



## Behind the Scenes: Mali Rising's Girls Project

*August-September, 2016*

**MALI RISING'S NEW PROJECT TO KEEP GIRLS IN SCHOOL IS OFF TO A GREAT START. OUR NEWLY HIRED GIRLS PROJECT COORDINATOR – HINDATY TRAORE – JUMPED RIGHT INTO THE WORK IN OUR THREE PILOT VILLAGES.**

Over the last two months, Hindaty did extensive groundwork in each of our three villages to gather input and set the project direction. Hindaty met with village leaders, parents, and others in each village. In two villages – Beneko and Kolimba – the project was warmly embraced by all consulted. In the third village – Simidji – we ran into a hiccup. After initially welcoming the project, residents decided to decline participation. However, after further discussions we were able to uncover and address their concerns. Hindaty also coordinated subsidies for girls' school fees and set the stage for the first Girls Groups meetings in October.

### **Laying the groundwork**

Much of Hindaty's early work focused on connecting with school and village leaders, village mothers' associations, and other decision leaders. In addition, Hindaty reached out to other organizations working on girls' education in the region, including staff at UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, and Islamic Relief. Hindaty also gathered a lot of important basic information, such as school fees at each of our schools, rosters of girls who graduated 6th grade in June (and so should be attending our 7th grade this fall), and other baseline information.

## Meeting with parents and village leaders

Hindaty then hosted large discussions in each of our three villages. The goal of these meetings was to outline the Girls Project and gather input from key people. The meetings were very well attended (in Kolimba, 43 villagers attended!) and we were happy with the range of people who participated– from primary and secondary school principals to village leaders to community health workers to students’ mothers.

The feedback from these meetings was generally very good. Participants shared many of the obstacles they see to girls’ schooling, and supported the general strategies proposed in the Girls Project.



Women discuss the Girls Project in Kolimba.

The liveliest discussion was around early marriage. It was agreed that marriage before finishing grade 9 would be avoided, but where it was unavoidable the parents agreed to make the new husband guarantee the girl could still attend school. This will be interesting in practice, but was a compromise Hindaty and our other staff felt was wise.

As mentioned earlier, one hiccup occurred in Simidji. After initially welcoming the Project, residents expressed concerns. Follow up discussions with Hindaty and our Field Director Alou unearthed two concerns from the village: 1) the Project sounded too good to be true and 2) the villagers thought the Project

was a one-time thing, and so felt it would be bad to enroll girls they couldn’t continue to support later.

After more discussion with the staff, villagers felt better about the three-year nature of the Project and agreed to support it. However, we suspect this initial suspicion will slow adoption somewhat in Simidji compared to the other villages.

## Subsidizing school fees

Hindaty also coordinated the provision of school fee subsidies for girls in the three pilot villages. School fees vary by school, as does girls attendance. As of October when school began, we subsidized 25 girls in Kolimba, 80 in Beneko, and 27 in Simidji. This is fewer girls than we had planned on subsidizing (our plan was for 200 subsidies) but we expect participation to grow,

especially in Simidji where acceptance was a little slower. As an added bonus, we provided modest school kits (i.e., book bags, notebooks, pens, pencils) to the 25 girls in Kolimba.

### Setting the stage for Girls Groups

Monthly meetings of Girls Groups are an important component of the Girls Project. These groups are designed to be peer-led opportunities for girls to build key skills in areas such as leadership, study strategies, health, and more. Girls Groups will begin to meet the last week of October. In preparation, Hindaty and our Executive Director Merritt created a plan for topics to be covered at the year's meetings and designed a pre-evaluation to allow us to measure improvement in girls' skills. Hindaty also came up with a wonderful structure for the Girls Groups – allowing girls to hold elected “offices” that will build their leadership abilities over the course of the year and really encourage the girls to take control of these meetings. We can't wait for the first meetings!

### Next steps

In the coming months, the Project has several priorities. These include continuing to engage the villages in the project, launching the Girls Groups, and beginning work with mothers to establish a micro-enterprise strategy to fund girls' school fees after the Project is complete. We will also finish and deliver 150 menstrual kits in December 2016. We will report back on this work before the end of year!



A young girl models her new school kit in Kolimba.



Our intrepid Girls Project Coordinator Hindaty finds a surprise on the road to Beneko.