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LIVING ROUGH

On the Street in Senegal



INTRODUCTION

An estimated 50,000 children are forced to beg on the streets of Senegal every day.¹ These children are known as *talibés*, a French word originating from the Arabic, *talib*, meaning a person who seeks knowledge.² Talibés are male students between the ages of five and eighteen at Quranic schools called *daaras*.

Daaras are rooted in Senegal's history, culture, and religion and date back to pre-colonial times. Central to the Quranic education is the relationship between a talibé and his teacher, the *marabout*.³ While many marabouts care for their talibés and provide them with a high quality Quranic education, some take advantage of the system and exploit the children for their own economic gain, denying children their right to education, health, childhood, and freedom. This report focuses on the exploitive *daaras* and is not intended as a criticism of the many devoted marabouts providing excellent education and care for children in *daaras*. In particular, this report serves as an example of child migration and exploitation fueled by deeply entrenched traditions. Forced begging through *daaras* is concentrated in but not isolated to Senegal. Children are widely trafficked and exploited as part of their Quranic education across West Africa. This phenomenon leads to multiple child protection challenges, exacerbated by variations in cross-border policies and practices.

Religious traditions

Quranic schools have a long tradition in Senegal, dating back to the rise of Islam in the eleventh century.⁴ Even after the colonization by the French, they remained the most respected and dominant form of education. Efforts by the French to regulate *daaras* were viewed as attempts to limit the influence of Islam and were thus met with widespread resistance, the aftermath of which can still be felt today when the government attempts to enact regulations.⁵

Many families send their boys to daaras to learn Arabic and to memorize the Quran. Great value is placed on learning the Quran and marabouts are thus respected, influential figures.⁶ Traditionally, marabouts offer free education as well as room and board to their students. In return, talibés helped cultivate the land around the daara to sustain the students and teachers. Occasionally they would beg to fund supplemental items and as a way to learn humility.⁷ This begging is the origin of the modern-day forced street begging, which holds little semblance to its original form. Forced begging is perpetuated by Senegal's strong culture of alms giving, which is one of the tenants of Islam. People will give alms if they want a job or if they had a nightmare, providing ample opportunities for marabouts to make a profit.⁸ The long tradition of begging as part of talibés education as well as the notion of alms giving in Islam serves as a means of justification for the exploitation of tens of thousands of children through forced begging.

A profitable business

After independence and at the onset of urban migration in the 1970s, many daaras moved from rural to urban areas. Without the traditional means of sustaining the school through agriculture and village support, talibés were sent to the streets to beg for money and food. Many exploitative daaras emerged as marabouts began to realize how profitable this business could be. While the daily quota talibé must collect varies by marabout, it is not unusual for marabouts to receive the equivalent of 10,000 US dollars per child annually.⁹ In Senegal, child begging is almost exclusively linked to marabouts trying to profit from children. A study by UNICEF, the World Bank, and the International Labour

Organisation (ILO) found that 90 percent of all children begging on the streets of Dakar were talibés.¹⁰

This clear violation of children's rights is apparent to anyone walking the streets in Senegal's cities and yet there has been no concrete action by the government to provide protection or to change the status quo. Policies that would protect talibés and penalize those who are trafficking and abusing children exist or have been proposed, but political will is thus far lacking to enforce or pass these laws.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This report is based on publications by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially Human Rights Watch, which investigated the issues concerning talibés in Senegal in 2010, 2014, and 2015. In addition, a literature review of existing peer-reviewed academic articles was conducted as well as interviews with three key informants: Issa Kayouté, director of the talibé rescue center La Maison Gare in Saint-Louis, Senegal; Mathew Wells, program officer at Center for Civilians in Conflict; and Lauren Seibert, West Africa research associate at Human Rights Watch.

Abusive practices

Talibés are subjected to various forms of abuse, including forced begging in unsafe conditions, denial of access to education, severe physical abuse, poor living conditions, and poor health.

Talibés are sent to the streets to beg for money and food. The marabout sets a quota for each day. If children do not meet the quota,

they are often brutally beaten or not allowed to return back to the daara, forcing them to sleep on the streets. Nearly every talibé interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported incidences of severe physical punishment.

When I could not bring the quota, the marabout beat me—even if I lacked 5 CFA (\$0.01), he beat me. It was always the marabout himself. He took out the electric cable and we went to the room. I stood there and ... he hit me over and over, generally on the back but at times he missed and hit my head. I still have marks on my back from the beatings.¹¹

Spending so much time on the streets, weaving between cars and buses asking for money, leaves talibés vulnerable to traffic accidents. Numerous deaths and injuries have been reported.

My friend—we begged together—was killed by a car. It happened when the sun was almost down, during the cold season. We were out begging and a car hit him. It was a big car. I don't know how it happened. The car just hit him and he died, right next to me. The car stopped and people came around. People were shouting at the driver. I think he was taken to the hospital—someone took him in a car—but he died. I never heard the marabout talk about it.¹²

Even when the children are off the streets, they are subjected to harsh conditions. The daaras are overcrowded, lack proper sanitation and protection from the elements, and are of poor structural integrity.¹³ It is not uncommon for over thirty children to sleep in one room, allowing for the rapid spread of disease. In 2009 a daara collapsed, leaving one child dead and four severely injured.¹⁴ In 2013 an overcrowded daara broke out in fire, killing nine children and causing public outrage over the conditions in which talibés live. The President vowed to make changes, but no one was ever held responsible and a proposed law to regulate daaras was never passed.¹⁵

Other physical needs like food and clothing are also left unmet at the daaras. Most talibés are malnourished and do not receive food at their daaras.¹⁶ They must survive on what they find on the streets.¹⁷ As a result, talibés have precarious health, but over 70 percent have reported not having access to medical care.

When I was sick, I was never treated by the marabout. If we said that we were sick, the marabout would tell us to find medicines ourselves. So generally I would just suffer, try to sleep it off. I had skin diseases and malaria several times, but diarrhea was the most frequent problem.¹⁸

From talibés to street children

Many talibés ultimately end up as street children in Senegal's major cities. They turn to the streets out of fear. Some do not return to their daaras because they were unable to collect the daily quota demanded by their marabout, while others plot their escape because they can no longer bear the abuse.¹⁹

For many of these boys returning home is not an option, as they fear disappointing their families. There have also been many instances in which runaway talibés are returned to the daara by their parents out of conviction that they must complete their education. For children brought to Senegal from neighboring countries, returning home is even more challenging.²⁰

Cross-border child trafficking

About half of the talibés in Senegal are from Senegal with the other half coming primarily from Guinea-Bissau followed by the Gambia. A minority also comes from Mali, Mauritania, and Guinea. Human Rights Watch conducted an analysis of trafficking routes within

Senegal as well as cross-border trafficking between Guinea-Bissau and Senegal, but documentation on other trafficking routes is currently lacking.

Children are recruited through multiple avenues. Parents frequently have prior connections to the marabout; he might be of the same ethnic group and have ties to the region in which he is recruiting.²¹ Some marabouts from Senegal recruit boys from remote villages in Guinea-Bissau with the help of local associates who promise the poorest families a free Quranic education for their sons.²² Families frequently cite poverty as one reason for sending their children to daaras because they lack the resources to adequately care for their children at home.²³

Children are packed into trucks and ferried across the border. In most instances the trafficking would be easy to spot and could be stopped at border crossings, but it is all too common for border guards to wave through trucks full of young boys. Traffickers purportedly pay police officers at border crossings an agreed-upon amount of money per child.²⁴

KEY CHILD PROTECTION ISSUES

Failure to regulate Quranic Schools and the denial of access to education

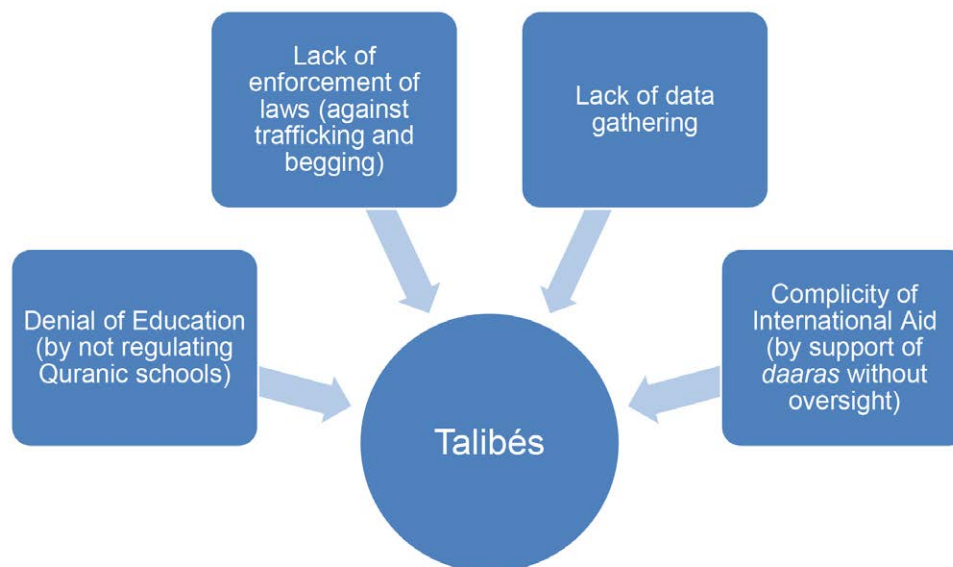
Efforts to regulate Quranic schools have been met with resistance ever since French colonial rule when regulatory attempts were viewed as attacks on Islam. The first regulation attempt to establish professional criteria for marabouts and standardize pedagogy was proposed by the Ministry of Education in 1978 but never passed.²⁵ One government

official explained the three-decade-long delay: “It is impossible for the state to regulate immediately. It must first gain the marabouts trust and reflect further on the institution of daaras.”²⁶

In the 1990s the government again promised to set standards. In 2013 President Macky Sall oversaw the drafting of the “Condition de la reconnaissance et aux modalités d’attribution des subventions, primes et appuis aux Daaras” [Status of Daaras], a draft law that would regulate Quranic schools, but it has yet to be passed by the National Assembly.²⁷ Under the draft law, Quranic schools would have to comply with curriculum standards, education and health inspections, and minimum teacher qualifications. In addition, all forms of begging would be outlawed. In return, schools would receive official government recognition and be eligible for subsidies and other incentives.²⁸ In 2014 an official at the Ministry of Education said that all relevant ministries had commented on the law and that the National Assembly was ready to review it;²⁹ however, as of June 2016 the law had still not been passed due to ongoing review and proposed amendments by religious leaders.³⁰

Senegal is in violation of its commitments to children’s well-being under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).³¹ Particularly stark violations are being committed in respect to talibés’ right to education.

Article 28 of the CRC requires that states “make primary education compulsory and available free to all.”³² It is particularly unfortunate that children are denied an education by the very marabouts who are supposed to be their teachers. Many exploited children leave the daaras as young adults having not only been denied a formal education, but also



Case Figure 7.1 Key Protection Failures Affecting Talibés

not having learned the Quran. With talibés in exploitive situations spending an average of eight hours per day on the streets begging, there is little time left for studying the Quran.³³

Lack of enforcement of existing laws against exploitation and trafficking

Senegal has legislation in place that could be used to protect talibés. Laws prohibiting forced begging, child trafficking, and abuse exist but are not frequently invoked.

Forced begging is considered one of the worst forms of child labor.³⁴ Article 245 of the Senegalese Penal Code prohibits begging with the exception of collecting alms as part of religious traditions.³⁵ This exception causes confusion for many, including police officers and prosecutors. Exploitative marabouts use this as a means of justification, but one religious scholar explains: “The tradition, for those who begged, was to spend a couple minutes in their village going to houses to ask

for food, to teach humility. It wasn’t to take kids to the city and force them to beg all day for money. Any real marabout is against such a practice.”³⁶

In 2005 Senegal passed a law that criminalizes the profiting from others through forced begging.³⁷ While a promising step on paper, enforcement of the law is extremely rare. Human rights experts are unaware of any cases in the last year in which a marabout was convicted under this law.³⁸

Some neighborhoods in Dakar have begun to enforce the anti-begging law. In April 2016 the mayor of Colobane called to end all begging,³⁹ offering talibés the opportunity to receive alms at local mosques from 2:00 to 5:00 pm instead.⁴⁰ While purportedly effective in keeping children off the streets, the success of such measures is still to be determined. It is unclear if such decrees are intended to truly benefit the talibés or merely keep neighborhoods appearing clean and safe. In addi-

tion, it is unclear if talibés are able to collect their daily quotas at the mosque or if they are begging in other neighborhoods to supplement their earnings instead. Another concern voiced is that marabouts will simply increase the daily quotas for the children so they can profit off of the mosque alms as well as street begging.⁴¹

The same 2005 law also prohibits human trafficking, making trafficking punishable by up to ten years in prison and a fine of up to the equivalent of 46,520 US dollars.⁴² While Guinea-Bissau has a better track record in enforcing anti-trafficking laws, there is a gross failure on the Senegalese side to monitor the borders. Child trafficking occurs openly. Matthew Wells, a human rights expert with Civilians and Conflict, notes “It’s not hard to spot eight to twenty boys in a station wagon being driven across the border by an adult man, and yet nothing happens.”⁴³ In addition, there are no statistics kept on the total number of trafficking investigations, prosecutions, convictions, or penalties assessed.⁴⁴

The failure to protect children against trafficking puts Senegal in violation of the CRC, which states in Article 35 that “States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form.”⁴⁵

Gaps in data

In 2014 the government began a comprehensive mapping of Quranic schools across Dakar to identify the number of students living in abusive daaras and to document exploitation.⁴⁶ The mapping identified over 30,000 boys in Dakar alone who are subjected to forced begging and poor living conditions.⁴⁷

The actual number of boys is likely higher as corrupt marabouts might have avoided inspection. In its 2010 report, Human Rights Watch estimated there to be over 50,000 talibés forced to beg across the country every day.⁴⁸

Several religious leaders led their own mapping of daaras in the city of Touba and found that out of 1,275 daaras, nearly fifty percent were exploitative.⁴⁹ Other cities are likely to have similar statistics, but the full extent will remain unknown until the government completes a nationwide mapping of daaras. As the number of talibés continues to rise, it is especially important to understand where abusive daaras are concentrated and who is being exploited. While Human Rights Watch mapped the most common trafficking routes within Senegal and from Guinea-Bissau into Senegal, cross-border trafficking between Senegal and the Gambia has not been investigated.

This report focuses on Senegal because it is the country that has been most researched. However, forced begging by talibés (under various names) is pervasive across West Africa,⁵⁰ with virtually no documentation of the abuses or knowledge of the scope of the problem including the total number of children involved and trafficking patterns. Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cote d’Ivoire, though less acute, are also considered hot spots of forced child begging and cross-border trafficking.⁵¹ If the abusive practice of forced begging is to be ended, children must be protected at a regional level.

Shortcomings of international donors

Many well-intentioned practices by international aid organizations have inadvertently

fueled the problem. Numerous organizations provide services to talibés, marabouts, and daaras, ranging from clothing and food to subsidizing the marabouts quota. These benefits have led to a proliferation of daaras moving from rural to urban areas. Corrupt marabouts are drawn by the prospects of higher profits that can be earned through international aid organizations.⁵² Aid organizations helping talibés need a coordinated, long-term strategic plan to systematically help end forced begging. An innovative approach led by UNICEF and Terres des Hommes, for example, is to resettle urban daaras back to rural areas to keep children in their villages where there is more communal oversight and begging is not omnipresent.⁵³

CONCLUSION

The lack of government enforcement of the most basic laws protecting children is inexcusable. Year after year the status quo remains unchanged and tens of thousands of children continue to be trafficked and abused. As long as human traffickers can continue to freely move children across the border and daaras remain unregulated, the number of children who are being exploited will continue to rise and Senegal will solidify its reputation as a safe haven for corrupt marabouts in West Africa. The international community must work together with the government of Senegal as well as religious leaders, many of whom have joined child rights activists in the call to end forced begging and abuse, to implement a coordinated response protect the rights of the talibé children.

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