

Girls deprived of school in Africa

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Thousands of young girls, victims of sexual violence or forced marriages, are excluded from the school system because of their pregnancy or their status as mothers. Although positive developments are perceptible, they are held back by a patriarchal policy shared by African leaders.

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The right to education for young girls is recognised by the African Union in its charter on women's rights, adopted in 2003. The reality is quite different for pregnant or parenting girls. Until recently, in some countries, they were systematically excluded from school.

Morality in the service of patriarchy

This was the case in Tanzania under the presidency of John Magufuli, a convinced Catholic and father of five. He had led a campaign against contraception and was behind the law banning young mothers or future mothers from the school system. Other countries had similar regulations, such as Sierra Leone in West Africa and Mozambique in Southern Africa. School authorities were even empowered to force girls to take pregnancy tests.

Many men in political circles justify these discriminatory provisions on the grounds of moral defence. Obviously, only young girls are victims of this, as pupils identified as fathers are not expelled from school in most cases. A variable-geometry morality since the same people defend early marriages, sometimes with girls. This ideology is shared in all strata of society.

Economic crisis and early marriage

Early marriage is a real danger for girls. Apart from the fact that almost all cases are forced marriages, it is a danger to the health of girls and is often synonymous with dropping out of school.

The Covid-19 crisis has had an amplifying effect on the number of marriages arranged by poor families in order to survive. Statistics from Zimbabwe's Ministry of Women's Affairs revealed that in the first two months of 2021, almost 5,000 students were pregnant, of whom 1,770 were in forced marriages.

Not enough progress

Under pressure from activists, the situation has improved somewhat. The education system is still open to pregnant girls and young mothers, as in Benin, Lesotho, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mauritania. Zimbabwe has recently adopted laws that guarantee access to school for all

students. Sierra Leone has made a major change in its position by adopting so-called 'radical inclusion' measures.

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Other countries confirm the right of access to school but impose, as in Uganda, maternity leave from three months of pregnancy, which is not justified in any way and confirms the ostracism of the authorities towards these girls. Compulsory pregnancy tests are maintained and the return to school is conditional on parental consent.

As for Tanzania, it maintains its principle of banning the girls from school and has set up an “Alternative Education Pathway”, i.e. special schools for these girls. This programme was supposed to be financed by the World Bank, which, faced with protests from feminist and human rights organisations, cancelled its financial participation. Fortunately, feminist mobilizations in Africa are succeeding in moving the lines and, with each retreat of patriarchy, the right to education for all advances.

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P.S.

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