

When Malian Women Looked to the USSR (1961-1991): The Challenges of Educational Cooperation for Women

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When Malian Women Looked to the USSR (1961-1991): The Challenges of Educational Cooperation for Women

Dear Soviet women, I have been wanting to write you a letter for so long but, unfortunately, I am ashamed to write that I am not working. Thank God, my husband has found a job. [. . .] We speak Russian at home. I do not want to forget the Russian language, the language of peace and the language of Lenin. [. . .] I miss your country. The TV, the cartoons of Khryusha and Karkusha [. . .], the singers, Alla Pugacheva, Sofia Rotaru, Yuri Antonov, and so many other things. . . Goodbye, dear friends.¹

This nostalgic and symbolically-weighted letter, addressed to the Committee of Soviet Women (CSW) in 1987, was written in Russian by a Malian former student of the Smolensk State Pedagogical Institute. Its tone bears witness to hopes disappointed on returning home, but also to the grip that the “country of Lenin” continued to have on the imagination of an African woman even as the Soviet model was falling apart. Despite the statistics showing the tiny number of women who went to study in the USSR, this letter testifies to the personal and emotional bonds forged between women of these two countries over almost three decades of Soviet-African educational partnership.²

When Mali declared independence on September 22, 1960, the question of the training of African elites was of crucial importance. There was not a single higher education institution in the country, and the break-up of the Mali

1. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Funds of the Committee of Soviet Women (f. 7928, op. 3), Correspondence from 1987 (document: d. 6954). Hereinafter, documents from these archives shall be cited thus: GARF, d. (for the number of the document). Citations taken from the archives were translated into French by Tatiana Smirnova and into English by Cadenza Academic Translations.
2. We thank Pascale Barthélémy, the anonymous reviewers, and the coordinators of this issue for their comments and critical reviews.

Federation³ had brought an abrupt end to educational cooperation with Senegal, the only country in the subregion to boast a university.⁴ France remained the primary destination for the education of Mali's future elites, to the great dismay of the Malian leadership, who aspired to "decolonize the mind" of its ruling classes, and had opted to develop along the path of socialism and non-alignment. At the same moment, however, new opportunities opened up in the East with the Soviet government's decision to adopt a policy of voluntary educational cooperation with the newly independent African states. *Rapprochement* began as early as November 1960 with the arrival in Bamako of a Soviet delegation sent to discuss the potential for economic cooperation.⁵ Agreements were signed during minister of the interior Madeira Keita's visit, in March 1961, which covered several areas including the training of Malian elites in the Soviet Union.⁶ It was on this basis that, between 1962 and 1993, roughly 2,500 Malians obtained degrees in the USSR,⁷ a figure far greater than the number of students educated in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc. While it is not possible from the archives to estimate the number of women among this body of students, it shows nonetheless that there were some Malian women at Soviet schools. Beginning particularly in 1964, special scholarships were allocated to African women's organizations by the CSW, an association supervised by the Soviet authorities and responsible both for supporting the international feminist cause in various forms and for promoting the interests of the USSR.⁸ This funding enabled around a hundred Malian women to study in the USSR between 1968 and 1991.⁹

3. The Mali Federation was a pan-African political union that united the territories of Mali and of Senegal from January 1959 to August 1960. On January 20, 1960, the Federation gained independence, but it broke up a few months later due to major conflicts between the Malian and Senegalese leaders (Cooper 2014, 387-442).
4. The University of Dakar was founded in 1957; the University of Abidjan in 1964.
5. "La délégation économique soviétique s'est réunie hier avec les membres du gouvernement du Mali," *L'Essor*, November 3, 1960, 1.
6. "Signature à Moscou d'accords soviéto-maliens. L'Union soviétique accorde à la République du Mali un crédit à long terme de 40 millions de roubles," *L'Essor*, March 21, 1961, 1; "Des étudiants maliens à l'Université Patrice Lumumba," *L'Essor*, March 15, 1961, 4.
7. See the article by Constantin Katsakioris, "Creating a Socialist Intelligentsia. Soviet Educational Aid and its Impact on Africa, 1960-1991" in this issue.
8. The Antifascist Union of Soviet Women was founded in 1941 and renamed the Committee of Soviet Women in 1956. Controlled by the state, the organization was made up of representatives of the republics, regions, and cities of the USSR, trade unions, and ministries. Affiliated with the Women's International Democratic Federation, the CSW worked actively with international movements and hundreds of women's organizations throughout the world.
9. As well as state scholarships, the USSR awarded "associate" scholarships to social organizations (for youth, women, workers, etc.) affiliated in certain contexts, as in Mali, with the single part.

Through these issues of education, lines of division were drawn within Malian society between “masculine” and “feminine” domains. In this way, studying the training of elites provides a heuristic point of entry through which to examine the gendered dimension of the structuring of African states, “the place attributed to men and women in the nation, and the processes by which their roles and powers are established” (Auslander and Zancarini-Fournel 2000). Although women occupied a marginal position at the head of the Malian state, and education in the USSR was numerically “men’s business,”¹⁰ Malian women nonetheless played a part in this story of educational cooperation. Behind the story, we can trace the outline of an individual and collective struggle waged by female elites who enjoyed a position of genuine power, but one that was subordinate in the structures of the state. They developed “strategies of extraversion”¹¹ aimed less at undermining gender divisions in the structures of the Malian state, and more at providing new resources and new professional prospects to a minority of women able to seize the opportunities afforded in the international context of the Cold War and decolonization. This article thus follows a detour in the analysis of African state building. Focusing on one aspect of state action, it examines the normal practices of the Malian and Soviet actors who forged a partnership between their two countries for the benefit of African women.

While women’s history has long dismissed communist women’s organizations by denying them the label of “feminist,” recent works have highlighted the Western-centric bias of this historiography (de Haan 2010, Ghodsee 2014, Donert 2015). In this context, we have opted here for a voluntarily extensive definition of feminism that includes differentialist and maternalist ideologies, as well as women’s movements that were not autonomous with regard to political power. By taking seriously the “state feminism” (Ghodsee 2012, Revillard 2016) of the authoritarian regimes of Mali and the USSR, this article intends to show the contribution of African and Soviet female activists to the shaping of an international feminist solidarity. Furthermore, while the history of feminist organizations in the Soviet bloc is being actively written, that of their interactions with the women of the “Third World” remains largely unexplored (Ghodsee 2015, Barthélémy 2016). Following these first works and those on the experience of African students in the USSR (Tchicaya-Oboa and Yengo 2015), we wish to show how Malian and Soviet female activists created often tumultuous bonds that embodied the principle of feminist international partnership. Far from reducing this partnership to simply its geopolitical and ideological aspects

10. According to the Ministry of Higher and Vocational Education of the USSR (Minvuz), only one student in ten, irrespective of origin, was a woman in 1969 (Katsakioris 2015, 133).

11. Strategies of extraversion can be defined as attitudes that consist of orienting oneself outwards. They imply asymmetrical relationships but, in contrast with models of dependency, Bayart (1999) suggests viewing “dependency as a form of political action.”

(Laïdi 1990), it is a question of understanding how greatly these bonds were strengthened by personal and emotional relationships, and how these exchanges as a result prompted “intimate transformations” (Saunier 2004) in the Malian women involved, both the politicians and, to a lesser extent, the students.

The archives of the CSW covering the period 1961–1991 offer a wealth of previously unexploited resources for exploring this history of the training of Malian elites in the USSR and the bonds of partnership forged with the two national feminist organizations that existed in Mali: the Social Commission of Women (Commission sociale des femmes, CSF) which operated under the First Republic (1963–1968) and the National Union of Women of Mali (Union nationale des femmes du Mali, UNFM), established under the Second Republic (1974–1991). These archives have been cross-referenced with the records of the Malian CSF available in Bamako.¹² The headquarters of the UNFM burned down during the revolution of March 1991, but records from the Embassy of France in Bamako and *L’Essor*, the Malian government newspaper, allowed us to gather valuable information about this organization.¹³ Finally, the biographical dictionary of the women of Mali compiled by Adame Ba Konaré (1993) mentions the careers of several women who studied in the USSR thanks to other scholarships.¹⁴ These different sources make it possible to study the way in which a feminist partnership between the USSR and Mali was built from 1961 to 1991, and the tensions, as much ideological as political, that surrounded the placement of Malian women for education in the USSR. We will show that the history of this partnership was built as much on friendships as on the numerous misunderstandings between Soviet and Malian women, who often did not share the same vision of the “emancipation of women” through education or the same national strategies.

Contacts: Between Socialist Internationalism and State Feminism (1960–1974)

During the 1960s, a partnership was gradually established between the Soviet Union and Mali. The feminist organizations of both countries contributed greatly to this story, in which the Malian Aoua Keita would play a key role. Although she knew little of the USSR before her first visit there in 1961, the bonds of friendship and shared aspirations for female and national emancipation, as well as the material assistance offered by the USSR, made the Soviets attractive, although not exclusive, partners. Together, Malian and Soviet women laid

12. Archives nationales du Mali (ANM), Box 55, Special report 144: Commission sociale des femmes.

13. Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Embassy of France in Mali, Box 62, Special report: UNFM 1975-1979—Activités de l’Union nationale des femmes du Mali.

14. State scholarships or scholarships from social organizations.

the groundwork for a female educational partnership that—against all odds—would continue and even intensify after the fall of the socialist regime in Mali.

Aoua Keita and Soviet-Malian Cooperation: Meetings, Friendships, and Politics

Aoua Keita, a midwife and activist in the Sudanese Union-African Democratic Rally (Union soudanaise-Rassemblement démocratique africain, US-RDA), played a significant role in the forging of bonds with the CSW.¹⁵ A prominent activist in the anti-colonial struggle, in 1958 she was appointed as the Party's "commissioner for the organization of women," a role that made her the only woman to hold political office. Her prominence in Malian politics, combined with the bonds of friendship that she had forged with international women activists, helped to put her at the forefront of international feminist cooperation in her country.

The International Conference of Female Workers in Budapest in 1956, attended by her comrade Aïssita Sow Coulibaly, probably constituted the moment when the first relations, initially at a personal level, were established with the Soviet members of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).¹⁶ It was at a later date, after independence, that official approaches were made, during training courses for African women organized by the United Nations in Addis Ababa in December 1960. The report written by the French delegate Marie-Hélène Lefauchaux gives an insight into the issues at play in this type of international gathering: France was trying to maintain privileged relations with its former colonies, the USSR invoked anti-colonialism and "African solidarity" in an effort to forge bonds with the African delegates, while the Africans themselves exploited the logic of the Cold War and decolonization to increase their partners. Depicted in this same document as a skillful diplomat, Aoua Keita openly expressed her "sympathies [. . .] for the Soviet Union" and attended working meetings held at night "in the room of the Soviet delegate," all the while maintaining her bond of friendship with her French counterpart.¹⁷ Five months later, she was invited with two comrades to visit Tashkent, capital

15. See her biography by Pascale Barthélémy and Ophélie Rillon in *Le Maitron*: http://maitron-en-ligne.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article170941&id_mot=11413.

16. *Soviet Woman*, no. 8, 1956, Supplement "Première conférence mondiale des travailleuses" (First World Female Workers' Conference). Our thanks to Pascale Barthélémy for having drawn our attention to this article, preserved in the archives of the Confédération Générale du Travail.

17. CADN, Archive of the Embassy of France in Accra, Box 1: The Ghanaian state, policy directions. Report by Mme Marie-Hélène Lefauchaux on the United Nations study course "Le rôle des femmes dans la vie publique" (The Role of Women in Public Life), held in Addis Ababa, December 12-23, 1960, addressed by the minister of foreign affairs, January 27, 1961, 23.

of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. In due course, a deep affection developed between Aoua Keita and Zinaida Fedorova, general secretary of the CSW, which the political eviction of Malian woman in 1967 failed to undermine, as their personal correspondence testifies.¹⁸

FIG. 1.—THE DELEGATION OF MALIAN WOMEN IN TASHKENT IN MAY 1961



The delegation of Malian women in Tashkent included three activists belonging to the US-RDA and the CSF: the teacher Fanta Diallo, who regularly participated in international women's conferences, the teacher Jeannette Haïdara—wife of Attaher Maïga, parliamentarian and minister of finance in Mali—and the midwife Aoua Keita, the only female parliamentarian and member of Mali's Political Bureau.

Source: GARF, Records of the Committee of Soviet Women.

As well as forging friendships, these trips and meetings were politically significant in the context of the polarization of East and West. The material and moral aid provided by the Soviet Union to women's organizations in African countries helped to establish the influence of the USSR. The feminist stance adopted by the CSW resonated with the struggles waged locally by African

18. The signs of affection in their correspondence are numerous: Aoua Keita writes "My dearest Zina," for example. The two women regularly mention personal subjects (children, holidays, and health), and their wish to meet. GARF, d. 1820, Letter of May 30, 1967.

women for women's rights as workers, as citizens, and above all as mothers. For communist feminist organizations, maternity had since the 1930s constituted a catalyst for mobilization and action at national and international levels (Issoupova 2000, Fayolle 2009, Barthélémy 2016). In the columns of the CSW newspaper *Soviet Woman*,¹⁹ advancements in health and education for mothers and children took center stage: "creches and kindergartens are the drivers of communism," explained its editor-in-chief.²⁰ The numerous letters from African women published in the CSW newspaper testify also to the shared concerns and values involved in balancing work and motherhood.²¹ The exaltation of motherhood as the incubator of female pacifism, combined with eulogies to the role played by women in the economic development of their country, was heard sympathetically by African female activists involved in the building of their own nations. On returning from her visit to Tashkent, Fanta Diallo wrote the following in a letter to Lidiya Petrova, vice-president of the CSW, informing her of the admiration her Malian comrades felt for their "Soviet sisters":

My report has greatly excited them, and they all want to visit the Soviet Union, to see your achievements and your progress, and above all to admire and to compliment their Soviet sisters, whose inimitable courage, combined with the heroism of Soviet men, has managed to put an end to imperialism and colonialism. They are also thrilled to see, as was I, that in all areas but particularly in hospitals and above all in operating theaters, women can occupy the majority of roles and can show themselves to be just as effective as men.²²

While the USSR did provide a model for some Malian women, it is difficult to assess with accuracy the degree of adherence concealed underneath the revolutionary and anti-colonialist rhetoric. Activists like Aoua Keita were certainly radicalized by their contact with Soviet women. Her speeches became colored over time with an increasingly assertive anti-imperialism that on occasion provoked great tension with her French counterparts. She clashed, for example, with her friend Andrée Doré-Audibert (2000), who was known for having run Sudan's first social service in the 1950s, and thus having been an actor in the French "civilizing mission." When she returned to Mali ten years later on a mission on behalf of the French assistant in 1967, the welcome she received was less enthusiastic than she had hoped. Although Doré-Audibert cited her deep and longstanding attachment to the country, Aoua Keita suspected her of having imperialist ambitions and of wanting "to sow dissent in our ranks."²³

19. The magazine's title in Russian is *Sovetskaia Zhenshchina*. It was translated into several languages.

20. M. Ovsiannikova, "Anticommunism and Soviet Reality," *Soviet Woman*, 8, 1968, 5. Ovsiannikova is echoing the words of Lenin. [All Russian quotes and titles rendered in English are our own, translated via the French version of this article].

21. See, for example, Numbers 5 and 8, 1968.

22. GARF, d. 1139, Letter of December 19, 1962.

23. ANM, Box 55, Special report 144 CSF, Minutes of the working meeting between Aoua Keita and Mme Andrée-Doré Audibert, Bamako, July 31, 1967.

Aoua Keita also played a key role in the expansion of CSW investment in Mali. If, in the early years, the Soviets only came to Mali within the framework of WIDF activities,²⁴ there was a definite change in 1966 when a delegation of Soviet women were invited to attend a seminar on child health.²⁵ This mission marked the beginning of a specific program of material aid provided by the CSW to the social commission for Malian women. The work carried out in Mali, meanwhile, bears witness to the stark disparity between the ideal of transforming gender relations in socialist society and the practical reality. In the USSR, as in the Mali of the 1960s, familialist ideology was in ascendancy. While the emancipation of women through paid work was envisaged for a minority of female elites, the contribution of women to nation building was mainly through motherhood and education (Rillon 2013, 58–71). The partnership with the Soviet Union was mainly focused on the training of good socialist mothers and on the protection of maternal and infant health, as can be seen from the two highly symbolic projects to which the Soviet women contributed in 1967. The CSW gave its material support to the “most beautiful baby contest,”²⁶ an annual event founded by Andrée Doré-Audibert during the late colonial era and revived by the government of Modibo Keita in 1964 to mark the Day of the African Woman. Keita also participated in the creation of the Malian Women’s Center, opened on March 8, 1967 in Bamako to mark International Women’s Day. Financed by numerous “sister organizations” (Soviet, French, American, Chinese, etc.), this center for domestic training was aimed at adult women (from 30 to 40), and the diplomas it issued had no vocational value.

Socialist Mali thus offers yet another example of the disparity, often highlighted by academic studies, between the emancipatory utopia and the actual policies implemented with regard to women (Buckley 1989, Christian and Heiniger 2015). Nonetheless, the cooperation between Malian and Soviet women was divided across several fields and, while the activities that took place within Mali conformed to the patriarchal system of Modibo Keita’s regime, the education of female elites in the USSR would come to undermine gender hierarchies.

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24. For example, during the meeting of the WIDF in Bamako in 1962. This was the first time that the Federation had organized a meeting of this type in Africa. “La réunion du Bureau de la Fédération Démocratique Internationale des Femmes s’est ouverte hier à Bamako,” *L’Essor*, January 20, 1962, 1 and 4.
25. “Les délégations féminines de la FDIF et du Comité des femmes soviétiques dans la boucle du Niger,” *L’Essor*, August 10, 1966, 1.
26. A veritable eulogy to motherhood, this competition existed in several countries of the former French West Africa, Côte d’Ivoire among them. It was designed to reward the mothers of “fit and healthy” babies who adhered to the hygiene standards promoted by the social and medical services.

Sending Girls to Study in the USSR: The Era of Pioneers

Granting women the opportunity to go and study in the USSR became a point of bitter contention between the Malian feminist organization and Soviet and Malian officials. At the time of independence, no special arrangements were made to send female students for education in the USSR. In reality, young women with secondary education amounted to only a few dozen individuals due to the poor level of female enrollment at the country's schools.²⁷ Fundamentally, there was no reason why this minority should not compete on an equal footing with the boys for the scholarships to study in the Soviet Union awarded by the government or social organizations. But it was also necessary that the families agreed to see their young daughters of marriageable age leave home for several years to go to an unknown, distant land,²⁸ toward which a certain hostility was developing. Was the USSR not the land of atheism, female debauchery, and the pooling of property, women, and children?²⁹ The home of communism inspired many fears in popular circles, and also among the better educated, as evidenced by the seizure in June 1961 by the management of the Lycée Terrasson de Fougères in Bamako of a pamphlet denouncing the conditions of study in the USSR.³⁰ Nonetheless, a handful of these girls did go to study in the USSR in the 1960s thanks to state scholarships. We know little about these women, except that they were Mali's first female doctors, a profession that had previously been reserved exclusively for men. Such was the case with Diaka Diawara, trained as a teacher, who moved to Moscow in 1962 (probably with her husband) and gained a doctorate in medicine in 1969. She would return to the USSR in 1979 to specialize in gynecological surgery and neonatal care. Aichata Cissé departed for the USSR at a much younger age, immediately after obtaining her baccalaureate in Bamako in 1965. She gained her doctorate in general medicine in Leningrad in 1972 (Ba Konaré 1993, 170–171 and 198).

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27. In 1961, 71 girls were enrolled in secondary education across all grades and throughout the country. Their number grew gradually, going from 183 in 1962 to 422 in 1964 (Rillon 2013, 87).
28. It is a reasonable assumption that families preferred to see their daughters go to study in France or, better yet, in Senegal, where the presence of a Malian community ensured the social control of the young women and proximity allowed the students to return home during the summer vacation.
29. Interviews with Colette Keita (Bamako, September 2014), Almamy Nientao (Sévaré, March 3 and 6, 2010), and Frère Wilfried (Sévaré, February 22, 2010). All interviews cited in the article were conducted by Ophélie Rillon as part of her doctoral research on gender social and political struggles in Mali 1954-1993. The question of relations between Mali and the Soviet Union appeared in the margins of her inquiries.
30. ANM—Records 1920-1960, Volume III, B.1047: Various correspondence from Lycée Askia Mohamed 1961-1963, Special report 1961, Pamphlet “Les communistes affirment. . . Les Africains répondent. Dix (10) vérités sur l’université de Moscou,” sent to the minister of national education, June 6, 1961, by Lycée Terrasson de Fougères, 23 pages. With regard to this pamphlet written by Somalian students, see the thesis by Katsakioris (2015, 148-149).

These two trajectories were exceptions nonetheless and should not in any way be seen as the reflection of a political will to affect the training of female elites on the part of the Malian state. It is revealing, moreover, that it was the Soviet Union that first raised the question of implementing a policy specifically aimed at girls: “Increasing the intake of girls to educational establishments will not only help to resolve the issue of female elites in developing countries, but also contribute to the normalization of the personal life of foreign students in the USSR,” suggested the president of the Committee of Youth Organizations in 1964 (Katsakioris 2015, 240). For the communist youth organization, the arrival of African women in the Soviet Union was supposed to quell the tensions between young Africans and their Soviet peers aroused by the appearance of “mixed couples.” These Soviet anxieties provided a strange echo of the fears generated in the colonial era by the couples that formed between colonists from metropolitan France and colonized women (Simonis 2007, Tisseau 2010). In the Soviet context, however, it was the private life of young, single African men that would come to undermine racial barriers. From 1964 onwards, the CSW began to award scholarships to Arab and African women’s organizations.³¹ The following year, Aoua Keita requested 15 such awards,³² although at the time this was the quota provided for the whole continent of Africa.³³ After lengthy negotiations, she managed to obtain an agreement for the awarding of two to three scholarships for vocational studies in medicine in the year 1966–1967.³⁴ It was not, however, until the start of the academic year in 1968 that the first batch of CSW scholarship recipients left Mali. Only two of the four students initially accepted actually made the trip.³⁵ This delay and loss of recipients was the result of the multiple conflicts between Mali and the USSR that had stalled the procedure for the selection and dispatch of the students. The primary obstacle was that Mali refused to send female students for two years and demanded that the duration of studies be reduced. This request illustrated the goals that the Malian political authorities set for the professional training of women—it was as support staff that they were required. Then, as we will see, the political tensions that rocked Mali from 1957 onwards would stifle feminist cooperation for several years.

31. The World Congress of Women held in Moscow in 1963 may also have contributed to the establishment of scholarships for women of the Third World.

32. GARF, d. 1324. Embassy of the USSR to Mali (hereinafter “the Embassy” and “the Ambassador”). Notes from the diary of Feoktostov. Report of the meeting with Aoua Keita on August 20, 1965.

33. GARF, d. 1324. Letter from the vice-president of the CSW, Lidiya Petrova to the Ambassador, November 1, 1965.

34. GARF, d. 1820. Letter from the Ambassador to the secretary general of the CSW, April 16, 1968.

35. GARF, d. 1820. Letters of April 16, 1968, July 12, 1968, and July 19, 1968.

The USSR in Search of New Partners (1967–1974)

Although the Soviet and Malian women's organizations had managed to initiate an educational exchange, an outside event would soon undermine this precarious partnership. Immediately after the *coup d'État* that overthrew the Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, Modibo Keita radicalized his political stance, fearing that similar events could play out in his country. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China, he pressed youth organizations and trade unions to launch, on August 22, 1967, an "active revolution" aimed at purging the state apparatus of elements viewed as "moderate" or "conservative." Many former comrades were stripped of their functions, among them Aoua Keita, whose sidelining from politics was coupled with an interdiction on remaining in the Soviet Union, demanded by the Malian authorities who feared that she would take advantage of a medical visit to the USSR in order to pursue militant activities. Aoua Keita could no longer act as a partner of the CSW, which thus lost its main intermediary. In the ensuing confusion, the activities of the Commission of Malian Women were dramatically reduced, and the Malian minister of education suspended the departure of the female students for the USSR, accusing the Soviet and Malian women of acting without his permission.³⁶ Although the situation was resolved for two of the students, the military coup that overthrew Modibo Keita's regime on November 19, 1968 would worsen the disorder in Soviet-Malian cooperation.

The political uncertainty, combined with the lack of knowledge of their new interlocutors, affected feminist cooperation despite the USSR's efforts to find support within the new regime. While local women's social commissions had not been disbanded after the coup d'état, the ban on political activity and the suppression of the single political party decapitated the political structure of the Malian feminist organization. Its functions were transferred to the Secretariat of Social Affairs, directed from November 26, 1968 by a young nurse, Inna Sissoko Cissé.³⁷ From then until 1972, it was Cissé who was responsible for liaising with the CSW, but according to the Soviet women she had little understanding of the Committee's work. Inna Sissoko Cissé had been educated in Dakar and Paris and had never been a member of the US-RDA. The Committee tried to build links by inviting her to attend international women's events (Helsinki in 1969 and Moscow in 1970). Nonetheless, Inna Sissoko Cissé's Secretariat had neither the scale nor the international legitimacy of a mass feminist movement, as the Soviet women regretfully noted: "The Secretariat of Social Affairs is not in a position to represent the democratic organization of women."³⁸ Moreover,

36. GARF, d. 1820. The Embassy. Report on the meeting of August 20, 1968 at the Ministry of National Education of Mali between the directors of the office of the Ministry and Soviet diplomats.

37. GARF, d. 2572. The Embassy. Memo, May 7, 1970.

38. GARF, d. 2572. The Embassy. Memo, March 7, 1970.

the Secretariat was disbanded in 1972, and its replacement with the National Directorate of Social Affairs would further confuse the Soviets, who continued in vain to search for a partner.

Despite the disruptions caused by the political situation, the CSW maintained the educational exchange established under the First Republic, awarding educational scholarships to Malian women on a contingency basis. Between 1968 and 1972, eight women traveled to the USSR to undertake vocational studies in childcare,³⁹ the latter subject demonstrating the non-progressive view that the new regime had of professional training for women. From 1972 onwards, Mali requested an increase in the quota on the basis that the country “had need of professional women for the field of kindergartens.”⁴⁰ The Soviets offered to award five scholarships,⁴¹ but the agreement was only partially implemented, and in 1974–1975 only three scholarships were awarded for childcare courses.⁴²

Training Female Elites: Political Tensions and Social issues (1974–1991)

A genuine change in favor of the education of female elites took place in the middle of the 1970s. In the light of changes in the Malian regime and the International Women’s Year planned by the United Nations for 1975, a national feminist organization was reestablished in Mali in 1974. Even though it was led by the first lady, Mariam Traoré, the National Women’s Union of Mali (Union nationale des femmes du Mali, UNFM) remained in its early years relatively independent from political power. With its appearance, the Malian landscape became clearer for the Soviets and cooperation between the women of the two countries was given a new impetus.

Battles around education

Continuing the activities carried out by the CSF in the 1960s, social work and healthcare constituted the main policy areas for the UNFM. Its approach, however, proved more pragmatic than that of the socialist women’s organization, and less bound by a family-focused conception of society (Rillon 2015, 164–182). UNFM activists openly called for a transformation in gender relations aimed at social, economic, and political equality. They demanded access to the elite “masculine” professions (in law and medicine, for example) and an increase in women’s wages, and they denounced the sexual harassment (“droit

39. GARF, d. 2815. Letter of March 1971.

40. GARF, d. 3052. Letter from the CSW to the Ambassador, February 2, 1972.

41. Ibid.

42. GARF, d. 3555. Letter from the CSW to the Ambassador, March 29, 1973.

de seigneur”) to which female workers in the public sector were subjected.⁴³ These positions testify to the transformations taking place in Malian society in the 1970s, which probably contributed to the diversification of education for women and the partial lifting of the barriers that had prevented women from pursuing advanced studies abroad. Thus, in 1975, the first recipient of a CSW scholarship left for the USSR to take a degree in agricultural economics.⁴⁴ The number of women going into higher education grew progressively. The majority went to study economics or medicine. A minority of women opted for courses in sociology and law, or in fields of advanced innovation such as milk processing technology. This diversification and specialization of female education spread in parallel with increases in the number of annual scholarships, which grew to five in 1977 and to ten in 1980. This figure remained almost unchanged until the collapse of the USSR and the end of cooperation in the area of CSW scholarships.

However, while cooperation in the area of CSW scholarships became more open with regard to subjects previously reserved for men, the issue of the level of female education remained a stumbling block that provoked considerable tension between Malian and Soviet women. From the beginning of the partnership, the USSR welcomed a majority of young women coming to pursue courses of specialist vocational education, which corresponded to the expectations of the UNFM. Of the six scholarships awarded by the Committee in 1980, only one was offered for higher education, while the rest provided training for midwives (three scholarships) and kindergarten workers (five scholarships).⁴⁵ The situation changed from 1981 onwards, when the CSW began to favor scholarships for university education. The USSR’s Ministry of Higher and Vocational Education (Minvuz) issued an internal memo indicating that it would not accept more than 20 percent of candidates from each country attending technical colleges. In reality, in the context of competition with France, which offered mainly university scholarships, the Soviet vocational diploma was not valued. This disparity in educational offers cast a shadow over studying in the USSR as a whole, even though some subjects such as “economics,” “finance and loans,” “agriculture,” and “pharmacology” comprised both “short” and “long” courses. This situation could lead to confusion when graduates returned to their home country as, according to Minvuz, “they have difficulty in their search for employment.”⁴⁶ Many of them consequently tried to continue their studies at the higher level,

43. “Résolution générale—Consécutive au congrès de l’Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali,” *L’Essor*, January 8, 1975, 1 and 4; “Que veulent les femmes maliennes? Une interview de Mme Tall, Secrétaire Générale de l’Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali,” *L’Essor*, January 22, 1975, 1 and 4; “Courrier des lecteurs. Halte au droit de cuissage,” *L’Essor*, March 7, 1979, 4. Letter from Mlle Maiga, an official from the city of Gao.

44. GARF, d. 3846. Letter of January 21, 1975.

45. GARF, d. 5211. Letter of late June 1980 sent by Zinaïda Fedorova to Sira Diop.

46. GARF, d. 5463. The Embassy. Communication, September 16, 1981.

leading to them spending several more years in the Soviet Union against the advice of their home states, which wished to benefit more quickly from the services of its newly trained cadres. The decision by Minvuz to reduce the number of foreign students on vocational courses in favor of higher education led to the rejection of six of the ten applications sent by the UNFM for the 1981–1982 academic year.⁴⁷ This move was seen as an outrage by UNFM's secretary general, who expressed her anger to her Soviet counterpart:

You cannot imagine the depth of our disappointment and the seriousness of family problems [sic] caused by the reduction in the number of scholarships. Moreover, I must add to this that, as the criteria for your selection are not clear, the candidates whose applications have been rejected may feel betrayed.⁴⁸

The hostile nature of the reaction contrasted sharply with the enthusiastic tone of the 1960s, but this in no way changed Soviet policy: between 1981 and 1990, only 30 percent of female students would enter specialized vocational fields. The UNFM would continue regularly but without success to demand the addition of five scholarships for vocational education to the ten for university studies⁴⁹ on the grounds that young women deprived of a full secondary education had great difficulty in finding work or continuing their studies. Hence, from 1980 onwards, the baccalaureate would become the primary and essential objective of professional training for Malian women.⁵⁰ In the standoff between Malian women and Soviet leaders concerning the type of education preferred for women, it was the latter that prevailed, as did an approach to education that placed greater emphasis on excellence at university level over the training of support staff in larger numbers.

Conquering Hearts and Winning (Geo)political Loyalty

Beyond the type of education, securing sympathizers among African national elites was another important concern in the eyes of the Soviets. Several authors have highlighted the rarity with which ideological education bore fruit, even at the beginning of the educational partnership (Demintseva and Krylova 2015). When Mali was socialist, the Malian organizers required the students dispatched to the USSR to take the otherwise optional courses in Marxist-Leninist theory

47. GARF, d. 5463. Letter of August 13, 1981.

48. GARF, d. 5463. Letter from the president of the CSW to the secretary general of the UNFM, August 20, 1981.

49. In 1984, 1985, and 1990. GARF, d. 7372. Letter from the UNFM to the president of the CSW, May 1984; GARF, d. 6266. The Embassy. Minutes of a conversation between a Soviet diplomat and Konaté Dicko, secretary general of the UNFM, August 5, 1985; d. 6504. Télec from the UNFM to the CFS, March 14, 1990.

50. GARF, d. 6504. The Embassy. Minutes of a conversation between a Soviet diplomat and Konaté Dicko, August 5, 1985.

(Katsakioris 2015, 205) and activists like Aoua Keita promulgated communist ideals. However, the arrival of the military regime put a stop to the dissemination of Soviet ideology. For the girls who studied technical and professional subjects, political training was not part of the syllabus. It was therefore through other channels that the USSR sought to instill loyalty: travel, care (visits to mineral and thermal spas, medical checks), and small gifts were all ways of extending Soviet influence among the ranks of the UNFM, which from 1980 became the female wing of Mali's single party.

Family ties between scholarship candidates and prominent UNFM activists played a not insignificant role in the selection process for scholarships.⁵¹ In the 1980s particularly, several UNFM leaders managed to procure CSW scholarships that allowed their daughters to pursue a higher education. Djenebou Sow, the daughter of Rokiatou Sow, president of the UNFM from 1980 to 1986, obtained a scholarship in 1982,⁵² while Aminata Soumaré, the daughter of Assa Soumaré, the UNFM's secretary for external relations from 1980 to 1986, obtained one in the early 1980s.⁵³ The same was true with Agnes Dicko, who won a scholarship to study "finance and loans" in 1988 and was the daughter of Dicko Massaran Konaté, the general secretary of the UNFM from 1977 and president of the organization from 1987.⁵⁴ In a conversation with one Soviet diplomat in 1985, the latter openly admitted her concept of the awarding of scholarships—it was a means of giving activists and their children access to education and professional training that would allow them to find their place in society.⁵⁵ These arrangements were reflected in the choice of subjects. While in theory it was the Minvuz that set the direction for the female students, these politically and socially influential mothers were able to negotiate their daughters' curricula. Correspondence concerning Djenebou Sow's change of subject show the flexibility the CSW allowed itself in its education policy when personal relations with the UNFM leadership were at stake. In October 1982, the young woman asked to change her course, and her mother wrote to Valentina Tershkova, the president of the CSW, to obtain her support. Her request was accepted, and she managed to switch to sociology,⁵⁶ a subject to which, in theory, the foreign scholarship girls from associated organizations did not have access (as was the case with international relations and international public law).⁵⁷ In fact, "associate" scholarships—which primarily benefited women—specifically prohibited

51. The official selection procedure of candidates was initially the preserve of Mali, even though the USSR had the final choice of scholars according to academic criteria.

52. GARF, d. 6266. Letter, February 2, 1984.

53. GARF, d. 6010 et d. 6266. Letters from Assa Soumaré, February 1984.

54. GARF, d. 7372. Letter, May 11, 1989.

55. GARF, d. 6504. The Embassy. Minutes of a conversation between a Soviet diplomat and Konaté Dicko, secretary general of the UNFM, August 5, 1985.

56. GARF, d. 6010. Correspondence between Rokiatou Sow and the CSW at the end of 1982 and beginning of 1983.

57. GARF, d. 6266. Letter, January 18, 1984.

access to subjects considered “political” in favor of technical fields such as “industry, agriculture, and the education system.”⁵⁸ The rule could potentially be bent for girls with the right connections, which was how another female student managed to enroll on a course in international relations in 1983.⁵⁹ Others eventually worked out how to exploit the geopolitical situation and play on the rivalry between the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (which had cultivated relations with Mali since the mid-1960s) in the service of their personal grievances. In 1984, Aminata Soumaré, the UNFM’s secretary for foreign relations, threatened to send her daughter to study in China if the USSR forced her to return to Mali at the end of her course as stipulated in agreements. Her argument carried weight, and the young woman was allowed to continue her studies in the Soviet Union.⁶⁰

This “patrimonial” view of CSW scholarships was implicitly shared by the Soviets,⁶¹ who sought to build connections with Malian women considered “influential”—a term regularly used in correspondence. This was also the reason they offered “sickness” grants to the leaders of the women’s organization. Each year, one or two of them would spend several weeks at one of the USSR’s mineral or thermal spas. The African women benefited from Soviet medicine and would then sing its praises in their home countries. Thus, Aoua Keita would write in 1969 from a small village in the French countryside where she was receiving treatment that “of course, one cannot compare it to Kislovodsk or Sochi.”⁶² In the cause of enhancing the Soviet Union’s influence and promoting its achievements in medicine or the success of its young people, the Committee of Soviet Women would develop and strengthen its personal relationships with Malian women close to power.

Soviet Baggage and Returning Home

The mark left on African students educated in the USSR by their Soviet experiences has prompted numerous debates in the worlds of academia and politics (Katsakioris 2016). Did they come back imbued with communist ideals or, on the contrary, disillusioned? Did they rise to high office or did they become support staff in the public sector of countries that did not recognize the value of their qualifications? Understanding the impact of their time in the Soviet Union is all the more difficult because the archives reveal almost nothing of these

58. GARF, d. 6266. The Embassy. Yakushin. Communication, June 1984.

59. GARF, d. 6266. Letter, November 16, 1983.

60. GARF, d. 6266. Letter, December 8, 1983.

61. These similarities in the workings of the Malian and Soviet bureaucracies have also been studied by Amselle (1992).

62. GARF, d. 2572. Postcard from Aoua Keita to Zinaida Fedorova, general secretary of the CSW, August 18, 1969.

homecomings, and biographical information is lacking. The problem of finding sources to write this history of homecomings is even more acute for women as they remained a minority in both numerical and political terms. Nonetheless, for the hundred or so Malian women who went to study in the USSR during these three decades, certain professional and political paths can be reconstructed. The contextualization of these singular trajectories and the silence of the sources makes it possible to develop certain hypotheses concerning the manner in which the education of female elites in the Soviet Union was able to undermine masculine hegemony in the state apparatus.

The nature of the scholarships granted to female students would seem to be a primary criterion for differentiating the professional careers of these women on their return to Mali. With one notable exception that we will return to, the women who took up the scholarships awarded by the CSW remained in obscurity. They cannot be found occupying high administrative office nor among the “pioneers” identified by Adame Ba Konaré. The level of education and the subject fields to which the first students were directed would explain their invisibility. Trained at vocational colleges in social and medical subjects, they were recruited to junior posts in “women’s” sectors. The diversification of subjects at the beginning of the 1980s and the increased number of female students in higher education did not in fact facilitate their access to positions of power. In contrast, among the minority to have benefited from state scholarships, several had eminent professional careers in medicine, both public and private. They constituted the first generation of female doctors in Mali, fulfilling professional roles that had previously been reserved for men. The career of Nana Kadidia Diarra is illustrative of the opportunities for advancement offered by the Soviet diploma (Ba Konaré 1993, 190). The daughter of traders from Djenné, she left for the USSR after obtaining her baccalaureate in 1966. She gained her state diploma as a doctor of medicine in 1972. On returning to Mali in the same year, she practiced at the hospital in Bamako before taking command of various state medical bodies in the 1980s (clinics, mother and infant health centers (PMI), and hygiene education centers). The paths of these women doctors thus came to undermine the cliché that Soviet diplomas were worthless in Africa. For women at least, it seems that it was primarily the nature of the scholarship (state or women’s organization) that dictated their chance of penetrating the professional elite of their country.

However, these professional successes were not matched in any political career. Although Nana Kadidia Diarra was a member of the Malian Association of Students and Trainees in the USSR, she seems to have abandoned all political activity on her return. Thus, the Soviet experience does not appear to have been decisive in the course of the politicization of women. The biographical paths that can be reconstructed show the extent to which engagement is a long-term process (Sawicki & Siméant 2009) influenced by multiple factors (acquaintances, predispositions, socialization, private life, and compensation among them) and that education in the USSR did not automatically produce activists.

Many remained outside politics, some became “disengaged” as soon as they returned home, others continued their political activities in Mali without necessarily adhering to Marxist ideology. Such was the case with Fatoumata Siré Diakité, a feminist trade unionist activist who became Mali’s Ambassador to Germany in the 2000s. As a student, she had won a CSW scholarship in 1983 to pursue a course in history at the Zhdanov State University of Leningrad, where she wrote her dissertation on Malian women. When she returned to Mali at the end of the 1980s, protest against Moussa Traoré’s regime was intensifying. Political opposition remained underground and was organized within groups that identified as Marxist, but there is no indication that Fatoumata Siré Diakité was close to any of these organizations. She pursued her struggle in the trade union movement, where she campaigned for the rights of women. Following the 1991 revolution, she founded the Association for the Promotion and Protection of Women’s Rights (Association pour la promotion et la défense des droits des femmes, APDF) which aligned the trade union struggle with broader demands for women: property rights, the fights against domestic violence and female genital mutilation, etc. Fatoumata Siré’s political career thus resonates in the debate about the relationship of African elites educated in the USSR to Marxism. Nothing in her activities nor in her speeches indicates any ideological affinity with communism, in contrast with the activists educated in France.⁶³ On the other hand, her Soviet experience may have reinforced her feminist convictions, the tenor of which would revolutionize the associative female landscape at the beginning of the 1990s. Her speeches contrasted sharply with policy statements in favor of “feminine advancement.” Identified as a radical militant feminist, she was subject to sarcastic criticism in the Malian press.

Partnership between the CSW and women’s organizations in Mali endured for almost thirty years. Significantly, these exchanges allowed almost a hundred Malian women to study in the USSR. But apart from this story of the education of female elites, what does this partnership teach us about the structuring of the Malian state? This article has sought to go beyond the quantitative aspects of the partnership in order to emphasize the full complexity of the national, geopolitical, social, and personal issues that shaped it. The partnership was made possible because an active feminist movement, sustained by charismatic personalities like Aoua Keita, succeeded in finding a place for itself within the Malian state during the process of decolonization. In many respects, Mali’s successive feminist organizations avoided being reduced to mere sounding boards for the single parties. Their leaders were able to attract multiple partners and to build personal relationships with their counterparts abroad—such as the CSW—in order both to reinforce their individual position within the Malian state and to develop policy for the benefit of women. During the 1960s, international feminist cooperation was principally oriented towards social and healthcare activities aimed at

63. Conversations with Sy Kadiatou Sow (Bamako, February 14, 2006) and Bintou Sanankoua (Bamako, March 13, 2013 and Paris, January 28, 2013).

“ordinary” women. The training of female elites was thus not a priority for the socialist governments of Mali and the Soviet Union. Gradually, nonetheless, thanks to regime change in Mali, International Women’s Year, and the USSR’s strengthening of cultural partnerships, education became one of the central aspects of feminist cooperation between the two countries. It allowed around a hundred Malian women to get an education in Soviet schools and then silently to conquer the higher professions previously reserved for men (medicine and law). Activists in positions of power were also able to exploit institutional and diplomatic resources to their personal advantage. Travel, healthcare, and educational scholarships were, of course, tools to foster in Malian women considered “influential” a certain dependence with regard to their “Soviet big sisters.” However, the Malian women understood how to manipulate these instruments of “influence” and nurture relationships with Soviet women in order to develop individual strategies to benefit their professional careers.

Very different from the dream of collective women’s emancipation, the international feminist partnership provided openings that a minority of Malian women managed to exploit. Through their actions, they challenged the androcentric model of the Malian state, at times in spite of themselves.

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ABSTRACT

This article is focused on political and social issues related to sending Malian women to the USSR on scholarships granted by the Committee of Soviet Women. Between 1961 and 1991, approximately one hundred Malian women benefited from such funding. This figure may seem small, but it does demonstrate the importance given to education by official feminist organizations of these two countries and the role of women in state-building. By combining the analysis of Soviet and Malian archives, this article suggests grasping the extent and influence of the cooperation with the Soviet Union in the struggle of Malian women to transform gender relations; it also shows how politics and personal matters are intertwined in the construction of these exchanges.

RÉSUMÉ

Quand des Maliennes regardaient vers l’URSS (1961-1991) – Cet article analyse les enjeux politiques et sociaux de l’envoi de Maliennes en URSS grâce à des bourses attribuées par le Comité des femmes soviétiques. Entre 1961 et 1991, une centaine de Maliennes a bénéficié de ces financements. Ce chiffre peut paraître minime, mais il témoigne de l’importance accordée par les organisations féministes officielles de ces deux États à la formation féminine et au rôle qui leur était assigné dans la construction nationale. En croisant l’analyse des archives soviétiques et maliennes, il s’agit de saisir la portée de la coopération avec l’URSS dans les combats menés par les femmes maliennes pour transformer les rapports de genre, en montrant l’imbrication du politique et du personnel dans la construction de ces échanges.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Mali, USSR, scholarships, cooperation, state, women, feminism, education, training, gender/*Mali, URSS, bourses, coopération, État, femmes, féminisme, formation, genre.*