# ET LES GARÇONS? REFLECTIONS ON UNICEF PROGRAM FOR GIRLS POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN MADAGASCAR

**Valentina Alice Mutti**
University of Milan Bicocca

valentina.mutti@yahoo.it

*Abstract*

*Based on a fieldwork in three districts of rural Madagascar (Sofia, Analanjirofo and Atsimo Atsinanana), this paper aims at investigating the practices and ideologies of a national Program for girls secondary education promoted by Unicef and implemented by three local NGOs.*
*By establishing a system of scholarships, mentoring activities and boarding houses for girls under the umbrella of "girls friendly schools", the Program seeks to bridge the gap between boys and girls enrolment in secondary education. The paper explores which kind of gender equity concept is promoted through the Program and how it interacts with local realities where traditional marriages ("moletry") as well as sexual tourism work as old and new social norms on gender relationships. Finally, the contribution shows how everyday project practices may produce unexpected side-effects.*

**Key-words**: education, gender, Unicef, early marriages, development, vulnerability

Valentina Alice Mutti

1.  **Ethnography of a development Program: key-elements**

The "Education for all" movement has shaped many intervention promoted by Unicef and other UN agencies worldwide and it has suggested a more gender-oriented attention - in line with the third Millennium Development Goal according to which the ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education should be achieved by 2015. This paper aims at exploring diverse dynamics

The case-study is represented by a Program - promoted by Unicef Madagascar and implemented by three local NGOs - that seeks to foster girls secondary education through scholarships, boarding schools construction, mentoring activities and school facilities support. The three areas of the Program have been chosen by Unicef and CISCOs (local representatives of Ministry of Education) because of the unbalance ratio between boys and girls at secondary level: the main causes of female dropping out from primary to secondary education are represented by "forced" marriages, teen pregnancies and need to help parents in domestic chores together with lack of economical resources.

The Program called *JFA* (*Jeune Filles en Action*) in Sofia region, *Allez les filles* in Vangaindrano district and *Amerioration de l'education post-primaire des filles* in Analanjirofo area has started in 2010 and includes several actions, as follows[1] :

**1.1.1 Campus Vehivavy**

"Campus Vehivavy" are boarding houses that host 21 girls living far from CEG[2]s: they have been built on municipality land, usually very close to the school. The girls are selected by the

---

Program Committee and in some cases they also benefit from the scholarships. Contributions from the girls 'families are expected to be 1000 Ariary per month together with food (rice and *loaka*) and candles.

In the Program designing of this component, the emphasis is put on security: Campus by definition should be a safe place for girls ("*a lieu sécurisé*"), where they do not have any other worries then studying and managing the house together with the other housemates under the supervision of the caregiver. The topic of control over girls is extended over the main caregiver (*tutrice*) as well: during the Unicef workshop in Fenerive est (December 2012), a session was dedicated to the analysis and discussion of possible internal rules for the Campus. A long debate among the participants was around the possibility for the *tutrice* to be married or not: until now one of the recruitment criteria is to be single[3].

In other words, the sexuality of beneficiaries is always present between the lines of the discourse and, as the Malagasy history of the boarding schools itself remembers us (Skeie, 2005; Predelli, 2000), the making of an institution has always to do with the making of gender ideology and discipline. Among the objectives of the Campus in the Program one can read "to protect the girls from external dangers and temptations" which is a traditional aim we can find in historical studies on missionary educational institution that have been built in Africa since the beginning of 1900: we should be aware that, in spite of protection objective, girls have creative ways to react to an institution and creating a good environment for their lives and studies do not always correspond to "make up" an internal world for them five days per week.

---

[2] According to the Malagasy educational system, CEG are *Collège d'Enseignement General* which last 4 years (from 6ème to 3ème) at post-primary level.

[3] An option was to recruit a married couple but the male presence in a girls' house is seen as potential dangerous too. This fear was confirmed during the FGD with the caregivers: parents would not accept the presence of a man even if it is acknowledge that he could work as the guardian of the Campus too.

Valentina Alice Mutti

The main objective of the Campus girls acknowledge is to live close to the school: that is why, especially in Analanjirofo and Atsimo Antsnana regions, they ask for a Campus for boys too. For instance, they think to their brothers that have to walk for an hour to go to school. In Sofia region, girls seem to be more aware about other factors of vulnerability and they do not want Unicef to build Campus for boys because "they are already too much at school", or "because they are not be able to take care of a house".

In addition to the absence of electricity, water, kitchen and cooking facilities which are needs expressed by the girls, one can highlight that the internal rules are not negotiated with the girls neither there is a representative of girls in the Program Committee (*deleguée*).


### 1.1.2 Scholarship system and Mentoring activities

One of the core activities of the Program is the setting up of a scholarship system for vulnerable girls that, after filling an application form and passing a selection process[4], can obtain a financial support for school fees and other important expenses, such as notebooks, pens, shoes, umbrella and school t-shirt. Along with this support they can participate to some mentoring activities, usually organized on Wednesday afternoons or Saturday mornings when girls do not attend lessons at school. Young women enrolled by the Program as tutors (called *marraines*) coordinate a series of activities such as sewing, cooking, planting flowers in schoolyard, learning embroidery, preparing cakes and helping in homework in order to help girls and provide them with some instruments they may use in the future as a basis for income generating activities. At the same time, they are supposed to be reference point for family or school problems and "to foster the girls 'empowerment", according to Unicef discursive practices.

---

[4] Selection criteria include family level of poverty, number of siblings, distance of origin village.

Valentina Alice Mutti

Some of the activities are carried out in collaboration with local WA (Women Association), villagers 'organizations composed by female farmers, shop keepers and housewives, usually gathered for the celebration of 8th March or other community-based activities.

Through this scholarship system which includes three kinds of supports (*bourse de rétention, de transition, de réinsertion*) Unicef creates different categories of "vulnerability": girls passing from primary to secondary school, girls wanting to continue their studies at secondary level and girls who quitted the schools and want to come back studying. This third category is usually represented by young mothers that dropped out school because of their pregnancies (see 2.1). Finally, some girls are given bikes or canoes in order to reach the school if they live by 10 km of distance.

"There won't be any *boursière* going to school without notebooks, or with dirty clothes, or without the blue uniform, you should be the examples for all the others that didn't receive the grant", said a Ngo representative during a meeting with the girls.  By emphasizing the group of "target girls", the Program tends to create the category of "*boursières*": Wednesday afternoons dedicated to mentoring activities could reinforce the idea of a group apart from the other schoolgirls.

In addition, some criteria of selection are not understood and the process of becoming a *boursière* is not always seen as fair: for example, a Director of CEG said that an orphan girl did not get the scholarship because she did not pass the class (she was *redoublant*) but "she is a victim of her family situation, she should have get it". Moreover, there is a risk of manipulation: in Tsaratanana (Sofia region) some *marraines* report that families push the daughters to come back to school and become *boursierès* in order to ask an higher "bride price" in case they get

Valentina Alice Mutti

pregnant or have sexual intercourse with boys. In one specific case, a girl's family asked to boy's family 3 million of FMG because their daughter was more "expensive" because of the scholarship she got.

Finally, along with direct interventions on "beneficiaries" the Program wants to contribute to the making of a gender sensitive environment in schools by funding a series of facilities requested by the schools themselves, such as basket and volley fields, libraries, and by creating separated WC for menstrual hygiene management (two doors for "girls" and "boys", see picure 1 and picture 2).



**Picture 1**

Valentina Alice Mutti

**Picture 2**

### 2.1 The "schoolgirls mothers"

As we have seen, one of the main reasons for female dropping out the school in the three Malagasy regions is to get pregnant. Being a mother does not only represent a problem in terms of logistic arrangements but it also involves the fear of stigmatization and some problems of acceptance at school.

This produce a sort of shame in the girls and in their parents that sometimes use this argument to justify the early marriages, especially in Sofia regions: "we prefer to send our daughters to get married instead of having a single mother at home".

Valentina Alice Mutti

Some Directors of CEG do not accept schoolgirl mothers, even if there is not an explicit rule regarding these cases in the schools neither in the Ministry of Education guidelines.

In Analanjirofo some teachers and some *animatrices endogens* I spoke about pointed out the danger of "helping the *maditra* (the bad ones)" and even in Sofia there is a general fear of give "a bad example" to girls when helping the young girl back to school. The understanding is to give them a prize instead of a punition, even though the rhetoric of the Program underlines the importance of "a second chance", an expression that occur very often during the meetings and Project presentation. A CISCO staff member told me that the bourse could be seen by the girls as an excuse to feel free to have children because then they can be readmitted at school for free.

By collecting life stories of young mothers, I realized that two elements contribute to the success of the grant: the family support, as in the case of Zafileny, 17-years old, where her mother encouraged her to study and cares for the 2-years old baby, and the school acceptance, as in Fetine case (16-years old) where the Director herself passed by the girls 'place to speak about the possibility to apply for the scholarship.

While speaking with the CEG girls about early pregnancies it was obvious that become parent will be something exclusively affecting the girl. When we try to find solution to this "problem" none mentioned the marriage and/or the support of the partner but some of them proposed to continue the education with the help of the grandmother, some others thought of the use of contraception ("*fisa*") and many referred to the most diffused discourse in school: abstinence until the end of the studies, which is not very realistic in a context where girls get pregnant at 12 or 13 years old.

Valentina Alice Mutti

**3.1 Gender equity and discrimination at school**

While talking with girls involved in the Program and boys in the CEGs the questions of gender equity was usual refer in *quantitative terms*, as the Program itself presents the problem: in some marginal areas there are less girls than boys at secondary school level[5]. My informants from Sofia and Vangaindrano region did recognize without doubt the numerical unbalance between girls and boys, while in Analanjirofo is less evident. From a qualitative point of view they distinguish male and female division of labour at school: girls would sweep the classroom floor while the boys would lift the desks up. Girls fetch water and boys clean the blackboard. Girls grow flowers in the school garden and boys cut the trees. As a picture taken on the wall of CEG in Mampikony shows (see picture 3) the gender discrimination is not mentioned, while it is certainly more important for the local context then for example the race discrimination. In other words, gender inequality at school is not always perceived as a matter of urgency. However, both girls and boys can recognize the vulnerability of girls in terms of being at risk of pregnancy and early marriages. Some pupils remark a different attitude of the teachers towards girls and boys, but in general they do not perceive a strong difference in terms of approach but they agree on the fact that male teachers are usually stricter. When the discussion move from school in general to the Program ideas about gender discrimination were clearer. Girls in Sofia region think that Unicef and NGOs partner do not have to establish a scholarships systems for boys because they do not need: many of them already pass the BEPC, they are not affected by the issue of pregnancies or at least this does not affect their studies (while it can imply the practice of "*détournement*").

---

[5] In other Malagasy areas, such as South-Western region, it is exactly the contrary: we found more girls in secondary school because boys from fishing backgrounds are expected to drop out at 13 years old and dedicate time to fishing, "the manly activity providing social prestige, whereas school is not, or to a much lesser degree" (Picard, Moreira, 2011).

Valentina Alice Mutti

In other words they are aware of the "double burden" (Sharp, 2002) affecting the schoolgirls (homework, domestic chores, siblings care).
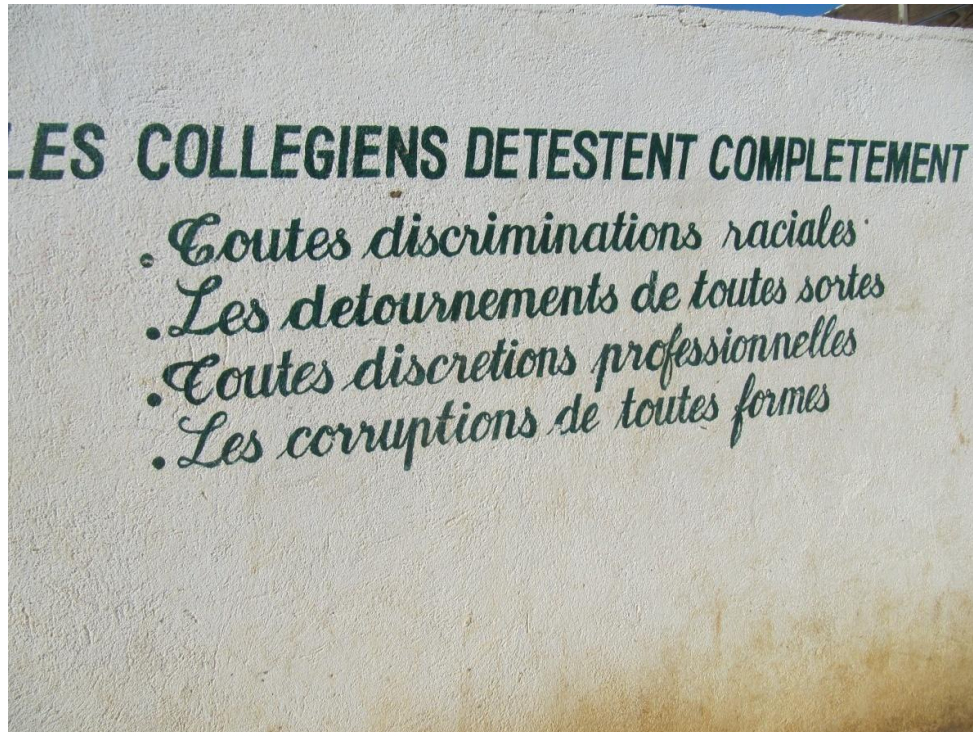


Picture 3

### 3.1.1 *Moletry* in Sofia region and sexual tourism in Analanjirofo: alternative path to education

With *moletry* we refer to the traditional marriage among Tsimihety ethnic group. Despite it has not been object of several studies we can define it as the dominant form of marriage in Sofia region which is virilocal and where the bride-price is represented by cattle (usually zebu) and money (Wilson, 1992). According to UN Economical and Social Council Report (2009), *moletry* has considered as a custom that "arbitrarily deprives a woman of her fundamental freedom to choose her future husband (forced marriage). This practice consists in an engagement

Valentina Alice Mutti

contract obliging the underage girl to behave irreproachably throughout the term of the contract on pain of losing the agreed dowry (in zebus and/or money)"[6]. If we deepen analyze the practice of *moletry* nowadays we should take into account several additional aspects: firstly, the bride has the right to go away from his husband if she is not satisfied after one year of marriage without giving back the bride-price (while if she comes back home before the end of the first year money and zebu should be give back to the partner's family); secondly, *moletry* arrangement is not necessarily decided by the families but it could be chosen by the girl and the boy as well (that is why the definition of "forced marriage" is not always appropriate); finally, many families consider the *moletry* a way to protect their daughters from possible violence, given the fact that a married girl is less likely to be object of dangers and even rapes. My child and adult informants distinguish between girls forced to get married and girls willing to get married ("*mahazoto manambady*"): in both cases they do not consider as appropriate for the bride to continue her studies. They can estimate a normal *moletry* around 300.000 Ariary in addition to the zebu: that's why a 4ème girl said "We should explain to parents that an educated girl is more precious than a zebu'". In addition, we can consider that *moletry* and "*détournement*", a financial sanction for boys responsible for pregnancies to be paid by the boy's family to the pregnant girl's family, work as social norms that regulate gender relationships in Tsimihety society.

On the other side, in Analanjirofo gender relations are affected by new phenomena connected with tourism: Fenerive est, Mahambo and Soanerana Ivongo are three touristic places where many strangers are spending few days before leaving for Saint Marie island. This fact lead to a growing sector of sexual tourism where CEG girls can easily find a job and gain money, independence and sometimes power (Cole, 2004 ; Cole, 2005): some of the use the resources to

---

[6] For that reason Malagasy Government was asked to amend the law on minimum age for marriage to rise the legal minimum age for girls and elaborate legislative and awareness-raising measures taken to prohibit and eradicate the traditional practices leading to forced marriages.

Valentina Alice Mutti

continue their studies while others move to Tamatave, the biggest city of the area, and quit the school.

### 3.2  *Et les garçons?* Possible unexpected side effects

In most of the meetings with CEG management someone ended up asking "*et le garçons*?": the choice of girls as a target group was not always well understood by adults and pupils involved in the Program as the category of "vulnerability" is often associated with poverty and difficult family background which is of course experienced by both girls and boys.

This aspect raises the topic of the ownership of the Program: are the target groups aware of the final objectives of the interventions? Is Unicef ambiguous in its actions?

Despite the valuable effort of this Program to tackle the gender discrimination in school access and to set up a series of gender sensitive interventions, Unicef and its partners risk to reproduce and reinforce some gender stereotypes that the intervention itself tries to eradicate. Under the umbrella of "Girls friendly school" (label then changed in "*Amélioration de l'environnent scolaire*"), the Program includes (from a critical point of view):

- Mentoring activities where the gender labour division is reproduced since girls are committed in "female" traditional tasks (preparing food, growing flowers, embroidery);
- In some cases sexual education addressing only girls risk to reinforce the idea that pregnancy is only a female matter (and it is not efficient since birth control is a couple decision or even a male choice);

- Indeed, the content of sexual education is usually reduced to "*le cycle de la reproduction*" which is not an explication on how the reproduction works but it is only concentrated on menstrual calendar: again the focus is put only on female bodies;

- Campus Vehivavy as a place where girls can live under supervision far from temptations (if the emphasis in on security issues, again girls are seen as bodies to be controlled);

- Separate WC for girls and boys for menstrual hygiene management (I was told by some girls that they wear two or three slips together when they are menstruated since they do not have any cotton and they should go very often to the toilet to wash the slips): we can add that separated WC respect the privacy of both sexes and they are not only in favour of girls.

## 4 Conclusions: the making of "girls friendly schools"

This paper has used the case of Unicef Program in Madagascar to show how UN policies inspired by international guidelines and "universalist goals" meet local needs and actors and interact with pre-existent norms and values.

Despite the effort to focus on  gender unbalance in education access in some marginal areas, my research shows how everyday project practices have produced unexpected side-effects. By establishing a series of activities under the umbrella of "girls friendly schools", Unicef and local partner NGOs risk to reinforce the idea of only female responsibility for unwanted pregnancies as well as construct a category of vulnerability which is not well perceived by the schoolgirls involved in the Program. In addition, schoolboys and some adults do not properly understand the gender-oriented idiom and claim the same needs for them (money for school fees, boarding                                                houses,                                                etc.).

If we pay attention to the ethnographic aspects of a national Program (by looking at

everyday activities in schools, boarding houses and NGOs offices, by reading the meanings of some practices from different target groups 'points of view and by listening what the so-called "beneficiaries" perceive of the humanitarian aid, by collecting life stories) we can highlight the unexpected side effects and the ambiguities of the strategic objectives promoted by UN agencies.

A cultural translation from universalist goals to local views and differences in the target regions is needed. In spite of "labeling" practices as "human right violation" (such as *moletry*) or "gender sensitive" (as mentoring with women) it would be interesting to look at concrete reactions and practices: girls that do not want to get married and refuse *moletry* agreement, young mothers that supported by their families come back to school or even attend classes at 8th month of pregnancy, boys willing to attend the mentoring activities and learn embroidery.

A gender-aware Program such this one has to consider the effects of its actions on short, mid and long term by using a "social relation approach" which considers different rules, resources, target people and power. In order to avoid or reduce side effects a gender responsive policy should include activities with both girls and boys and work on the level of teachers and contents of curricula that may transmit an ideology of gender (INEE, 2010).

## References

Cole, J. (2004). "Fresh Contact in Tamatave, Madagascar: Sex, Money and Intergenerational Transformation," American Ethnologist. 31(4), pp. 571-586.

Cole, J. (2005). "The Jaombilo of Tamatave (Madagascar), 1992-2004: Reflections on Youth and Globalization". Journal of Social History. 38 (4), pp. 891-914.

INEE. (2010). Gender equality in and through education. Pocket guide to Gender. Geneva: UNHCR.

Picard, D., Moreira, C. (2011). Critical factors for secondary school success among coastal populations in South Western Madagascar. Preliminary Summary Report. University of Lisbon, University of Tulear, Dren Tulear.

Valentina Alice Mutti

Predelli, L. Nyhagen. (2000). "Sexual control and the remaking of gender: the attempt of nineteen century Protestant Norwegian Women to export Western domesticity to Madagascar". Journal of Women's History, 12 (2), pp. 81-103.

Sharp, L. (2002). The Sacrificed Generation. Youth, History, and the Colonized Mind in Madagascar. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Skeie, K. Hestad. (2005). "Remaking gender according to what template? Johanne Borchgrevink's Boarding school for girls in Madagascar". LFM. Social Sciences & Missions, 16, pp. 11-41.

UN Economical and Social Council Report, (2009), Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Wilson, P. (1992), Freedom by a Hair's Breadth: **Tsimihety** in Madagascar. Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press.

Valentina Alice Mutti