

Rethinking Barriers to Inclusive and Equitable Education in Conflict Affected Zones Through the Lenses of Geo-Inquiry and Photovoice:

THE CASE OF MOPTI AND SÉGOU REGIONS IN MALI



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ABSTRACT

This report shares findings from a study conducted in the conflict-affected areas of the Mopti and Ségou regions, Mali, focusing on barriers to girls' education and the use of geo-inquiry tools and photovoice to promote inclusive and equitable education. The report identifies how traditional barriers hinder girls' education in conflict-affected zones. These include gender and cultural roles, teacher strikes, economic factors, religious beliefs and insecurity, nomadic lifestyles and disabilities. These challenges underscore the complex socio-cultural and economic dynamics impacting access to education in conflict zones and call for rethinking barriers to education in conflict-affected zones as well as intervention mechanisms by governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international development partners. The report further highlights innovative methodologies such as geo-inquiry and photovoice to understand the barriers to inclusive and equitable education in conflict-affected zones. Photovoice emerges as a powerful tool for uncovering hidden perspectives and experiences, though it also presents challenges due to heightened security risks faced by participants. By examining the obstacles to education and the potential of innovative approaches, this study offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators and stakeholders working to improve educational outcomes in conflict-affected regions. The main conclusion of this report is that many barriers existed before the conflict but were aggravated by conflict. Other barriers emerged because of the fighting and related insecurity. It might be assumed that learners and community members would be focused solely on issues of safety and security, and these challenges might lead to despair and lack of hope for the future. However, most of the learners remained hopeful and wanted to pursue their career dreams. Some wanted to be nurses, teachers, mechanics and doctors. It remains a clarion call from learners in emergencies to governments, development partners and international agencies to support the dreams and hopes of children in emergencies.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents key findings from a study conducted in the conflict-affected areas of the Mopti and Ségou regions of Mali, focusing on barriers to girls' education and the use of geo-inquiry and photovoice to promote inclusive and equitable education.

At level one, the study identifies how traditional barriers hinder girls' education in conflict-affected zones. These include gender and cultural roles, teacher strikes, economic factors, religious beliefs and insecurity, nomadic lifestyles, and disabilities. These challenges underscore the complex socio-cultural and economic dynamics impacting access to education in conflict zones. Level two highlights innovative methodologies like geo-inquiry and photovoice to understand the barriers to inclusive and equitable education in conflict-affected zones. Photovoice emerges as a powerful tool for uncovering hidden perspectives and experiences, though it also presents challenges due to heightened security risks faced by participants. By examining the obstacles to education and the potential of innovative approaches, this study offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators and stakeholders working to improve educational outcomes in conflict-affected regions. The key findings are summarized below.

Level 1: Barriers to Girls' Education

- **Gender and Cultural Roles:** Cultural roles prioritize domestic duties over education for girls. Girls are burdened with household chores such as childcare, fetching water and tending to gardens, leaving them physically and mentally exhausted. Although boys also face challenges, they are not burdened to the same extent. These gender disparities limit access to education and perpetuate cycles of inequality and poverty.
- **Economic Barriers:** Poverty is a significant obstacle given the low-income levels of most households. Most families struggled with paying enrollment fees and for textbooks, uniforms and other supplies. These costs act as deterrents for low-income families, who often prioritize basic needs over education, making it challenging to afford school-related expenses.
- **Poor School Infrastructure:** Substandard and dilapidated infrastructure negatively affected children's access to equitable education. Schools in Mali remain underfunded as the budget allocation to education is inadequate.
- **Disability:** Children with disabilities face significant obstacles to education due to the lack of proper infrastructure and resources in Mopti and Ségou. In rural areas like Ségou, physical accessibility issues further hinder their ability to attend school.
- **Nomadic Lifestyle:** Children from nomadic families experience frequent disruptions in their education due to the seasonal migrations in search

of pastures. Moreover, nomadic communities usually lack easy access to formal education, posing a significant challenge for children to attend school regularly.

- **Distance to School:** Physical distance was noted as a barrier to children's access to education. Schools in Mali are not always close to where children live, especially in rural areas, so students often walk long distances each day. The study revealed that physical distance was particularly challenging for conflict-affected children, especially girls.

Children under eight years of age and girls are less likely to go to school. The conflict has compounded this difficulty as children's lives and daily routines have been disrupted.

- **Safety and Security:** Safety and security play a significant role in undermining children's access to inclusive and equitable education, with Mopti being the most severely affected region.

- Firstly, girls are most affected as they face physical harm and threats that create an unsafe learning environment. This insecurity results in the displacement of families, further impeding children's access to education. Internally displaced children face challenges attending school in new communities due to overcrowding and distance.
- Secondly, heightened insecurity has led to teacher strikes over security fears. Some teachers are not willing to be deployed to certain schools.
- Some families enrolled their children in both Qur'anic and classic schools. They usually start by going to a Qur'anic school and later to a classic school.
- There were observable different perceptions of security within the study. Both parents and children did not put heavy emphasis on insecurity, while teachers deemed schools to be unsafe.

- **Religion:** Religion played a triple role in limiting access to inclusive and equitable education. Firstly, Qur'anic schools have a limited curriculum that focuses more on the Qur'an, and this is not recognized in getting employment in the government or the private sector. Secondly, in Qur'anic schools, girls are expected to be married off once they reach the age of twelve and, therefore, do not continue with education. Thirdly, armed groups have been waging attacks against classic/public schools. They perceive them to be teaching anti-Islam culture. Also, Qur'anic schools were found to be immune from attacks by the armed groups as they are seen not to be teaching anti-Muslim traditions.

Level 2: Geo-inquiry, Photovoice and Access to Inclusive and Equitable Education

- **Utility of Photovoice:** Photovoice provided learners with a platform to share their experiences through photographs and drawings, thus empowering them to express their challenges freely in accessing inclusive and equitable education. Learners used this method to capture challenges, such as girls' responsibilities for domestic chores, effectively highlighting barriers to education. However, challenges such as digital literacy limitations and security concerns regarding the use of smartphones or cameras were observed.

- **School Geographical Location and Choice (Classical and Qur'anic):** The geographical location of public schools is determined through collaboration between the government and local leadership, considering factors such as high population density and accessibility for the community. Proximity to villages positively impacts school attendance. On the other hand, Qur'anic schools are located based on their proximity to Muslim communities and learners' residences.

- **Challenges with Photovoice:** Heightened security risks in Mopti and Ségou posed challenges to participants using photovoice. Fear of reprisals or retaliation from armed groups hindered participants' ability to document and share their experiences through photography. A lack of a secure environment for discussions and image sharing limits the depth of narratives captured by photovoice.

- **Challenges with GIS Implementation:** Using GIS technology in conflict zones pose dangers by revealing the locations of individuals, putting them at risk. Restricted access to conflict-affected areas limited researchers' ability to obtain accurate spatial information. Also, the low levels of digital literacy meant more investment was needed in training both enumerators and participants.

The main conclusion of this report is that many barriers existed before the conflict but were aggravated by conflict. Other barriers emerged because of the fighting and related insecurity. It might be assumed that learners and community members would be focused solely on issues of safety and security, and these challenges might lead to despair and lack of hope for the future. However, most of the learners remained hopeful and wanted to pursue their career dreams. Some wanted to be nurses, teachers, mechanics and doctors. It remains a clarion call from learners in emergencies to governments, development partners and international agencies to support the dreams and hopes of children in emergencies.

01 INTRODUCTION

The crisis in Mali has severely disrupted the education of approximately 700,000 children, with 200,000 having no access to schooling in both the north and south of the country, according to UNICEF and educational authorities in Mali.¹ Since 2012, escalating armed conflicts have created widespread insecurity, impacting people's ability to access basic services.² Despite the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in 2015, the situation in northern and central Mali remains unstable, with violence and insecurity gradually spreading further south.

In 2013 alone, 800,000 school-age children dropped out of school due to the crisis in the North, while Malian refugee children, 77 per cent in Niger and 79 per cent in Burkina Faso, are not enrolled in school. The crisis led to an estimated 80 per cent of education personnel fleeing the region, and by March 2013, 130 government schools were occupied, looted or destroyed by armed forces³. As of August 2022, over 1,800 schools were closed, leaving 750,000 Malian children out of school due to conflict, marking a 15 per cent increase from the previous year.⁴

From our research, it was evident that attacks by armed groups and inter-communal violence were the primary drivers of school closures across research sites in Mali. These conflicts affect education in two significant ways: (1) insecurity within communities and schools makes attending school unsafe or forces school closures; and (2) economic prospects are dampened, leading to insufficient school resources or rendering parents unable to pay school fees or spare potential labour.

Education centres in Mali are among the most threatened systems globally, subjected to general insecurity and targeted attacks against schools, students, teachers and administrators. Between 2020-2021, there were over 650 attacks against schools.⁵ Religious conflicts were cited as the most significant factor affecting attendance and enrollment, especially in regions like Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu. Violent extremist groups target "classical" (public) schools as part of their campaign to impose Sharia law and mandate attendance at Qur'anic institutions. Parents who choose to send their children to classical schools face attacks and intimidation⁶. Additionally, in areas with high inter-communal tensions, schools become targets for groups seeking to negatively impact "the other."

This report outlines the findings of a study undertaken to enhance understanding of the various dimensions of nexus contexts (humanitarian, peacebuilding and development). It focuses on the importance of places and spaces in education programming, using geographic inquiry tools such as community mapping and photovoice to monitor teaching and learning in conflict-affected contexts. These methodologies provide community participation, insights and data in areas that may be inaccessible due to security issues or where schools may be closed.

The study builds on the Phase 1 study, which tested how Geographic Place and Space Inquiry theory (GPSI) could inform education programming in the crisis-affected context of Mopti and Ségou within the IMAGINE project. The IMAGINE project was implemented in Mali in partnership with Global Affairs Canada, Plan International (lead), Save the Children, and World Vision. Phase 2 of the study expanded on this by collecting data

from a larger sample and focusing specifically on conflict-affected learning contexts in Ségou and Mopti, where World Vision Mali operates.

The specific objectives of the geo-inquiry were:

- To explore the importance of places and spaces in education programming in conflict-affected contexts using geographic inquiry tools such as community mapping and photovoice.
- To describe how these tools can be used for remote monitoring and evaluation of learning in World Vision Mali programming areas.
- To identify strategies to enhance continuity and sustainability in education program delivery for adolescent girls and boys aged 10-18 living in conflict-affected contexts.
- To generate insights and recommendations for education programming in conflict-affected contexts that consider the interrelated dimensions of nexus contexts (humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development).

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The study is grounded in GPSI theory, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and emotional constructs of space and place in educational research. As guided by Butler and Sinclair (2020), this theoretical framework considers space as an abstract social and emotional construct infused with experience and meaning, while place is rooted in geography.⁷ It suggests that place shapes the geography of opportunity and influences the experiences of students, families and stakeholders in and around schools. The use of geographic inquiry tools such as community mapping and photovoice was central to this study, as they provided valuable insights into the social, cultural and economic dynamics of conflict-affected areas in the Mopti and Ségou regions.

The methodological approach was a build-up from the works of Del Col, MacBride, Aime, M'Pai and Kabamba (2022), who tested how GPSI theory could inform education programming in the crisis-affected context of Mopti and Ségou within the IMAGINE Project.⁸ Del Col et al. (2022) used the theoretical framework of geographic place and space inquiry to investigate how education projects implemented in the humanitarian-development nexus space can leverage geographic place and space inquiry to improve approaches to equitable educational access, particularly for girls.⁹ Therefore, this study was anchored by the same conceptual framework and the assumption that place and space are integral and inescapable aspects of communities, daily life, individual experiences and learning. The following approaches were employed in data collection and analysis.

A comprehensive review of relevant literature was conducted, including documents such as the Rapid Education Risk Assessment (RERA) 2020-2021 and the IMAGINE project baseline study. This review helped to contextualize the project and provided valuable background information for the study. The study also used community mapping, which is best characterized as a collaborative mapping exercise in which local voices are articulated against standardized modes of mapping, which have historically reflected more top-down or expert forms of knowledge. Perkins (2021) argues that Geographic Community Mapping is, in theory, participatory, inclusive and appropriate to local needs, interests and goals.¹⁰ Group mapping exercises were conducted with children ages 8-12 years, adolescents aged 13-18 years and adults to identify the locations of schools, learning centres, community structures and other relevant areas. This collaborative mapping exercise provided insights into the spatial distribution of educational resources and community assets.

Photovoice is an established method developed initially by health promotion.¹¹ It is a qualitative research method used in community-based participatory research that gathers participant-taken photographs and narratives to translate experience into actionable knowledge and is used to elicit and analyze data in the interest of knowledge dissemination and mobilization. Participants, especially children ages 8-12 years, were

provided with handheld tablets to take photographs reflecting their perspectives on education programming in conflict-affected contexts. Group discussions were held to explore the significance of the photographs chosen and to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. Before the exercise, World Vision Canada provided a photovoice expert who provided training and technical support to the research team, staff members from World Vision Mali, World Vision Canada, and the In-Country Research Coordinator. The research team and the In-Country Research Coordinator then trained enumerators from Mopti and Ségou on using photovoice as a data collection methodology. Enumerators, under the supervision of the In-Country Research Coordinator facilitated and mobilized communities, school children and youths to take photos and draw sketches that signified an event or activity relevant to girls' education or education in crisis.

Data was collected from World Vision implementing partners and stakeholders through virtual interviews. These interviews provided insights into education programming in conflict-affected areas, including the challenges faced and the strategies employed to address them. By employing this multi-method approach, the study uncovered the barriers to girls' education in conflict-affected regions and provided valuable insights for education programming.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The fieldwork research revealed significant challenges in utilizing geographic information systems (GIS). The primary issue stemmed from the inherent risks associated with using GIS technology in conflict environments, posing potential danger by revealing the locations of individuals and putting them at risk. The volatile nature of the areas made it challenging to ensure the safety of both the researchers and the local population. Moreover, the practicalities of implementing GIS were hindered by the impossibility of sending staff and enumerators into communities for necessary training and data collection using GIS. Restricted access to these areas limited the researchers' ability to obtain accurate spatial information, hindering the effectiveness of GIS in mapping and analyzing the dynamics of the conflict-affected regions.

04 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Cromer (2023), Africa is home to a greater number, if not most, of displaced people in the world due to violent conflicts.¹² The situation in Mali sheds light on several aspects of educational difficulties in areas affected by conflicts, emphasizing the short- and long-term effects on people and society. Conflict disrupts the normal functioning of educational systems, leading to the destruction of infrastructure, the displacement of populations, and the breakdown of social institutions. Mali is part of the Central Sahel, comprising Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. According to the report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), the Central Sahel has seen a significant spike in attacks on students, teachers and schools by armed Islamic militias¹³. Mali has grappled with political instability, violent extremism, inter-communal conflicts and resource scarcity since the 2012 political crisis, in which the resultant humanitarian catastrophe led to the displacement of over 385,000 civilians.¹⁴ Over 60 attacks on schools took place in 2019, with over 1,100 schools closed.¹⁵ Between January and July 2020, over 85 attacks were recorded on schools, despite COVID-19-related school closures between late March and May. In the same year, at least 27 attacks on middle schools were recorded when schools reopened for children to take their exams in June.¹⁶ The number of recorded school closures due to attacks increased to 1,700 schools in Mali in 2022.¹⁷ Thus, since 2020, the country has been among the three African countries whose schools are most attacked, along with Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), according to the GCPEA.¹⁸

The educational institutions, which were formerly safe places for learning, have come under ideological and physical attacks by violent radical armed groups.¹⁹ These groups are hostile toward “classical” French instruction and are intent on driving children toward the Qur’anic religious schools instead.²⁰ More than 500,000 children living in conflict zones have had their schools closed. For those who can continue going to school despite the conflict, the psychological consequences of the violence they have witnessed affects their focus and their ability to understand in class.²¹ In June 2022, three villages in the IMAGINE project sites in Mopti were attacked by radical elements of an extremist group claiming Islamic ties, resulting in the deaths of 132 civilians, including four teachers and a school director.²² Thus, the consequences of these attacks are conflict-induced trauma and stress with profound effects on the mental health and well-being of learners.

Some triggers of conflict between Qur’anic and classical schools in Mali are intercommunal tensions. One study notes that violence in schools and communities is a result of intercommunal tensions.²³ Students reported feeling uneasy near people from different ethnic groups, and running the risk of being attacked either inside schools or on the way there in regions where intercommunal tensions still exist. Parents in Mopti stated that because of student-to-student conflict caused by ethnicity, they did not bring their children to school. Parents in Timbuktu expressed reluctance to bring their kids to school due to unwelcome inter-ethnic mingling. Furthermore, when parents of kids involved in conflict intervene, for example, these disputes exacerbate community tensions and feed new cycles of violence and instability. Another trigger is on an ideological level. The dispute between the classic and Qur’anic schools frequently reflects larger societal and ideological divides. Some supporters of the classical educational model argue in favour

of a contemporary, secular curriculum that prioritizes scientific literacy, critical thinking and practical skills. They consider the Qur'anic schools to be antiquated and inadequate to meet the demands of a shifting society. On the other hand, proponents of the Qur'anic schools place a higher priority on upholding Islamic principles and stress the importance of religious instruction as the cornerstone of individual and societal growth.²⁴ Historical and religious fault lines between the North and South and between religious extremists have also exacerbated the conflict between Qur'anic and classical schools.

Burde et al, in their review of theory and research on education in emergency programs and interventions implemented by international agencies in areas of armed conflict, found that, conflict reduces boys' and girls' access to education differently.²⁵ Attacks on education often have differentiated impacts on women and girls, including forced marriage, forced pregnancy due to rape and premature pregnancy, and stigma, which reduce the likelihood of girls returning to school after an attack.²⁶ In the Malian context, girls have a greater risk of school dropout due to early marriages. Sixty-two per cent of all Malian children who enter primary schooling finish their last year of primary school, of whom 64 per cent are boys, as compared to 59 per cent of girls who complete their basic education.²⁷ In 2020, only 73.8 per cent of girls were enrolled in primary basic education, compared with 85.8 per cent of boys. By the time they reached secondary education, the proportion of girls enrolled was only 15 per cent, compared with 21 per cent of boys.²⁸

Nicolai and Hine, in their study on investment for education in emergencies, use case studies of Haiti and DRC to illustrate that even when education is a high priority for communities after emergencies, funding for the sector can be very erratic.²⁹ In line with this observation, Mali's national budget cannot cover the needs, and education is one of the least funded sectors in the country, accounting for only two per cent of funds received in 2022.³⁰ This has led to teacher strikes over working conditions and pay, resulting in widespread teacher absenteeism and lack of motivation.³¹ In addition, infrastructure shortages are a major challenge due to a lack of proper funding. Some schools in Mali's conflict-affected regions have a single classroom accommodating up to 300 children. It is impossible to implement quality education in these conditions.³² Since the beginning of 2022, one in 10 schools in Mali remained closed due to a lack of infrastructure and school equipment.³³ This has been made worse due to threats against schools and the destruction of school infrastructure and equipment, which has led to a shortage of teachers in affected areas and a breakdown in the pedagogical support system due to massive population displacements.³⁴ Among children who do attend school in Mali, the absence of qualified teachers, textbooks and low-quality school environments adversely affect learning outcomes. Most students in fifth grade in Mali are not able to master basic mathematics and reading skills.³⁵

Another implication of these violent conflicts in Mali is that children become reluctant to go back to school, even after the conflict is over. Many youngsters choose not to return to school or will only do so after a delay. These learners find that the disruption to their routine, and the years spent out of school, cause them embarrassment, which makes them reluctant to return to school when the time comes.³⁶ To comprehend this, one must consider that their peer group would have advanced and that they would be resuming class with younger peers who are matched to their intellectual level. Though

this does not lessen their desire to learn, many believe they are too old to attend school. However, children who are internally displaced people (IDPs) during a crisis sometimes find themselves enrolled in new educational institutions with people from other cultural backgrounds. A child transferred from a learning institution will require some time to become used to the new surroundings. For children who have been displaced due to armed conflict, the process of acclimatization may be more complex and require more time.³⁷

Burde et al. also show that concerning learning, education content likely contributes to or mitigates conflict, although the mechanisms through which it does so remain underspecified.³⁸ Peace education programs show promise in changing attitudes and behaviours toward members of those perceived as the “other,” at least in the short term.³⁹ Their study also demonstrates that providing children living in emergency and post-emergency situations with structured, meaningful and creative activities in a school setting or informal learning spaces improves their emotional and behavioural well-being.⁴⁰ These initiatives in Mali are supported by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that provide emergency education, psychosocial support and rebuild educational infrastructure. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is working to support partners in dismantling gender barriers to education in humanitarian crises.⁴¹ It's important to ensure that gender is a focus in delivering education services in these contexts.⁴² UNICEF in Mali supports the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Vocational Training and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to fulfil a vision of lifelong learning.⁴³ UNICEF's education program aligns itself with national priorities. It emphasizes the most vulnerable children: those who are currently outside of the school system, girls, children on the move, children with disabilities and those affected by conflict or other emergencies.⁴⁴ In addition, the Global Affairs Canada-funded IMAGINE project in Mali with Plan Canada International (lead), Save the Children Canada and World Vision Canada, helped support the learning needs of conflict-affected girls, boys and adolescent girls. ⁴⁵ Despite a worsening humanitarian context due to persistent conflict, insecurity, climate hazards and social and economic disruption, IMAGINE improved girls' realization of their right to quality, inclusive learning in the conflict-affected regions of Ségou and Mopti.

05 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings of this study on two levels. Level one presents the barriers to girls' education in the Mopti and Ségou regions. It discusses the effect of gender and cultural roles on girls' education. Insecurity and teacher strikes posed another barrier to education in these conflict zones. In addition, religious and economic barriers were cited by both children and parents as barriers to education. The nomadic lifestyle of some families and the disabilities of some children limited their access to education. Level two presents findings on geo-inquiry and photovoice to deliver inclusive and equitable education in the conflict-affected areas of Mopti and Ségou. It examines the benefits of the tools like photovoice, which unveiled perspectives and experiences that may have remained hidden through traditional research methods. The study also reported some challenges observed while using photovoice in this study: it posed substantial challenges due to the heightened security risks faced by participants.

5.1 BARRIERS TO GIRLS EDUCATION

5.1.1 *Gender and cultural roles*

Education for girls can be significantly impacted by traditional gender roles that impose expectations, behaviours and duties on women and girls in many communities. These roles frequently put childcare, household duties and even marriage before education and professional goals. In Mopti and Ségou, field (work) data underscores the formidable barriers to girls' education, with child labour emerging as one of the most significant challenges. While both boys and girls are subject to household duties before attending school, the burden on girls is particularly heavy. Girls are often compelled to engage in domestic work, ranging from toiling in the fields to caring for younger siblings at home, fetching water from boreholes, tending to gardens and pounding millet. These demanding tasks leave girls physically and mentally exhausted, leading some to reluctantly abandon their pursuit of education.⁴⁶ The responsibilities placed on boys are not without challenges either, as they may be required to catch fish or tend to domestic animals under parental supervision. The prevalence of such labour-intensive expectations hampers the academic aspirations of both genders, perpetuating a cycle of limited access to education in these regions. One girl had this to say:

I don't have enough time for my studies. The children in our community are facing the same problems: field, domestic, and family work. Our parents always act the same way. There is a need for a great deal of awareness about the usefulness of education for our elders.

Figure 1: Girls carrying out different household chores that act as a barrier to access to education for girls.



(Source: Photovoice)

In other cases, some girls' education is interrupted during market days as they are sent to sell instead of going to school. A class 4 learner in a Qur'anic school noted:

On weekly market days, we walk around the market selling things.

Another added:

*On market days I don't go to school. My mother gives me things to sell.
I wanted to be an office secretary.*

Another young girl participant remarked on the same sentiments, highlighting that:

Out of ignorance, people in our community think that child labour is a form of training and not an exploitation of which I am a victim, as are some of my friends.

On the other hand, boys are expected to take part in income-generating activities to help their families. A 12 year-old boy said:

I am the person in charge of watering this garden morning and evening before going to school and after school. I don't have a choice. I must do it to meet the family's small needs.

Figure 2: Sketch by a boy participant of a boy watering gardens.



(Source: Photovoice)

Another boy child also raised the same issues, highlighting that:

I'm my parents' only son and I'm the one who looks after the animals during the winter season. I'm out of school for the first two weeks of the new year because I'm looking for grazing areas and that discourages me. I often intend to drop out of school.

The identification of barriers to education for girls, particularly those obligated to fulfil household duties before attending school, reveals a pervasive challenge with profound implications for their future. The expectation to prioritize domestic responsibilities over education perpetuates gender disparities, limiting girls' access to learning opportunities. This imbalance impedes their academic progress, hindering the development of essential skills and knowledge crucial for future success. The dual burden of household chores and schooling creates a formidable hurdle, often resulting in compromised academic performance and reduced educational attainment. This limitation not only perpetuates gender inequality but also undermines the potential for these girls to break the cycle of poverty, limiting their economic empowerment and overall well-being in the long run.

The study also revealed that societal and cultural norms have exerted a profound influence on school-going children, resulting in both boys and girls being subjected to child labour and early marriages. This phenomenon is prevalent in both classic and Qur'anic schools. Notably, the prevailing belief that assigns specific types of jobs to girls further exacerbates the issue. For example, one of the boys explained that he is forced to wash his clothes because he does not have a sister to do the chores. He noted:

I don't have a sister, so I must wash my clothes so as not to stay dirty among my comrades.

Implying that if he had a sister, she would have done the laundry. Gender roles are frequently ingrained in societal expectations and conventions. As such, these entrenched norms act as significant barriers to education, particularly for girls, even in conflict-free areas. The expectation that girls engage in certain tasks perpetuates gender disparities, limiting their access to formal education. This perpetuates a cycle of inequality, hindering the overall development and potential of these children, undermining the principles of equal educational opportunities and contributing to the perpetuation of child labour. The study has shown that domestic duties serve as significant barriers to education for both boys and girls in the study areas, as they are expected to fulfil these responsibilities both before and after school hours.

5.1.2 Insecurity

Another notable barrier to education identified during the study was insecurity. However, the situation at the study sites of Mopti and Ségou exhibits notable distinctions. In Mopti, school closures stem from pervasive insecurity, with reports of armed Islamic groups sometimes disrupting classical schools. According to some key informant interviews (KIIs), these disruptions are not only driven by a broader aim to ban non-Islamic education but also include a concerted effort to eliminate classical schools. The participants further highlighted that the attacks are inconsistent and continuous. However, as another KII noted, threats and attacks lead to the closure of schools. When a school is attacked, all schools within a five to 10 km radius will close because children, parents and teachers will move. After all, the elders are likely to be the target. In addition, teachers will refuse to go there for security reasons. However, some participants highlighted that the attacks are not as frequent. Many participants from focus group discussions (FGDs) and KIIs reported that schools in Ségou had not been attacked in the last four years. It should be emphasized that the research participants from Ségou did not mention armed groups disrupting education, presenting a marked distinction from the prevalent insecurity issues reported in the Mopti region.

Another KII highlighted that the schools that were likely to be attacked were in remote areas. Still, the news of attacks in some communities nearby makes the teachers unwilling to go to their work assignments. Feldman, echoed the above finding and noted intercommunal tensions resulting from conflict within communities and schools.⁴⁷ Chauzal & van Damme, also suggest ideological differences as a trigger to these attacks on schools. Supporters of classic schools consider the Qur'anic schools antiquated and inadequate to meet the demands of a shifting society.⁴⁸ On the other hand, proponents of the Qur'anic schools prioritize upholding Islamic principles and stress the importance of religious instruction as the cornerstone of individual and societal growth. Historical and religious fault lines between the North and South and between religious extremists have also exacerbated the conflict between Qur'anic and classical schools.

Attacks on schools and communities have also resulted in Internally Displaced People (IDPs) with children's education being disturbed as families might be forced to abandon their home areas, further impacting education for both girls and boys. Children are compelled to escape their homes, taking their familiar surroundings and educational resources with them. This disturbance may severely disrupt their education, with schools being destroyed or rendered unusable. Highlighting the impact of being an IDP on the community and schooling of children, a male KII participant said:

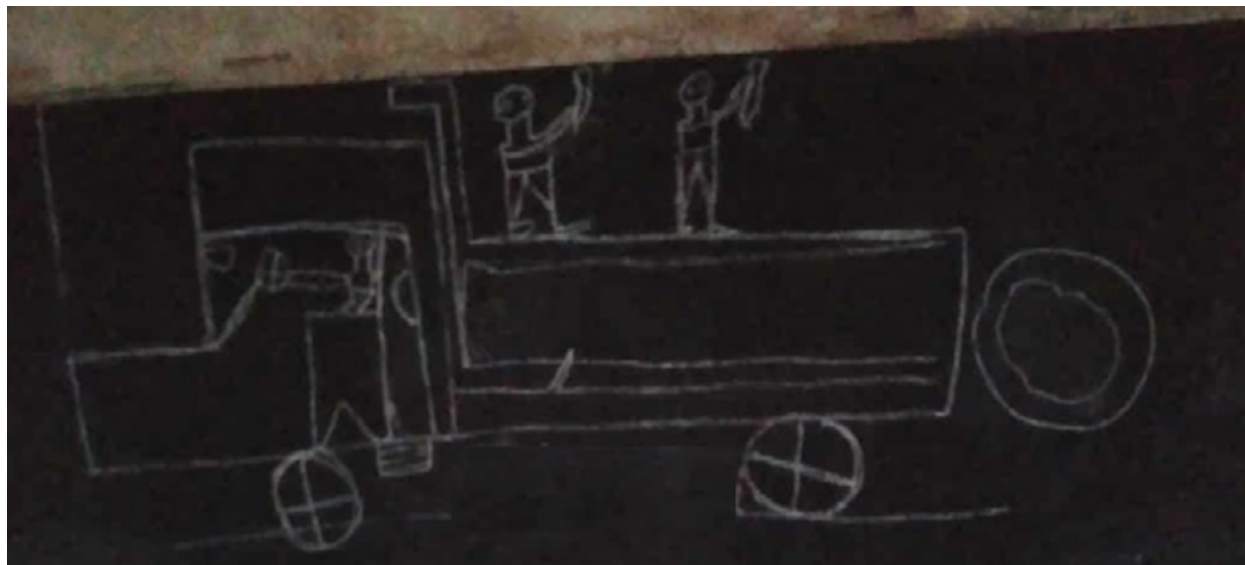
...the impact is not only on the school, but the impact is on the whole community. Because they are IDP they leave there to check for another place to be safe. But the most impact is on the children because if they leave the community and join another community, you have no chance to see all the children who leave this community being at school again. The dropout rate is very high because some face challenges of how to stay safe. And then schooling is not for them the key thing to do.

Children who have been internally displaced could find it challenging to get to school in their new communities. Schools in the host community cannot handle the unexpected surge of displaced children and the subsequent overcrowding. Furthermore, it becomes difficult for children to consistently attend the closest school, given the considerable distance between the relocation site and the school. These findings on IDP corroborate with Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, who argued that children who are IDPs during a crisis sometimes find themselves enrolled in new educational institutions with people from other cultural backgrounds.⁴⁹ A child transferred from a learning institution will require some time to become used to the new surroundings. For children who have been displaced due to armed conflict, the process of acclimatization may be more intricate and require more time.

With the eruption of conflict in Mopti and Ségou and the destabilization of the region, insecurity has become a major barrier, affecting children's educational access. In northern Mali, there is evidence of recruitment and use of children by armed groups. There is also evidence of schools being attacked, looted and used by armed groups as bases for their operations. Data from the study revealed that security and instability particularly affected girls' access to education, especially those who had to walk long distances to school. The violence and instability, especially in Mopti, mainly impacted girls' access to education. Parents in FGDs said they were more concerned about their daughters' safety and security than their boys', especially if the daughters had to travel long distances to school. Therefore, girls are more at risk of being attacked on their way to school than boys. One image sketched by a child and captured in photovoice depicts armed men in a vehicle, confirming armed conflict as a barrier to both girls and boys. However, the impact affects girls more, according to the findings.

The study shows that conflict and other forms of violence against the person within the community have a direct effect on the ability of schools to operate. According to the FGDs, low levels of school functioning in the studied areas are mainly due to repeated conflicts and threat perceptions felt by community members. The study also uncovered the resilience factors that allow some schools to operate despite these disruptive dynamics. They are structured around community safety experience and the value communities attach to education. In other words, school functioning is far more effective in communities where the sense of security is high, and education is valued. In these communities, the local security experience is characterized by low exposure to conflict. At the same time, citizens feel safe and more trusting of the security forces and public service delivery in general. Therefore, a secure environment is associated with access to state services, which help people to feel protected. Schools' operations tend to stabilize within an environment where school education is valued and encouraged. It is characterized by parents who encourage children to go to school and consider education a crucial lever for social integration.

Figure 3: Photovoice sketch depicting armed militia as a barrier to access to education in Mopti



(Source: Photovoice)

Furthermore, in certain communities, the educational landscape is deeply influenced by religious factors, especially Islam. In Mopti and Ségou, religion has become a barrier, especially for girls, in two ways. Firstly, in some communities, especially those in remote areas, coupled with religious indoctrination, it significantly shapes the choice of schools, educational environments, curricula and the moral lessons imparted to pupils. Despite a shared understanding among parents regarding the pivotal role of classical education in securing a better future, the influence of religious practices compels them to enroll their children in Qur'anic schools. This is done despite knowing the educational limitations and barriers to future opportunities that Qur'anic education offers children. The other religious influence is informed by security threats that might force parents to enroll their children in Qur'anic schools. This duality poses a challenge as Qur'anic schools often become barriers to girls' education, restricting their options beyond the age of 10 to 13 years of age. According to key informants, the disparity between classical and Qur'anic schools is evident, limiting the educational choices for girls in a way that does not necessarily apply to boys.

Figure 4: Photovoice participant sketch of an Islamic Mosque shown as a barrier to access to education in Mopti



(Source: Photovoice)

5.1.3 Teacher Strikes

Another school barrier is teacher strikes in classic schools, which learners and parents report at the study sites. However, these were more prominent in Ségou compared to Mopti. According to some KIs, the teacher strikes are due to the lack of resources to pay teachers, especially in some community-funded schools. If the teachers are not paid, they will resign or teach elsewhere. Almost all respondents in Ségou reported this. Women participants, age 36-45 years, in an FGD in Ségou summarized the overall situation, highlighting that:

School has never been closed in Ségou, and the only challenges we faced in the past four years were because of teachers' strikes, and closures during the Coronavirus pandemic.

However, the study also established that in Mopti, teacher absence is mainly attributed to insecurity issues involving either a direct attack on their schools or feeling unsafe due to attacks in schools that might be within a five to 10 km radius. The consequences of these school closures were uniformly detrimental, leading to disruptions in learners' education, compelling some to engage in domestic work or becoming displaced, thus a barrier to their education.

5.1.4 Economic Barriers

In Mopti and Ségou, participants noted that some barriers to sending children to classic schools are cost-based, whereas Qur'anic schools are easily accessible and free. In rural Mali, certain schools have fees for enrolment, textbooks, uniforms and other school supplies. For low-income families, these costs may be a deterrent to sending their kids to school. This lack of access to education was attributed to poverty by the FGD participants. Arguably, poverty is a major barrier to education in these contexts, as one of the male parents in an FGD explained:

The children who don't have easy access to school are those whose parents are unable to pay school fees because of poverty.

Another female participant in an FGD also emphasized that:

There's the aspect of purchasing schoolbooks and making sure they have some food to go to school with; if you live far away, you can't afford transportation to school. These are all direct costs of attending school.

Although some female parents agree that the money charged by the classic school is small and highlight that:

As parents, we have less to spend (school fees only, i.e. an annual amount of 2000 francs per pupil).

For some parents, raising this money remains a challenge. Some learners also believe that education should be free without any underlying cost, as some of their parents cannot afford the amount required. A 10-year-old girl who attends a classic school explained that:

School is a means of educating children for a better future. Access to school for all children must be a priority for all authorities, by paying for children's school fees and supplies.

Furthermore, in Mopti, some of the children explained that they had to drop out of school because their parents could not afford to pay, and the school principal refused to understand their situation, leaving them with no option but to drop out. One of the boys who dropped out of the classic school explained:

I have dropped out of school here because each time my father gives me 500 francs, the principal summons my father and the village chief to decide for the payment of my remaining school fees. That's why I gave up school. Today, I can work well at home and in the field, too. I cultivate well this year and we have a lot of millet. Our principal is very mean.

Lakica observes that household poverty is a key barrier to accessing education and completion of school, with girls and children from the poorest families at the highest risk of school dropout. This is made worse by the fact that Mali's national budget cannot cover the needs, and education is one of the least funded sectors in the humanitarian response, accounting for only 2 per cent of funds received in 2022.⁵⁰ Families in rural locations find it difficult to pay for uniforms, textbooks, school supplies and other associated expenses, even if schools exist. Families in poverty frequently find it difficult to provide for their members' necessities, including food, housing and medical care. Therefore, education loses priority in these situations, and families might not have the money to send their children to school. For low-income families, the expense of textbooks, school supplies, uniforms and transportation may be unaffordable. This situation further affects access to education, especially for girls.

5.1.5 Disability

Disability poses serious obstacles to a child's education, especially in rural Mali, where resources and support networks are scarce. Some participants highlighted a child's disability as one of the reasons for lack of access to education due to the distance they must travel to school and a lack of proper infrastructure and resources to accommodate them. For example, a male community member aged 46-55 years explained that:

Children with disabilities or reduced morbidity are unable to go to school.

Children with disabilities find it difficult to get to school when there is a lack of accessible transport infrastructure. In rural areas such as Ségou, there is an absence of accessible facilities, including classrooms, schools and restrooms for children with disabilities. Children with impairments cannot use educational facilities or attend school because of this physical accessibility issue.

5.1.6 Nomadic Lifestyle

Children of nomads often struggle to stay in school or complete their studies. The continual movement that comes with a nomadic lifestyle causes educational disruptions for children. It is important to note that nomadism has changed in these regions. In some cases, entire families and groups would move, women, children and the elderly included. However, in the present day, mainly men undertake seasonal migrations in search of pastures and water for livestock while families remain in permanent settlements practicing agriculture.⁵¹ Children leave their schools when families relocate, which causes disruptions to their education. Regular interruptions and erratic attendance impede their academic achievement. A male KII noted that:

These children do not have enough chances to go to school, especially the children of nomads. So, these children also don't have enough chances to stay in school for a long time. They also have goats. They move with the herd according to the season. And they don't have a fixed address.

Therefore, because they live in rural areas and move around a lot, nomadic people might not have easy access to formal schooling. It is challenging for children to attend school consistently because it is frequently situated in a settled area distant from a nomadic camp. A previous study conducted by Del Col et al. (2022) also echoes that the nomadic communities in the northern regions of Mali also experience challenges in accessing formal education.⁵²

5.2 USE OF GEO INQUIRY AND PHOTOVOICE TO DELIVER INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION

5.2.1 Photovoice

For this study, photovoice has proven to be a powerful tool in research, facilitating a unique and impactful way for individuals, particularly learners in the Ségou and Mopti regions, to share their experiences through the lens of photographs and drawing. This method has empowered them to vividly express the challenges they face in accessing education, with poignant images capturing girls undertaking responsibilities such as caring for babies, fetching water and pounding millet, shedding light on the multifaceted barriers hindering their educational journey. These compelling visuals provide a nuanced understanding of the obstacles faced and catalyze advocacy and change. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations uncovered in the research, as some enumerators faced challenges of digital literacy and skills and security fears in openly using smartphones or cameras in the communities, thus, limiting the effective use of photovoice. This underscores the importance of ongoing training and support to ensure the full potential of photovoice is realized to capture the authentic narratives of individuals in these communities.

5.2.1.1 *The utility of photovoice as a data collection tool*

The utility of photovoice as a data collection tool in conflict-affected areas lies in its unique ability to unveil perspectives and experiences that may remain hidden through traditional research methods. The findings from this study reveal a profound impact, showcasing instances where individuals, particularly learners, may be hesitant or fearful to share information through conventional means, such as interviews. This is especially evident in cases where participants fear repercussions from their elders or guardians. For instance, the research demonstrates cases in which girls, through the photovoice process, bravely disclose their awareness of being exploited by their parents and confront other challenges that might have otherwise remained undisclosed.

For example, as depicted by Figure 5 below, an 11-year-old girl using the power of photovoice was asked what the photo meant to her and highlighted that:

The picture shows a girl carrying water with a wheelbarrow, the same thing I do at home. The picture shows how some parents overwork their children.



(Source: Photovoice)

A female attendee of a classic school noted that:

...out of ignorance, people in our community think that child labour is training and not exploitation, which is why I'm a victim, and so are some of my friends.

Photovoice emerges as a powerful tool, breaking down barriers and providing a platform for individuals to share their narratives in a more authentic and uninhibited manner, ultimately bridging gaps in understanding that traditional research methods may fail to address.

5.2.1.2 Challenges of using photovoice

a) Safety and security risks

One observation made while using photovoice in this study was that it posed substantial challenges due to the heightened security risks faced by participants. The periodic presence of Islamic armed groups in these regions raises concerns about the safety and well-being of learners engaging in the photovoice process. Some participants feared encountering threats associated with moving with cameras and taking photos and, therefore, could not freely capture and share images. The fear of reprisals or retaliation from armed groups hindered participants' ability to document and express their lived experiences through photography. Additionally, the insecure environment presented challenges regarding depth of narratives captured, image sharing and training enumerators. Striking a balance between empowering participants to share their stories and ensuring their safety became a delicate task, necessitating thoughtful strategies and measures to navigate the complex dynamics of conflict zones.

b) Restricted access to research sites

The fieldwork research also showed significant challenges associated with utilizing GIS. The primary issue stemmed from the inherent risks associated with using GIS technology in such environments. It posed a potential danger by revealing the locations of individuals, putting them at risk. The likely volatile nature of the areas made it challenging to ensure the safety of both the researchers and the local population. Moreover, the practicalities of implementing GIS were hindered by the impossibility of sending staff and enumerators into communities for necessary training and data collection using GIS. The restricted access to these areas limited the researchers' ability to obtain accurate spatial information. It hindered the effectiveness of GIS in mapping and analyzing the dynamics of the conflict-affected regions.

5.2.2 Geo-inquiry

5.2.2.1. School geographical location and choice (classical and Qur'anic)

The study findings reveal that the geographical location of public schools in the Ségou and Mopti regions is a result of collaborative efforts between the government and local leadership, including village chiefs, councillors and mayors. They aim to ensure easy access for the local community while fostering a peaceful learning environment for the students. This shared approach to site selection is evident in the proximity of most schools in the regions to villages and central locations, as determined by the collaborative decision-making process. Intentionally choosing locations positively influences school attendance, as the schools are conveniently situated closer to the communities they serve. However, a notable challenge highlighted in the study is the difficulty faced by individuals with disabilities in attending school. Additionally, the study identified instances where certain villages, particularly those affected by floods in Ségou or security issues in Mopti, are far from school locations. This geographical disparity poses a challenge for displaced populations and residents of distant villages, making it more difficult for them to access education. For example, a student highlighted that:

The photo I chose speaks of the obstacle that prevents me from coming to school on time and my discouragement from studying. I come 5km... by bike every day. The distance is long. From my village there is no school. I have to ride my bike every day to get to school. It's tiring. Every day I come late, and I am always punished by the master.

Regarding the geographical location and easy access to public schools, male FGD participants, aged 26-35 years, highlighted that:

The access for the children of the village is not difficult but the children from other localities come on foot or by bicycle which makes it difficult for them to concentrate on their learning.

On the other hand, the study also shed light on the determinants of the geographical location of Qur'anic schools, which operate as private institutions. Proximity to Muslim communities, use of the Arabic language, and considerations of the learners' residential locations played pivotal roles in determining the location of Qur'anic schools. In some instances, these schools were found within private houses owned by the instructors, while others were situated at the heart of villages based on consultations with

community members. Safety in Qur'anic schools is not much of an issue as the armed groups target public schools that they perceive to teach anti-Muslim tradition. These factors influencing Qur'anic school locations were consistent across both Ségou and Mopti areas. Women in the FGD, 46-54 years, said:

*The school is in the centre of the town, which makes it easy to access.
The Qur'anic schools are in the Muslim village. The school is in this location because the chief and the rest of the community have chosen it.*

The study showed that parents' choices for their children's school are determined mostly by socio-economic and cultural factors. In cases where parents choose Qur'anic schools, according to a KII, the choice is most likely influenced by cultural reasons because most Malians are Islamic. Therefore, they assume that children sent to a classic school, especially in their early years, when they are five to six years old, might not learn about their religion. In addition, Qur'anic schools can be chosen for security reasons, especially in Mopti, where the chances of armed groups likely attacking schools might be high. According to a KII, when parents feel that the safety of their children might be compromised, they are more likely to send their children to Qur'anic school than to classic schools. This is because, in some villages, Islamic groups might not allow children, especially girls, to attend classic schools. However, in some instances they allow them to attend if they are veiled. According to a KII, in the face of these challenges, a new trend among parents has emerged: allowing their children to blend classes by attending Qur'anic and public schools. The child starts earlier in the morning at the Qur'anic school, and after 8 a.m., they can go and continue at the classic school.

5.2.3 School choice and preference

The choice of schools in the study areas is intricately linked to economic and social factors. Economically, parents prefer classical schools for their children, primarily due to financial considerations. Classic schools receive substantial support from the state, covering infrastructure, stationery and teacher salaries. However, this remains inadequate and insignificant to reduce the cost of education. Moreover, the curriculum in classic schools emphasize learning in French, as opposed to Arabic taught in Qur'anic schools. This linguistic distinction is seen as offering better opportunities for learners, as French is widely used in the administrative system, opening doors to diverse career paths. The economic advantage and the perceived broader career prospects associated with a French-based education make classic schools a favourable choice for most parents in the study areas. The alignment of economic considerations with perceived societal advantages further solidifies the prevalence of classic schools as the preferred educational option.

Socially, distinct differences exist, particularly concerning gender. For girls in Qur'anic school settings, education beyond the ages of 10 to 13 years is often not a viable option, restricting their educational choices. Some Qur'anic schools may even have specific conditions or outright restrictions on admitting girls. The differences between boys and girls limit school choices for girls. Conversely, classic schools do not impose such distinctions, accepting learners without gender-based restrictions. In certain regions of Mopti, a noteworthy practice was observed where parents opted to enroll their children in both school systems. This decision is driven by the societal belief that Qur'anic education, as guided by the Qur'an, helps maintain community religion and morale. In families with two children, a pattern emerged where one child was placed in a classic school and the other in a Qur'anic school to benefit from both educational systems. This practice likely results in girls being sent to Qur'anic schools while boys are directed to classic schools, reflecting societal expectations regarding gender roles and future family providers. These social dynamics contribute significantly to the complex interplay of factors influencing school choice in the studied regions.

5.2.3.1 Movement of girls and boys between the classic and Qur'anic school system

The discernible differences in educational offerings between Qur'anic and classical schools have led to a notable trend of families transitioning their children from Qur'anic to classic schools. Motivated by financial considerations, most families perceived classic schools to provide their children with a better education and a more secure future. The emphasis on Arabic language and Qur'anic studies in Qur'anic schools, without a broader curriculum, has deterred some families who believe that a classic education offers a more well-rounded knowledge base. Additionally, the societal inclination in Qur'anic schools to limit girls' education after the ages of 10 to 13 years, with an expectation for early marriage and family responsibilities, has prompted parents to shift their daughters to classical schools. Considering these factors, the move from Qur'anic to classic schools is seen as a strategic decision for families aspiring to provide their children with a comprehensive education and better prospects for the future, driven by both financial

considerations and a desire for a more diverse and inclusive learning environment. These observations are similar for both girls and boys and in all the study sites of the Mopti and Ségou regions.

5.2.3.2 Shifting perceptions on choice of school for girls and boys

The study observed a gender-based shift in schooling preferences in Mopti and Ségou. Previously, some parents believed that girls' education was unnecessary because their major function was to marry and have a family. However, the study established that the community's perspective has developed, and there has been a noticeable shift in thought. Some parents increasingly recognize girls' capacity to make significant contributions to their family if they are educated. As a result, school options for boys and girls have become increasingly aligned, with both genders attending classic institutions for future-oriented opportunities. Furthermore, both girls and boys are enrolled in Qur'anic schools to learn highly prized moral qualities. Although extreme circumstances exist in which families are forced to send girls only to Qur'anic schools for ideological grounds based on Qur'anic teachings or security concerns raised by Islamic armed groups, such cases are uncommon. Overall, there is a growing understanding in Mopti and Ségou that education is equally important for both genders, resulting in a lack of differentiation in school choices between boys and girls in these areas.

5.2.3.3 School geographical location and its influence on school safety and attendance

The research findings show that the schools' geographical location influences the schools' attendance and safety in the Ségou and Mopti regions. In all locations, schools are strategically located near villages for two compelling reasons. First, this proximity reduces the distance children must travel to and from school, resulting in shorter and safer commutes. Second, communities raised concerns about living in potentially risky areas, emphasizing that if schools were positioned far from villages, it might endanger their children's safety, especially in the event of an attack. Parents stressed the necessity of schools being close to the village for their children's safety and ease of monitoring. The opinion shared by community members reflects the importance of the school's location to ensure the safety of learners and teachers. As a result, the physical location of schools had a significant impact on attendance and school safety.

The following excerpts from different participant groups shed light on how they see the geographic location affecting school safety. In the study's examination of school location and safety perceptions among school-going children in the observed areas, a noteworthy revelation emerged as none of the participants cited concerns about safety at their schools during the photovoice sessions. Emphasizing a sense of reassurance, the students highlighted the central location of the school within the village, affirming that this positioning contributed to a feeling of safety and emphasizing the prevailing security measures in place. One 12-year-old participant remarked that:

In our school it is safe all the time because it is located near our houses.

The responses of adults regarding the geographic location and safety of schools in their communities shed light on the significance of the school's placement to the frequency of attendance by children. It was established that Qur'anic schools situated in the heart of the community provide ease of access and enhanced supervision for the children. These factors were considered pivotal to ensure regular attendance and safety of children at school and on their way to school and back home. Conversely, the adults highlighted that classical schools' geographical positions are driven by the community's choice for their construction and safety considerations. The FGD group for men ages 35–45 years explained:

The public or classical schools are located to the west of the village because it is the ideal place chosen by the village for the construction and safety of the classic schools.

Likewise, the research established that the school's geographical location determines a learner's capacity to attend school consistently, which may be impacted by the distance between the house and the school. Almost all participants noted that because classic schools are located out of the community, while the Qur'anic schools are situated in the centre of the communities, it was much easier to access the Qur'anic schools than classic schools due to the distance.

The location of the school can have a significant impact on girls' education. Transportation issues and safety problems may arise from a school's remote location or risky neighbourhood, especially in areas with inadequate infrastructure or where girls' mobility is culturally restricted. The challenges stemming from the distance of these schools were notable, with learners facing difficulties in accessing and attending classes, particularly those who had to travel long distances. This issue also raised concerns about the lack of protection on the way to school, as some learners felt unsafe on the way to school. Interestingly, while some respondents reported being protected by their communities as they commute, most expressed vulnerability when travelling long distances. For example, one FGD respondent from the male 55-65 years group highlighted that:

The school's geographical location has a major influence on its safety, as being in the middle of the community makes it easier to keep an eye on the children and the school itself. All school activities are supervised by members of the community itself.

A participant in a women's FGD for the 46-54 years age group said:

The school is located inside the village allowing easy access for our children and it reassures the community about being closer to their children just in case of emergency.

5.3 SPACE

5.3.1 Safety and protection of learners

The study reveals distinct differences and similarities in how learners are protected in the study areas of Ségou and Mopti. In Ségou, both male and female parents express a sense of security for their children as they travel to school, passing by houses where vigilant adults ensure their safety until they reach the school premises. It is important to note that the mere fact of seeing their children on the way to school gives a sense of security, even though this may not be enough. Within the school, the School Management Committee (SMC) and teachers are mandated to safeguard the learners, especially in the classroom setting. Schools have safety and security plans. However, what was not clear was if these are effective, especially in the context of security violations or armed attacks. Conversely, in the more unstable region of Mopti, children are sensitized at home to be vigilant on their way to school, including being cautious about explosive devices, and encouraged to move in groups for added safety. The protection of learners in Mopti extended beyond the community, involving the general population and security forces. Notably, a community-organized initiative in Mopti, consisting of young people from the village, works to protect learners while they are in class. They act as vigilante groups that keep a constant eye on any threats to security within the community. Additionally, traditional leaders in Mopti highlighted the community's involvement in ensuring learners' safety. This contrast in protective measures underscores the influence of the local context on the strategies employed to safeguard students in the two study areas. For example, female FGD participants ages 26-35 years highlighted that:

On the road, they [children] pass in front of houses under the gaze of adults who protect them until school, and teachers protect them at school.

Male participants in the FGD for those 18-25 years reiterated this:

On the way to school, children and pupils are protected by the public, who see them pass by, but in case of emergency, everyone participates in the children's safety.

However, another group of female parents expressed concerns, perceiving a vulnerability during the transition point between home and school. This unguarded stretch on the way to school prompted apprehensions about their children's safety. This was shown by the sentiments of one female FGD respondent ages 26-35 years saying:

They are not protected on the way to school but [are] in class.

To address this perceived gap, observations noted that some children chose to travel to school in groups, while others were accompanied by their parents. Despite these variations, the school's central location within the village alleviated worries among parents, as they reported never encountering problems related to insecurity in the schoolyard. This geographical placement contributed to the children's collective sense of assurance and safety.

However, some learners complain that they must travel long distances and do not feel safe doing it alone:

I don't feel safe on my way to and from school because I must travel long distances. We always try to move forward as a group so that we can look after each other.

Figure 6: A photovoice sketch depicting the need for a bus as learners walk long distances to and from school



(Source: Photovoice)

One male participant in the FGD for ages 46-54 years noted that a girl committed suicide on her way to school because no one was paying attention due to the distance from the school. He said:

There was a case where a young girl committed suicide in the water on her way to school in 2023. This distance to school influence attendance, as most of these schools are insecure and threatened by bandits and sometimes rape of young people.

For some learners, the long distance between school and socio-cultural expectations intensifies the burdens on learners, potentially leading to tragic outcomes such as the girl's suicide and the widespread dropout trend. In scenarios where learners are compelled to work before and after attending school, the relentless pressure to balance household duties and the long distance to school create an overwhelming environment, pushing some learners to tragic breaking points while prompting others to drop out of school in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

When asked about the measures to safeguard children during school closures, the community members candidly acknowledged a lack of a formal protection system. However, they pointed out that a form of informal protection still exists through small-scale family supervision. Without a structured approach, each family within the community undertakes the responsibility of ensuring the well-being and safety of their children in their unique ways.

The prevailing sentiment is that, despite the absence of a centralized system, the collective responsibility of all parents plays a crucial role in looking after and safeguarding the children within the community. According to some KIIs, the community and SMCs are responsible for the protection of children on their way to school and when they are in class. It was noted that before the IMAGINE project, World Vision had already been working in these areas, and they established community protection committees and school community management committees at the community level. These protection committees are responsible for ensuring safety in schools. For example, the School Security Community Management Committee is responsible for school safety plans, including messages and awareness of the guidelines of the declaration on security in schools. The safety plans include protective activities at school and on the way to school. World Vision supported implementing these activities at school through school-based risk reduction and disaster risk activities. As one KII highlighted:

We also set up committees at the school level. Especially here, it was at the level of cycle-to-cycle. For example, kids from 12 to 16 years old must carry out activities to establish a safety plan for their schools.

Throughout the duration of the project, IMAGINE supported implementing and funding these school safety plans through community and SMCs.

In addition, the research also established that World Vision has also been working with the government to disseminate the Safe Schools Statement. The Safe Schools campaign also makes a plea to armed groups not to set up shop next to a school or occupy a school as a base. So, awareness is being raised in this direction. To spread awareness about the Safe Schools campaign, the government created radio campaign messages pleading with both the Malian military and Islamic groups to desist from using school buildings or grounds as bases either to defend against Islamic insurgency or fight against Malian armed forces. However, it emerged that despite this campaigning and attempts to negotiate with armed groups, at times, all parties (government, military, and armed

groups) continue to use schools as bases. As such, the KII concluded:

So, awareness is being raised in this direction. All right. But on the side of non-lawful armed groups, it is difficult. But there is always what we call an intermediation through the administration, which had the demand to not close schools.

The national committee is currently establishing regional and local committees. At the level of local committees, management committees are part of it.

5.3.2 Teachers' safety in the community and classrooms

The community members interviewed consistently emphasized the safety of teachers within Ségou. According to their accounts, teachers are well-housed, a testament to the support and involvement of the SMC, which represents the parents of the pupils. In any incident, the committee readily comes to the aid of teachers. The community has taken the initiative to build houses for teachers, underscoring their commitment to ensuring educators feel comfortable and valued. While acknowledging that some individuals may express concerns about this lifestyle, most community members feel that their teachers are well-protected, citing the absence of serious problems either in the classroom or within the community. These sentiments were shared in the men's FGD for ages 18-25 years:

They feel protected by the population because of the good behaviour of the community toward them. Teachers can feel protected in the community because the community supports them and turns to them in terms of need.

In the Mopti region, a monitoring committee overseen by the SMC ensures the comfort of teachers, as emphasized by participants in the FGD. In another FGD, participants highlighted the additional layer of protection provided by government security forces operating in the area. Despite the absence of formal security measures around the schools, the trust and collaborative relationship between the community and teachers serve as a solid foundation, instilling confidence in the population's readiness to defend the cause of teachers. Villagers also display a vigilant attitude, promptly informing authorities of any immediate threats, highlighting the community's active role in maintaining a secure environment.

06 DISCUSSION AND KEY OBSERVATIONS

Regarding safety and security, it is important to note the students did not highlight security as a major issue in the region of Ségou. This is contrary to the claims in the literature and some of the KIIs, which attribute some of the school closures and teachers' strikes to reasons of insecurity and safety. This may be due to different perceptions of security between teachers versus students and parents. Teachers may be outsiders, and their perception of risk and insecurity is different to students and parents who are native to these communities in conflict. However, in Mopti, both learners and parents cited insecurity as a main challenge. Learners dropped out of school and resorted to child labour due to insecurity issues that led to the closure of some schools.

On the effectiveness of awareness programs: participants in both regions cited the importance and effectiveness of the awareness campaigns and community outreach programs implemented by World Vision and other NGOs in the area to educate both women and men about traditional norms and cultural practices that can contribute to the marginalization of women and girls. Drawing from this, one could say that there is a behaviour change due to awareness.

IMAGINE has trained the management committees in many places. They are involved in the development of security plans. They have also developed security plans that IMAGINE has financed. World Vision is involved through the IMAGINE project and the government, as well as communities and schools, for the security and safety of schools, teachers and learners.

Parents and learners, especially those in Ségou, are not aware of the existence of the Community and School Management Committees. If these committees are there, as the KIIs claim, then there is a lack of awareness on the part of the parents and learners, which needs to be addressed.

Attacks have been low in areas where the IMAGINE project has been implemented. They occur most often in the North, where the project is not implemented.

In both Ségou and Mopti, women and girls are grateful for the intervention of NGOs like World Vision in creating awareness against gender discrimination and harmful gender roles and norms. For example, some of the women from the FGD for ages 26-35 years explained that:

The children and we, the women, are on the same footing, equal to the handicapped. World Vision has helped in sensitization to help us and the handicapped. We appreciate your support. Thank you very much for your advice to our communities...and even us women.

This quotation from the women highlights the effectiveness of the awareness campaigns and community outreach programs implemented by World Vision and other NGOs in the area to educate both women and men about traditional norms and cultural practices which often contribute to the marginalization of women and girls. This finding corroborates the literature that various organizations have been involved in providing emergency education, psychosocial support and rebuilding educational infrastructure in Mali. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is working to support partners in dismantling gender barriers to education in humanitarian crises. In addition, the IMAGINE girls' education project, which started in Mali in January 2020, funded by Global Affairs Canada, aims to improve the realization of the rights of girls and adolescent girls to access inclusive, gender-sensitive, quality education in two conflict-affected regions in, Mopti and Ségou.⁵³

07 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 CONCLUSION

This study set out to:

- Understand the various dimensions of the nexus contexts (humanitarian, peacebuilding and development).
- Understand the importance of places and spaces in education programming through geographic inquiry tools for monitoring teaching and learning in conflict-affected contexts and providing community participation, insights and data in areas that might be inaccessible due to security issues or where schools may be closed.

Using participatory methods, the study concluded that place and space inquiry can assist in determining programming priorities. Based on geographic factors, including school choice and location, accessibility and risk, we can identify schools that require priority security planning based on their vulnerability to attacks and how close they are to the community.

The mapping effort draws attention to the difficulties children encounter getting to school, and the creative ways local communities and educational councils address these problems, such as establishing SMCs to offer protection from attacks on schools. Qur'anic schools were the first educational institutions in towns. People tend to accept or tolerate them more easily because of their superior location and proximity to the community. Even though classical schools are the preferred option for economic and employability reasons, their later establishment and location—closer to roads, farther from the community and possibly more vulnerable to outside threats, were cited as the main deterrent for parents not to send their children there.

Using photovoice allows for the tangible effects of project interventions to be captured, as well as information about community involvement, the condition of school infrastructure (classrooms), student diversity (gender) and learning materials. For example, the method proved how learners could vividly express the challenges they faced in accessing education, with poignant images capturing girls undertaking responsibilities such as caring for babies, fetching water and pounding millet, shedding light on the multifaceted barriers hindering their educational journey. Sed quid ende etur

7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study makes the following recommendations:

- Interview findings revealed that societal and cultural norms have exerted a profound influence on school-going children, resulting in both boys and girls being subjected to child labour and early marriages. Therefore, increased awareness of gender norms and cultural practices that affect children's education, especially girls, could curb these practices. Once parents, religious authorities, and the community at large become aware of the negative implications of these practices for the future of their children, they might stop.
- The cause for teachers' strikes is the lack of resources to pay teachers, especially in some communities. Therefore, the local school management bodies and the communities could advocate for a living wage for teachers to avoid constant strikes that could affect children's education, especially in areas already affected by armed conflicts. The school management body could also lobby or raise funds to assist teachers.
- Studies revealed that the lack of access to education could be caused by poverty as parents could not afford to pay the required fees, even though they are less expensive than private schools. Therefore, local educational authorities could consider waiving the payment of the school fees from parents who provide evidence that they cannot afford it. International NGOs working in the field of education in Mali could also consider supporting children who cannot access education due to insufficient resources. This will encourage parents unable to afford school fees to send their children to school. It will also limit school absenteeism for children who had to sell or work to raise their school fees before attending classes.
- This study revealed that photovoice is an efficient data collection method as it unveils perspectives and experiences that may remain hidden through traditional research methods. However, to get the full benefit from this method, researchers who desire to use it should consider implementing it in a context where security is stable, and participants are free to express themselves through their drawings or photos. The quality of facilitators is also key as they ensure that participants' voices are accurately captured.
- Education programming in Mopti and Ségou needs to be revised using a conflict-sensitive approach that considers the power and conflict dynamics of this crisis.
- The government of Mali should work closely with the National Committee of the Safe Schools Declaration through the Regional Committees of the Safe Schools Declaration to strengthen the coordination of activities as well as monitor, alert and respond to reported cases of violations, as well as to prevent attacks.
- World Vision Mali and World Vision Canada should consider implementing conflict-sensitive education interventions. Interventions must not create new

grievances within communities or worsen existing conflict dynamics. Instead, programming should maximize schools' potential by incorporating elements that enhance social cohesiveness, and other conflict dynamics. Focusing on schools with significant, conflict-sensitive interventions can achieve immediate educational benefits and promote greater social cohesiveness within the community.

- Long-term remedies that tackle the underlying causes of the nation's educational deficits must be the focus of efforts in Mali. Only through consistent investment across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding nexus will these drivers – which include persistent violent conflict and other social and economic problems, including low livelihoods, cultural attitudes and insufficient state resources – be addressed. Achieving education goals should prioritize preventing and minimizing conflicts, as well as resolving general insecurity and banditry throughout all communities in the project.
- One of the most important ways to ensure educational places is through substantive interaction with the Mali administration. International partners must use two strategies: (1) diplomatic pressure to increase awareness of the gravity of school attacks and persuade the Mali government to recommit to school protection; and (2) support community-based, people-to-people initiatives that prioritize education as a shared interest and concern. By preventing most of the violence that prevents students from attending and enrolling, schools can be made safer places for them.

Annex 1: Survey Guide for Community Mapping, Focus Group Discussions and Photovoice

(To be administered at cercle, community or school level targeting learners, community members, community leaders, school leaders etc.)

Materials needed:

1. Copies of surveys
2. Flip chart paper (for F3 activity)
3. Pencils, pens, markers
4. Cell phones with cameras

Survey Timeline:

- One week for data collection.
- Data, including photovoice and mapping activity, sent to the Consultants.

Sample sizes:

- Enumerators should survey at least all the cercles/communities and 5 to 10 community members (try to diversify the group as much as possible).
- Enumerators should also survey at least 5 project staff members.

100: Enumerators:

Complete this section prior to approaching a new respondent (child, youth, parent, teacher, headteacher, volunteer, etc.). NOTE: it is necessary to interview at least every type of respondent

Code	Question	Response
101	Name and organizational affiliation of enumerator:	Name: Organization: Title:
102	Respondent code:	Project Manager (00) Technical Advisor (01) Child (02) Youth (03) Parent (04) Teacher (05) Head Teacher (06) Community leader (07) Community Volunteer (08) Other (09): Please specify:
103	Data collection date	Date

200: Introduction and Consent

Hi, my name is _____ and I am with World Vision Mali working with the IMAGINE girls' education project in this community. The project is preparing a research paper on how Geographic Place and Space Inquiry Theory (GPSI) could inform education programming in the crisis-affected context of Mopti and Ségou within the IMAGINE Project. I would like to ask you some questions so we can learn about you, your experiences with the project and its impact on the community. I would really like to hear your ideas about education and learning because they are important. We might use some of your ideas to make the project helpful to children in your country, community, and schools.

Consent from Respondents

201	YES	Continue interview
202	NO	Terminate interview

Thank you for your consent.

It will take about 30 minutes of your time to complete this survey and I will be writing down your responses. What you tell me will be used anonymously. This means that no one will know that the response came from you. When we look at the responses, we will be grouping the responses

300. Respondent Introductory Information

Code	Question		Response	Notes
301	Respondent Name			We may need name for data validation in case of data quality issues, but names will be kept anonymous
302	Name of commune or village			Please identify whether this is a commune or village
302	School name			If relevant
303	Sex of Respondent	1 2	Male Female	
304	Age of Respondent (in years)		#	
305	Role of respondent	00	Programme Manager	Circle choice
		01	Technical Advisor	
		02	Child/Student	
		03	Adolescent/ Youth	
		04	Parent	
		05	Teacher	
		06	Head Teacher	
		07	Community Leader	
		08	Community Volunteer	
		09	Other	Specify
306	# of years in the role		#	If relevant

400: SCHOOL MAPPING AND LOCATION:

NOTE: This section can be answered as a single respondent interview, or as a group response after completing the Mapping Activity in F3.

1. In this community, why are the classic (public) schools located where they are?
2. In this community, why are the Qur'anic schools located where they are?
3. What are the important community structures or activities located close to the schools? Why are they important?
4. In what ways does the geographic location of the school factor into why children attend there?
5. In what ways does geographic location of the school impact the school security?

500: SCHOOL CHOICE

1. Where do most families send their children to school? Why do they make this choice? (e.g., political, economic, cultural, social, physical location reasons)
2. Which of the two school systems is preferred by: parents, students, teachers, community leaders. Explain why.
3. Is there a difference between school choice for girls vs. boys? Explain.
4. Has there been any movement of girls and boys between the public (classic) and Qur'anic school systems in the last few years? If so, what are the reasons for this?

600: SCHOOL CLOSURES

1. What were the various reasons for schools to be closed in the last four years?
2. What is the impact of school closures on the community?
3. Where did children go when the schools were closed?
4. Where did teachers go when the schools were closed?
5. How does the community protect children when schools are closed?

700: COMMUNITY and SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

1. How easy or difficult is it for children to get to school? Describe any challenges in accessing and attending classes.
2. Which groups of children do not have easy access to learning opportunities? Explain why.
3. How are children protected on their way to and from school and while they are in class?
4. In what ways does schooling contribute to social cohesion or social division between different cultural groups in the community?

800: IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Reflect on how teachers set up their classroom seating arrangements. Where is the following usually located?
 - Boys
 - Girls
 - Children with disabilities (e.g., mobility, hearing, sight)
 - IDP children from outside the community
2. What is the community's perception towards teachers? Is it different for teachers who are from the community vs. those from outside the community?
3. How protected do teachers feel in the community and in the classrooms?

900: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOLING

901: SCHOOL MAPPING

Note to Enumerators: For this activity choose a diversified group from the community of about 5-10 people.

INSTRUCTIONS: Working as a group with flip chart paper and markers:

1. Draw a simple map showing the locations of all schools in the community, including formal and informal learning centres, classic schools, Qur'anic schools, etc. Please label each school type clearly on the map, using a legend and/or captions.
2. Label all access routes to the schools (i.e., roads, pathways)
3. Label all community structures located near the schools (e.g., water access points, municipal buildings, commercial activities, etc.)
4. Add any additional information that will help us to understand the layout of the community (e.g., housing, central meeting places, market areas, etc.)
5. When complete, please answer the questions in section 400: School Mapping and Locations

902: PHOTOVOICE

Instructions

Using a cell phone or disposable camera, please provide photos which capture evidence of the IMAGINE project in action. These photos should illustrate a moment or activity that is meaningful and provides insight about an issue that the project is addressing. Note that the setting, activity, or locale captured in the photo must relate to the situation of education in this setting, specifically girls' education and/or education in crisis. The photos should address one or both of the following guiding questions:

Guiding Question 1: In your opinion, what educational issue or challenge is the IMAGINE project addressing?

Guiding Question 2: How do children or youth see their opportunities for learning now or in the future? (Please capture both genders)

The photo can be taken by an enumerator or participant (student, teacher, parent, etc. The photos must be captioned with a short narrative clearly explaining the message in the photo)

PLEASE PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Name of photographer (for credit):
- Role/position/title of photographer:
- Location (name of commune, village, locale):
- Description/message of photo:

Annex 2: Survey Tool for Key Informant Interviews

Introduction and Consent

Instructions

Hi, my name is _____ and I am with World Vision Mali working with the IMAGINE girls' education project. The project is preparing a research paper on how Geographic Place and Space Inquiry Theory (GPSI) could inform education programming in the crisis-affected context of Mopti and Ségou within the IMAGINE Project. I would really like to hear your ideas about education and learning because they are important. We might use some of your ideas to make the project helpful to children in your country, community, and schools.

Consent from Respondents

YES	Continue interview
NO	Terminate interview

Thank you for your consent. It will take about 30 minutes of your time to complete this survey and I will be writing down your responses. What you tell me will be used anonymously. This means that no one will know that the response came from you. When we look at the responses, we will be grouping the responses together.

Consent from Respondents

Question	Response	Notes
Respondent Name		We may need name for data validation in case of data quality issues, but names will be kept anonymous
Name of commune or village		Please identify whether this is a commune or village
Name of Institution/ School		If relevant
Sex of Respondent	Male Female	
Age of Respondent (in years)	#	
Role of respondent	Programme Manager	Please write down
# of years in the role	#	If relevant

School mapping and location

1. In this Mopti and Ségou, why are the classic (public) schools located where they are?
2. In Mopti and Ségou why are the Qur'anic schools located where they are?
3. What are the important community structures or activities located close to the schools? Why are they important?
4. In what ways does the geographic location of the school factor into why children attend there?
5. In what ways does geographic location of the school impact the school security?

School choice

1. Where do most families send their children to school? Why do they make this choice? (e.g., political, economic, cultural, social, physical location reasons)
2. Which of the two school systems is preferred by: parents, students, teachers, community leaders. Explain why.
3. Is there a difference between school choice for girls vs. boys? Explain.
4. Has there been any movement of girls and boys between the public (classic) and Qur'anic school systems in the last few years? If so, what are the reasons for this?

School closures

1. What were the various reasons for schools to be closed in Mopti and Ségou in the last four years?
2. What is/was the impact of school closures on communities and the whole nation?
3. Where did children go when the schools were closed?
4. Where did teachers go when the schools were closed?
5. How do communities protect children when schools are closed?

Community and school environment

1. How easy or difficult is it for children to get to school in Mopti and Ségou?
Describe any challenges in accessing and attending classes.
2. Which groups of children do not have easy access to learning opportunities?
Explain why.
3. How are children protected on their way to and from school and while they are in class?
4. In what ways does schooling contribute to social cohesion or social division between different cultural groups in the community?

In the classroom

1. What are the communities in Mopti and Ségou perception towards teachers
Is it different for teachers who are from the community vs. those from outside the community?
2. How protected do teachers feel in the community and in the classrooms?

ENDNOTES

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