

Sudan: Nomadic Education
February 2001

0'10"

The eagerness is unusual, but then this is no ordinary school. We're in central Sudan, in a remote nomad's village that didn't have a school until just 20 months ago. Since then the children have been caught in a frenzy of learning.

0'35" Title: Sudan: Learning frenzy

0'47"

For the 600 villagers of Goz El Marekh, the road has not been easy. Originally nomads from Saudi Arabia, a branch of the Kawahla tribe settled in the inhospitable dunes of North Kordofan, in the 50s. As they migrate from July to October in search of water and pasture, it's been particularly hard for them to have access to education. Until recently, when UNICEF came up with a project for nomads' education.

1'16" intv. Mohammed Idris Musa, Director of Nomads' Education North Kordofan

First it's really difficult to reach the nomads, we go out for long periods to mobilize the community, to convince them. We take the emirs and the sheikhs with us, to tell them the importance of education for the nomads. And if there are some of the educated nomad sons and daughters, I usually take them too so that they can see the difference for themselves. Some accept the idea, some don't.

1'53"

And the idea caught on when the government, in partnership with UNICEF, decided to establish a school in Goz El Marekh. Not only did the community contribute to the project, but the villagers agreed to send their daughters to school. A real change of heart, considering that in the past they claimed that they only had sons. Now in their one class school there are 21 girls and 23 boys. 2 years ago only 20 out of 600 knew how to read and write.

2'15" intv. Elfatih El Rikabi, teacher

Actually, the awareness that girls should get an education comes from the others, specially from educated relatives. You add to that desire, what they themselves see I mean by that the benefits of learning. To the extent that if one of them has only one daughter and that there is a need for her at home, he'd still send her to school.

2'46"

And the Ameer gave his blessing, his wife and sister were among the first educated women in the tribe...

2'58" intv. Ahmed El Iasir, Ameer of the Kawahla tribe

I'm in favour of girls going to school, because they changed here the concept about family, children, motherhood and various other things. Even if they stay nomads and are always on the move, it wouldn't be the same old traveling. It'll be more organized, nicer, more hygienic, more knowledgeable, because of girls' education.

3'38"

Bakhita is 11 years old. Her parents live 15 kms from the village, so in order to go to school she stays with her brother's family. After class her day is a succession of gruelling chores, like any other girl's. Everyday, she and her friend Leyla go to the handpumps for water 10 kms. away.

4'12"

The boys watch them leave, after all fetching water is women's work.

4'55"

The girls come back, unload the water and start off again under the scorching sun. This time to gather wood 18 kms away.

5'15" intv. Fatma Taabit, Bakhita's mother

Of course, it's girl's work. Boys don't fetch firewood, they would become a joke, they would be laughed at. They get wood only on wedding occasions. Getting firewood is a woman's job, it suits her.

5'37" intv. Haja Ghandour, Education Section UNICEF

They think that a girl should stay at home, taking care of the siblings or helping her mother, then she will wait for the coming husband.

6'02"

Changing traditional attitudes towards education has been a major priority here. In Bakhita's world where the women themselves are the fiercest defenders of tradition, it's not easy to be a little girl. But Bakhita is not a child anymore. Her brother is away working in Qatar, her sister in law's just had a baby, so she's got the entire workload of the household on her shoulders. In fact, it's a wonder that she can even go to school. Initially her mother was against it, she didn't want to send her to the village, finally she relented under the pressure.

6'32" intv. Fatma Taabit

It was her father's idea. In the beginning I didn't like the idea at all. You know what they say, that those school girls are no good, they don't listen, they do what they want, they can go anywhere, any country. If she

stays here she'll get married... but, when I saw all the girls going to school, I said OK. God bless her.

7'04"

In the dim light of a lantern, the girls end their exhausting day with homework: the Koranic verses. Bakhita's father is proud of this and says even he's learned from her. He thinks basic education is enough, but he might be open to persuasion if she insists.

7'24" intv. Abdullah Saleh Taabit, Bakhita's father

Education could get her out of a lot of mess. It would make her know her duties, prayers, religion, her house, all about marriage, good behaviour and civilization. She wouldn't just be a dirty Bedouin, who doesn't even know how to wash herself or her clothes. She would be clean and prepare clean good food. She would be clean and she would die clean.

7'54"

The men are keen to have the girls pass their newfound knowledge on to their mothers. However, when it comes to sending them to a secondary school, it's a different matter altogether. The desire for education is overcome by the fear of sending the girls away. And what makes it worse is that there are no boarding schools in town.

8'19"

But, a lot has been accomplished under the impetus of the UNICEF supported project. In the Darfur and Kordofan regions, 431 nomadic schools have been established since 1993, bringing education to 28'000 children. This means that 15% boys and 10% girls have been to school for 4 years. Still not enough, but a distinct improvement compared to the past when there were only 5% boys and no girls. A sign of change in a country where, according to the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme, more than half of the entire female population is illiterate.

8'45" intv. Roger Guarda, Resident Representative UNDP, Humanitarian Coordinator

Special mechanisms have been set up. Special arrangements have been designed, whereby a teacher is assigned to a group and travels with the group and gives the education to the children of the group. And this has worked. The community itself, the group that is travelling, has been providing the resources for the teacher and it has worked. But, it is by no means covering the whole country. So the whole education system needs to be revisited and proper solutions have to be identified, in order to cover this major sector.

9'20"

Today it's Thursday and the start of the weekend in Sudan. Bakhita goes on

her weekly trip to see her parents. She's the elder daughter and her help is sorely missed at home. But Bakhita is happy in the village, her life has changed over the past 2 years. For her, school is like a holiday, a respite from the drudgery of chores and she doesn't want it to stop.

9'45" intv. Bakhita Taabit

I want to continue school, finish my studies and become an engineer.

9'50" intv. Haja Ghandour, Education Section UNICEF

She's very ambitious that she wants to be an engineer and when we asked her mother, she said that we will support her with money with everything. But, is she going to continue, this is a problem because there is no 5th, 6th even the chance to complete the 8th grade of basic education. Unless, they think again about establishing boarding schools or something of that sort to let the girls complete their basic education.

10'25"

It won't be easy for Bakhita to realize her dream. Maybe she'll become an engineer, maybe she won't. One thing's for sure, her 4 years in school will have given her a glimpse of a different life, a different future. And if she can't make it, maybe her daughters will or her daughters' daughters. And it will have all started with Bakhita.