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BENIN

SUCCESS STORY

Mothers For Girls' Education

Forced marriage no substitute for education



Céline Nambi fights with the Association of Mothers of Students to keep girls in school in Tabota, Benin.

Photo: USAID/André Rousset

“I witnessed mothers taking initiatives and convincing parents to send their daughters to school,” said Céline Nambi, a member of the Mothers Association of Tabota, Benin.

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“Before, girls did not go far in their studies. Today, girls have a chance and they are coming back to school”, said Céline Nambi, speaking on behalf of the Mothers Association of Tabota, a remote village in northern Benin. “At first, I was skeptical, but I witnessed mothers taking initiative and convincing parents to send their daughters back to school.”

A USAID project is working to increase girls' enrollment and retention in primary school in 9 northern districts of Benin where the gap between the number of girls and boys in school is most prominent, and the number of girls completing primary school is the lowest.

The project's activities aim to improve the capacities of the primary school parents to support girls' education. USAID has helped create and support 500 associations for mothers of students. Mothers associations cooperate with the existing, but predominantly male-controlled parents associations to raise awareness about the importance of girls' education, assist girls to enroll in school, and monitor their attendance.

In Benin, use of poor, often trafficked, children for labor is one of the reasons that keep young boys and girls out of school. A 2007 study shows that 86 percent of trafficked children are girls between 6-14 years old. “When the mothers association school enrollment campaign started,” said Aime N'Toua Kouambe, Tabota's school teacher, “they discovered that 16 girls and one boy were away, many in Nigeria, as the result of abduction, and arranged or forced marriages. Their age: between 10 and 14 years old. The mothers association succeeded in bringing five girls and the boy back to school and is searching for the others. Association members are on the look-out for girls in danger of being trafficked or married by force.”

When they discover a girl has been abducted to be forced into marriage or labor, mothers association members talk to the child trafficker, who is often a male youth, and try to convince him to return the girl. If they fail, they file a complaint with law enforcement officials who detain the boy's father until the girl is brought back. At that time, law enforcement officials require the trafficker sign an agreement not to do it again.

Successful mothers and parents associations show that organized parents can keep boys and girls in school. They also play an important role in improving schools and education at the local level. They convince families of the importance of education, rescue trafficked children, raise money, and build thatched-roof classrooms. They advocate for education authorities to build permanent classrooms to support additional students and teachers.