



West Africa

CULTURE

Enrolling Girls in School

In many parts of the world, including parts of Africa, boys receive more schooling than girls do. In part, this is due to cultural attitudes concerning the roles of males and females in society. However, it is also often due to the fact that poor families cannot afford to educate all their children. This reading reports on a program in the West African country of Benin that is attacking both reasons for denying girls an education.

More and more girls are going to school in Benin's southwestern region of Couffo thanks to a World Food Program (WFP) initiative which distributes "dry rations" to impoverished parents. Known in Pakistan and Morocco as "Food for Learning" and "Food Aid In The Service of Instruction," the project, launched in Benin in November 1998, offers parents a 50-kilogram [110-pound] bag of rice and a 4-liter [about one gallon] can of cooking oil for every girl registered at school.

Many poor parents, who normally would resist sending their daughters to school, are now enrolling four or five of them with the promise of food for each one. Some expressed astonishment at the large amount of food they receive. . . .

In just one school year (1998–1999), the number of girls enrolled in 10 village schools under the WFP project rose considerably, even reversing the previous boy-girl ratio in favor of girls. For example, the number of girls at the public primary school in Dohodji rose from 25 to 107, an increase of 328 percent. WFP's educational campaign was particularly successful in this village. In the neighboring villages of Gnigbandjime and Dekandji II, the number of girls rose from 19 to 72 and from 21 to 55, increases of 279 and 161.9 percent, respectively.

In the 10 pilot schools where the WFP project was launched, inspired by the excellent results achieved in Morocco, the rate of attendance by girls had never before reached the 30 percent mark, or barely one girl for every four boys. Some 92 percent of the 768 girls enrolled in school during the first trimester maintained the attendance required by the project for their families to continue receiving the dry rations benefit.

According to the 1998 WFP annual report, the project supported efforts by Beninois officials to break down certain traditional cultural barriers against the education of girls and their integration into modern society. "For the hungriest and poorest parents, the promise of food assistance is sometimes the only way they'll allow their girls to go to school," said WFP's executive director, Catherine Bertini.

Today, many parents in the 10 villages where the program is underway . . . would allow their daughters to continue school even if the free distribution of rations were to end. . . . An increasing number of

mothers now say they “no longer consider the education of their daughters as a waste of time and money, but as a step toward improving the quality of their lives.”

. . . [The] WFP will continue to encourage girls’ school attendance in the 10 villages in Couffo. . . . Research to choose more pilot schools for the “food aid for the education of girls” program is already underway in Atacora, another of Benin’s poorer regions, in the northwest, where the rate of enrollment of girls in school is less than 20 percent.

Bertini hopes that once educating girls becomes a habit, “the old prejudices will crumble, and girls will be able to pursue their education even further. The future for girls, women, their families and communities will continue to glow brighter and brighter.”

Adapted from “WFP Hands Out Food to Keep Girls in School” (retitled “Enrolling Girls in School”) by Ali Idrissou-Toure from *African News Digest*, November 14, 1999. Copyright ©1999 by **African Media Group, Inc.** Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How are parents in Benin encouraged to send their daughters to school?

2. Why do you think that the program described in the article targets only poor families?

3. What information in this report suggests that a lack of education among Beninois girls is a cultural issue as well as an economic one?

Activity

Design an illustrated poster that the WFP could use in a campaign to advertise its program to the people of Benin.