of course, there are school supplies to purchase, and photocopies to make, which may become rather costly, especially at a more advanced level. With the progression of grade levels comes the need for more expensive books and supplies. However, these small charges and fees here and there were nothing their families could not deal with. Because they came from families of a moderate to high socio-economic status, they were able to take full advantage of their educational opportunities. Had their families been poorer, they might not be in the same privileged position. When speaking with more privileged girls, I found that their perspectives reflected their privilege; education was not always a financial hardship for their own families, so they could not sympathize with poorer girls who did not have the same economic advantage (Personal Communication, July 2011).

The Diverse Economic Conditions of Families

One young woman, a college student, told me that she was from a family of seven children. Her father was a photographer and her mother was a homemaker. Supporting such a large family would be quite an impressive feat on such a marginal salary, but the girl explained to me that she considered her family to be neither poor nor rich. The mother of this young woman had begun studies at a young age, but abandoned them after a falling out with a teacher. The story of her dropping out of school is noteworthy, for it calls attention to the incredibly diverse reasons for which women may not receive a formal education. It could merely be a result of their own juvenile stubbornness that they miss out on such a precious opportunity. When this woman was young, she had left home on a very cold day. She reported that it was frightfully cold outside, colder than it ever gets in that part of the country. After walking the four kilometers to school, she arrived slightly late. That day was not going well for her for other reasons too, but when she arrived at the schoolhouse the instructor refused to let her in. Because of her tardiness, she was barred from entry into the classroom on that morning. She was so put-off by the fact that she was told to return home that she decided not to return to school, ever. Instead, the young woman opted to help her mother at home, eventually becoming a homemaker herself. Now, her daughter explained to me, she regrets it greatly. If only she had had some kind of financial autonomy, she could have lived life differently. She would not be at the mercy of her husband to provide her with money; she would be able to earn a living on her own. I do not mean to say that her husband mistreated her in any way, merely that she would have liked some independence financially within her marriage. So, for this reason, she taught her daughter to work hard in school, and not to

take her education for granted. She desired better for her children than the fate that she had sealed for herself (Personal communication July 7, 2011). Evidently, her own parents had not valued education to a sufficient degree to require her to return to school and she is still suffering the consequences day to day.

Although it was difficult to provide financially for seven children on the income of a photographer, she and her husband managed. Her daughter, my interviewee, was beyond grateful for all of these efforts by her father, especially. The financial sacrifice involved had oftentimes caused their family some stress, but she never was without when all was said and done. Perhaps her father hadn't been able to provide absolutely *everything* as far as finances were concerned, but he made his best efforts and she was reaping the benefits in college. "When I think about the sacrifices that my parents are making for me, that gives me the desire to study harder, and to make better grades. I know that I can honor them by succeeding in school and they will be proud of me for it." (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011). To earn a bit of extra spending money, she baked muffins and sold them to classmates and friends on the side. This was no extra burden for her; she was proud to be able to contribute to her education financially as well. She had learned this kind of work ethic from her father, who she watched work long hours to support seven children and a wife, who did not work outside of the home.

Conversely, when I spoke with uneducated women about the costs of school, they told me that it was an incredible hardship for their families. This is evidence of that the socioeconomic status of a family will play a fundamental role in whether or not their girls attend school. Most of these women's daughters were being raised by two parents who had not received formal educations themselves. Therefore, they were of a lower-income

status and less able to afford the *petits frais* or small fees, as they were consistently referred-to, which come along with school. In general, earning potential exponentially increases with educational level. So, educated parents not only place a higher value on education for girls, but they are usually better equipped financially to pay the small fees, which instructors often request for the maintenance of the school. Benches and tables are not included in the schoolhouse's budget from the government and on many occasions, neither are necessities such as books, chalkboards, chalk and other items. Families are expected to supplement whatever materials are needed along with their village community, which is a financial burden that could be avoided if they simply did not choose send their children to school (Personal Communication, August 2011).

In my interviews, lack of financial means was a chief complaint of village women concerning the importance of schooling for their daughters. How are the women to afford the small school fees that seem to pop up left and right? The theme of typical, daily life in a state of impoverishment was a constantly recurring element of my interviews. Since poverty is such a monumental issue for many Beninese citizens, education is clearly not always the first priority of a struggling family that needs to provide for four or more children.

Each school's needs vary. The small fees that arise "par-ci-par là", that is, here and there throughout the school year, differ from school to school. Oftentimes, there is such a lack of skilled labor that one man may be the only certified teacher in his school, also serving as the accountant and headmaster of the whole operation (Personal communication, August 11, 2011). In more impoverished areas, especially in the north of Benin, classrooms may be less well equipped and be lacking even more. Poorer

families obviously are less able to provide these small fees, even if paying these fees is imperative in order to eventually break their family's cycle of poverty.

One village woman explained to me that she did not see much advantage in sending her daughters to school. As village women, she, along with many others, became discouraged at the sudden lack of help within the household as soon as girls are sent off to the classroom. For these women, children

...compose a significant free source of the labor force for agricultural and domestic work: collecting shea nuts, water-related chores, cooking, looking after the younger children..." (Akpaka, 1991).

As soon as their daughters leave for the classroom, mothers are expected to do the domestic work of two people. She said to me, "It's probably best to learn a skill directly, rather than to go to school and be unemployed after paying so much for an education." (Personal Communication, August 15, 2011).

Unemployment: A Central Cause of Discouragement

Benin has, as of recent years, been struggling with a high unemployment rate among educated populations. One study that I found discussed the fact that Benin's universities are producing too many graduates in certain fields for the job market (World Bank, 2002). That is, the economy is so heavily based in agriculture that there is a large surplus of graduates unable to find work in their chosen fields. As of 2002, Benin was producing too many college graduates who had studied literature and law for the job market to support (World Bank, 2002). I was told that the value of studying law is not great in a nation such as Benin; few people are able to afford lawyers, and legal complaints are not settled in the same manner as they are in the West (Personal

Communication, August 2011). So, the liberal arts are not necessarily a secure avenue if one is to obtain steady employment. There are limited careers in the civil service to be obtained as well, so these positions are very competitive. It is common that Beninese citizens who have been educated abroad return and occupy these prestigious positions (Personal Communication August 2011). It is more likely for such graduates of the liberal arts to be underemployed or unemployed after their studies are completed. When I questioned one girl about what graduates do in those situations, she told me “they have to take some sort of unskilled job. A lot of them become *zemidjan* [motorcycle taxi] drivers” (Personal communication, July 7, 2011).

Regarding the formal education of girls, an overarching theme in developing nations is that governments and NGO's do not focus as much on the social sector, rather preferring to concentrate their efforts on the economic sector as well as structural adjustment (Bellamy, 2004). This is a result of a larger problem entitled “theoretical incapacity”, which holds that development theories have, in general, evaded addressing the inequalities between men and women. Development theorists have not adequately presented the arguments for advancing the education of women as a means to achieve their country's economic progress. This attitude has been shared by many Sub-Saharan African patriarchal states and has incidentally inhibited academic progress, which could ultimately lead to economic growth, if only such educational advancement was viewed as a necessity by those studying development theory. Unfortunately, due to these comportments, the social and economic sectors have not grown and changed in complementary ways, and thus there exists much competition among recent graduates for the jobs for which they have prepared.

Regrettably for many Beninese girls who are fortunate enough to receive formal educations, there are few job opportunities awaiting them at the end of their studies. This is also a vicious cycle for families debating about whether to send their girls to school. If they see that their daughters may not end up finding jobs at the end, they are not motivated to invest in the future of their own economy. As Akpaka (1990) explains, “the diploma does not guarantee employment anymore. Parents view that as a loss of time and money.” They cannot readily envision the long-term benefits of educating their daughters because they are not self-evident. They may not necessarily draw the correlation between education and economic growth and prosperity, or see that they may even benefit personally from sending their daughters to school if these daughters excel academically and are later able to better care for their aging parents. Parents may prefer to introduce girls to their future roles as homemakers, wives and mothers rather than to invest in a formal education. Obviously, parents that opt not to educate their girls are thinking in terms of the here and now. When a family is struggling so badly that it is unsure of whether there will be food on the table tomorrow, educating a girl hardly seems to be a worthwhile concern.

As a counter point, however, one illiterate girl told me that her parents had changed their minds with regards to the value they place on formal education for their children after having witnessed the financial success of their neighbors’ children, at least those who experience success in the job market post-graduation (Personal Communication, August 15, 2011). The chances of “becoming somebody” increase with an education, but then so do the odds of having difficulties finding jobs. Logically, educated parents want the best of formal education for their children. If their degree-

holding children are not able to find jobs, they may seek greener pastures elsewhere. I was told that there are more Beninese doctors in France than there are Beninese doctors in Benin (Personal communication July 11, 2011). Based on what my research revealed to me, this fact would follow logically. Clearly, the financial situation of the government does not permit it to pay doctors as much as their labor is worth, so they seek greener pastures in the developed world, although tragic deaths due to illness are far more common in Benin than in France. A doctor's education is not valued financially in Benin nearly to the degree that it would be in France.

Regardless of the bounty of healthcare providers and other college-educated professionals leaving the country to find better-compensated employment, the fact remains that Benin has an agriculturally based economy that needs agricultural workers in order to preserve itself. It is primarily a system of subsistence farming within small village communities. From what I observed while visiting villages with Autre Vie, each rural village will collaboratively work an adjoining plot of land. It is primarily women who perform the backbreaking labor in the *champs* (field) with small children riding on their backs and older children assisting their mothers. The shift from agriculturally based to industrially oriented could occur over time with the influx of foreign investment in industry, but this is unlikely to occur. Technologically, Benin is very far behind other nations such as neighboring Nigeria. Being such a small country that is so heavily reliant on foreign aid, the prospects for economic growth and innovation are all but stagnant (Jogwu, 2010). The small portion of girls graduating from college will likely find themselves unemployed due to the fact that there are simply not enough jobs for the number of graduates desiring to work in the non-agricultural or informal commerce

sectors. Therefore, parents, predicting a future of unemployment, may opt to keep their daughters at home to do something immediately productive and useful, such as housework (Legonou, 2001).

Chapter 7: Outlooks for the Future: Conclusions and Recommendations

The government, supported by various international NGO's and the larger grassroots NGO community, has already taken several crucial steps towards rendering public education affordable and free for all. Primary school is free for girls, but according to many, this is not enough. The government must also come to terms with the failures of the 'nouveau programme', which has proven less than successful in its inaugural years and is also the object of contempt of many Beninese girls who have experienced the program themselves.

When interviewing I asked what sorts of things must occur in order for Beninese girls to have a fair chance at a professional future and at sealing their own successful fates in the domain of education. The answers that arose were those themes that have been touched upon and my general argument throughout the entirety of this thesis, but it became clear to me that the things that need to change are attitudes, disciplinary procedures and enforcement of such procedures, and more financial investment in education. Additionally, an overhaul of the current public educational system is in order if girls are to benefit from the entirety of their education.

As my interviewees often explained, the Beninese education system will not be successful as long as it is attempting to emulate those systems of the developed world. From the point of view of its underdeveloped, rural state, children do not need the same kinds of tools to succeed as in the West. I was told the following by one interviewee:

A child in the West might need a laptop computer in order to fully complete his or her studies. This is not so in Benin. A child needs merely a slate and chalk in order to copy his lesson. For as long as we attempt to be like the West in our state

of development, we will not achieve progress. (Personal communication, August 2011)

One could argue that in order to enter into the modern world, students simply must be technologically literate. I understood my interviewee to comprehend this reality, but she wished to explain that progress must start somewhere, even if it is only with adequate chalkboards. Computers will not materialize in Beninese classrooms any time soon, so her proposed solution was to equip students for their minimum needs in order to learn.

It was often expressed by my interviewees that the government seems to be very detached from the actual needs and problems of the greater population, which have yet to be defined and recognized officially. In doing so, the government would have to identify its own shortcomings and internal corruption and misallocation of funds, which it is unlikely to do (Personal Communication, August 2011). The state seems to emulate the developed world's mechanisms of educational reform without considering the realities of poverty, lack of infrastructure and gender roles in their own country.

Public Education Resource Inadequacy

The amount of human, material and financial resources allocated to public education by the federal government is consistently inadequate for the demands of the population, especially for girls. This may be explained by budgetary limitations, corruption and a lack of consensus regarding this issue. That is to say that the government is often too busy with other concerns to focus heavily on the evaluation of educational progress among the female population. The World Bank (2002) states that there is a problem with resource distribution within the finances of the Beninese

government overall, and an unequal distribution particularly within public education. Even so, it appears as though the government could alleviate some of the complications of follow-up if it planned better from the beginning of the scholastic year. For “la rentrée”, or the return of students to school each year, there seems to be little encouragement from the government or participation by the federal government at the local level. Interviewees responded that representatives from the government are seldom visibly involved in any hype or awareness campaigns surrounding back-to-school season.

Rather, NGO's play a pivotal role in getting children, boys and girls alike, excited about the new school year and ready to work hard in their studies. Oftentimes, NGO's distribute school supplies to children from poor families who cannot afford to purchase the necessary items for school at the start of the school year. Many interviewees gave credit to grassroots NGO's for their participation in that particular element of village campaigning and awareness (Personal communication July-August 2011). Children, as a rule, love to receive brand new things; I don't feel that this statement could be easily debated. Annual distributions of supplies such as these are empowering for them, and allow children to feel equipped for the school year and helps encourage their parents, who know they will be responsible a lesser financial burden per child. Interviewees explained that mass distributions of school supplies, or at least an easing of the financial obligations associated with back-to-school season would encourage parents to send their daughters to school more readily.

One complication is the practice of school administrators having to require that families pay for classroom furniture. When the government makes claims that primary education is “free” for children, it should at the very minimum allocate funds for benches,

chalkboards and desks. The more school-aged children a family has, the greater their financial burden becomes every year concerning educational expenses. Evidently, teachers are forced to continue to ask for additional fees for such things. The population becomes discouraged by the fact that “free” primary education has so many hidden expenses that are not assumed by the government. Indeed, I would become frustrated with such a system as well. What is advertised as “free” is in fact difficult to afford for struggling families, especially those below the poverty line. The lack of classroom furnishings would definitely adversely affect academic performance among children, but the fact that they are not provided by the state fuels resentment towards the national government and what seem to be lies regarding the accessibility of education for all.

Awareness Campaigns

The national government, has, however, been known to work on collaborative projects with the international community in the field of educational promotion for girls. The first governmental awareness campaigns were launched in 1978 (Akpaka, 1991). One element involved in the campaigns was the necessity of parent-teacher conferences to enforce collaboration between the two parties for the benefit of the students. However, these conferences proved extremely difficult to carry out, especially in rural areas, perhaps due to infrastructural issues (such as road blockages and flooding), perhaps due to a lack of knowledge of the importance of such meetings among parents. It was most certainly also due to a shortage of teachers. The plan also included a course of action to address sexual education within classrooms and to punish educators who perpetrate abuses against girls (Akpaka, 1991). The lack of progress in all of those domains,

especially with regards to the latter two items, demonstrates that implementation of governmental educational campaigns have been far from satisfactory over the past several decades.

There is a billboard and signage campaign currently in place across the country that depicts various scenes of children, holding books, with the slogan “Tous les enfants à l'école!” or “Tous les filles à l'école!” meaning “Every child in school” or “Every girl in school” respectively. These billboards are displayed along main highways and in town. The goal of this campaign is to heighten awareness of citizens, specifically rural families, to the importance of primary education for all. What puzzled me initially about this campaign was that the signs are written in French. I was curious as to how effective such a campaign would be when the target audience for the signs is vastly illiterate and cannot understand French. The billboards display the logos of the various international NGO's and governmental bodies that have contributed to the implementation of this campaign. Among them are UNICEF, CARE International, The European Union, and the Beninese department of Education. Oftentimes, the signs had been ripped, damaged by vandals, knocked over by the elements or otherwise damaged. In numerous interviews, I inquired as to the perceived effectiveness of these publicity campaigns around the educational opportunities of rural Beninese girls. In general, respondents appreciated the efforts and said that it was a good idea that proved somewhat effective. Upon seeing the children dressed in khaki-colored clothing, holding books, illiterate parents were able to deduce the meaning of the signs and send their children to school (Personal Communication, August 20, 2011).

Even so, one respondent gave a resounding negative response to the question “What is the value of the advertisement campaigns ‘Every child in school?’” She told me that the government wants to be respected for its efforts in education, but really takes little concrete action against dropout rates and combating “*déscolarisation*” or dropout rates in the most crucial Beninese zones. The government’s actions, she explained, are largely symbolic. Regardless of the fact that some parents are affected by these publicity campaigns, there was a general feeling among my interviewees that the campaigns are not appropriately targeted for maximum public impact. This is a result of “strategic incapacity” (Bellamy, 2004), which is basically a formal way that UNICEF has identified a common problem across the implementation of Sub-Saharan African girl’s education. Strategic incapacity means “the behaviors and mentalities of political officials and educators, at best, do not respond to the specific needs of boys and girls and, at worst, severely obstruct their right to education” (Bellamy, 2004). This particular sentiment was echoed repeatedly in my interviews, as I stated earlier. One interviewee explained to me that it was mainly an infrastructural problem. That is, far-removed rural villages are not easily accessible by governmental personnel in large vehicles, or NGO workers with their equipment. So, the publicity campaigns seem to have been enacted mainly in areas that experience high amounts of traffic, such as along main highways. People frequenting these thoroughfares or people in large cities or towns are not the populations most in need of such campaigns. One interviewee explained “il faut refaire les ciblage [des campagnes publicitaires]”. To translate this expression, I mean to say that she insisted that the government, in collaboration with international organizations and bodies, must do a better job of reaching out to those people who have remained relatively isolated

from progressive ideologies such as educating their daughters (Personal communication, August 2011).

A second interviewee insisted that there were even enclaves in Porto-Novo itself where one would “wonder whether the residents had heard of such a thing as school” (Personal Communication, August 11, 2011). Indeed, there are areas within the city where life is much as it is in rural villages. On the outskirts of town, and even some neighborhoods adjoining busy roads, people live in mud huts with thatched roofs. They generally are able to access to clean water in such areas, by use of a communal well rather than one used by a single family as in wealthier neighborhoods. In these areas, people are less likely to venture outside of their immediate surroundings. The less contact people have with the world at large and city folk, the less likely they are to see a need for schooling of their young daughters. Improvements in population-targeting for awareness campaigns and the like will only come through a great amount of documentation and follow-up of educational campaigns and programs, something that is lacking, overall, systemically within the educational framework.

Another systemic problem is that of the tradition of patriarchy within Beninese society, which has caused girls education to suffer as have poorly executed governmental efforts and the lack of funding for education. Although reforms and NGO efforts have been well intentioned, Benin has a long way to go in terms of gender equality in the classroom, punishments for instructors who abuse their power. This was actually a point that interviewees tended to heavily emphasize; they recognized that if parents were held accountable for sending their daughters to school under the threat of fines or other forms of punishment, it was more likely that education would become a higher priority for the

parents of young girls. Ideally, parents would not need to be threatened in order to formally educate their daughters, but such is the reality of modern day Benin, which has a while to go before it obtains its goal of universal education for girls. Raymonde Agossou, an expert on Beninese girls' education, was asked in an interview whether she was optimistic about the future outlook. She responded:

I believe that the battle to bring every girl to school, to give the same chance to learn to every child, is profitable but difficult. I have hope that we will get there on the condition that we truly devote ourselves to this objective and that we give people the time to understand what we are saying. One of our problems is that we sometimes give the impression of pushing them back and forth, and suddenly we obtain superficial results...I think that we need to remind ourselves that it will take time- that the actors and beneficiaries with whom we work really adhere, by conviction, to our activities...so that the obtained results will be well-rooted and sustainable.” (Raymonde Agossou, *Le Trait de l'Union*, 2002)

Surely, education of the public is the first step in the solution to long-term formal education of Beninese girls and retention of girls in the scholastic milieu. If strong, dedicated girls set an example for their peers and younger sisters, the trend of increased literacy rates and lessened dropout rates will continue in future years, if certain key changes are made by leaders as well (Agossou, 2002 in *Le Trait de l'Union*). It is not only imperative to equip classrooms with trustworthy, qualified teachers, but to encourage this profession among the population. It is important to continue campaigning for all elements of women's equality in Benin for education to truly follow suit. My hope is that policy-makers, NGO's and private citizens alike may use this thesis as a means to understand the hindrances that impede women from obtaining formal education and be better equipped to make the necessary changes for the advancement of women's universal rights.

Appendix A - Demographics of Interviewees

Total Number of Interviewees: 15

Age Breakdown:

Age Group¹⁹	18-25	26-35	36-45	46 and older
Number of Interviewees	6	4	3	2

Education Level	Number of Interviewees
Completed college	2
Currently enrolled in college	7
No formal education	6

Occupation of Interviewee	Number of Interviewees
Full-time student	7
Nun ²⁰	2
Apprentice	1
Stay-at-home mother/smalltime businesswomen	5
Professional career women	2

¹⁹ The ages may be approximate; many women were unable to tell me their exact age due to the fact that they did not have birth certificates.

²⁰ Both nuns interviewed were both full time students and nuns; this table has 2 more total interviewees as a result.

Marital Status	Number of Interviewees
Single	9
Married	5
Widowed	1

Motherhood Status	Number of Interviewees
Have children	7
Do not have children	8
Desire children after marriage	6
Religious life prohibits children	2

Appendix B – Interview Questions

General Question Format²¹

1. Please introduce yourself. Where are you from, what is your age and occupation?
2. Are you from Porto-Novo originally? Are your parents from this area?
3. What do your parents and/or spouse do for a living?
4. Are you married and do you have children? If so, how many? Are they boys or girls?
5. When you were younger, what was your schooling like?
6. If you don't have children now, do you plan to have them in the future? Do you plan to send them to school?
7. If you have daughters now, or if you have some in the future, how do you see their schooling and career aspirations relative to those of boys?
8. Have you achieved your own professional and/or academic goals, and are you proud of what you have accomplished thus far?
9. After having children, did you/will you continue to work in the professional realm as well?
10. Do you come from a large family? How many brothers or sisters do you have?
11. What role did formal education play in your visions or objectives for the future?
12. In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently (academically speaking)?
13. What impact did your parents and family have on your career, livelihood or academic path?
14. Is formal education important for girls? Why or why not?
15. What is your opinion of the Beninese education system? Does it have any areas that need work, or strong points?
16. If you have been to school, what is the difference between the formal education you have received and that of your parents?
17. Relative to other life obligations, (chores, family life etc.) what importance does formal education hold for girls?
18. Do publicity campaigns, either by NGO's or the government, play a role in educating the public about the importance of formal education?
19. Is formal education expensive? How accessible is education for girls?
20. Besides money, what prevents girls from completing their formal education or discourages them from continuing their studies?
21. Why are so many Beninese women illiterate?
22. Does the government do an adequate job of ensuring access to school for girls? Do you have ideas for how they could improve?
23. How do you view the role of NGO's in that same regard?

²¹ These questions varied slightly depending on the age group and educational status of the interviewee.

24. Fifteen or twenty years from now, how do you see the evolution of Beninese girls' formal education?
25. What are the differences between formal education in the north and south of Benin?
26. Do you have any additional comments or thoughts to add?

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