

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Bissau-Guinean religious (Quranic) schoolboys during a state of emergency: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Background COVID-19 is mainly a disease of adults but can affect vulnerable children indirectly through social containment measures. The study aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic on the lives of Quranic schoolboys, *almudos*, who beg on behalf of their teachers, *chernos*, in Guinea-Bissau.

Methods Data were collected in July 2020 during a state of emergency. Data rest on semistructured interviews with 14 *almudos* and observations. The *almudos*, aged 12–16 years, were identified in the capital Bissau and the regional centre Gabú.

Results Four interconnected themes were found. The first, hardship, was brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and caused by lockdown and police threats, resulting in a decrease in alms and hunger. The second, circumvention of calamity, included preventive measures the boys undertook and concerns with crowdedness impeding social distancing. Relations with others is the third theme. These had changed with sharply reduced contacts with neighbours and other providers of alms. The parents had more frequent telephone contact with their sons, and encouraged them to continue their studies. At the same time, the *chernos* and *almudos* passed more time together, and they dedicated more time than earlier to the studies and prayers. The fourth theme has to do with the boys' concerns about their long-term aspirations—to complete their studies and become respected *chernos*, for which begging was seen as an integral part.

Conclusion The *almudos* suffered from decreased alms, resulting in hunger. COVID-19 was only an additional burden to the boys, who are used to facing challenges while begging to complete their religious education. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to develop their capabilities in line with their future aspirations. Governments and child rights organisations need to address the specific needs of *almudos* in respectful collaboration with them, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities.

INTRODUCTION

While COVID-19 has mainly infected adults, people of all age-groups have suffered from lockdowns and social containment measures, although unequally.^{1–4} In West Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted harshly

What is known about the subject?

- Lockdowns and containment measures threaten children and young people's survival in the time of a pandemic.
- Quranic schoolboys (*almudos*), who beg for survival and education, are identified by international and child rights organisations as victims of child trafficking.
- The Quranic teachers (*chernos*), accused of child trafficking, are respected religious teachers and community leaders.

What this study adds?

- The Quranic schools were not closed during the national lockdown in Guinea-Bissau in response to the pandemic.
- Bissau-Guinean *almudos* know key preventive COVID-19 measures from radio and their *chernos*, yet adherence was contextual.
- The challenges caused by lockdown came on top of other daily struggles of *almudos* to fulfil their aspirations of becoming a respected *cherno*.

on the livelihood of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, prisoners and informal workers, through loss of income, human rights violations, lack of access to healthcare and education, domestic violence, soaring commodity prices and food insecurity.^{1–5} There are concerns that the number of beggars in the region will rise in the wake of the pandemic, not least child beggars,^{6–8} but also that regular beggars will lose their income due to curfew and restriction of movement of people.^{9–11}

Islamic boarding schools with boys residing with their teachers to learn how to recite the Quran have a long history in the West African region.¹² Such education is common among the Fula, who refer to the Quranic schools as *dudal*, the students as *almudos*



and the schoolmasters as *chernos*; corresponding terms commonly used in neighbouring Senegal are *daaras*, *talibés* and *marabouts*, respectively. The in-house students, entirely boys, stroll around in cities asking for alms on behalf of their teachers; thus, international agencies and child rights organisations classify them as victims of child trafficking.^{13–15} Despite accusations of child trafficking, the parents continue to send their sons to live under the *chernos'* tutelage without paying for their livelihood.^{13 14 16 17} In West Africa, for example in Senegal, girls increasingly attend Islamic schools with boarding facilities that provide Arabic-Islamic education; they do not beg, and the parents generally pay for their education under the tutelage of primarily women.¹⁸

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, begging Quranic schoolboys in the West African region have become subject to governmental actions. In the northern states of Nigeria, despite travel bans and warnings not to spread the disease, tens of thousands of Quranic schoolboys (called *almajirai*) were sent long distances to their homes of origin for reasons such as to prevent them from becoming infected, cut expenses and end the *almajirai* educational system.^{19 20} In Senegal, curfew enforced by police violence in the streets resulted in a reduction of alms for the Quranic schoolboys and long hours of studies into the night without food.²¹ There are also reports of hundreds of boys taken off the streets for quarantine, during which they received food and hygiene materials and thereafter sent back to their families.²²

In Guinea-Bissau, the begging of Quranic schoolboys has been subject to the engagement of child rights organisations without satisfactory results, partly due to failure to listen to the involved communities.^{16 23 24} A child rights-based response in the time of a pandemic includes keeping children and young people visible and hearing their voices.³ Here, we aimed to explore the pandemic's impact on the life of Bissau-Guinean Quranic schoolboys during a state of emergency, their knowledge and practice regarding prevention and thoughts about their future.

METHODS

The government of Guinea-Bissau took preventive measures against the pandemic even before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the country (box 1).

Data collection was conducted in July 2020, when the country was still in a state of emergency. At the end of July 2020, 1981 cases of COVID-19 had been diagnosed, including 171 children aged 0–19 years, most in the capital Bissau (90%), but also in Biombo and Cacheu regions with 27 deaths.²⁵ The data rest on semistructured, open-ended interviews, informal chats and observations (see online supplemental appendix 1). Participants were 14 *almudos* aged 12–16 years in the capital, Bissau, and in Gabú, a regional centre in the eastern part of the country, with seven participants in each area. Almost all the boys originated from rural villages; one was from

Box 1 Early development of COVID-19 pandemic in Guinea-Bissau

- ▶ Closure of the national land and sea borders on 17 March 2020, and all international flights suspended.
- ▶ The first two cases of COVID-19 confirmed on 25 March 2020.
- ▶ State of emergency declared on 27 March 2020:
 - Nationwide curfew initially from 11:00 to 07:00 next day, with later gradual reduction of curfew hours.
 - Supermarkets and minimarkets open in periods outside curfew hours, allowing individuals wishing to leave their homes for essential goods and services.
 - Public transport limited and no transport between regions.
 - Closure of social institutions, for example, schools, places of worship, restaurants/bars and banks.
 - Ban on public gatherings and leisure and sports activities prohibited.
 - People ordered to use face masks and respect social distancing.

neighbouring Guinea-Conakry. They studied the Quran with a *cherno* to whom their parents had entrusted them, and they begged as a part of their religious studies. The participants were identified in the two settings when begging or in their respective *dudal*. The first author (HB) conducted the interviews in the Fula language and did the observations (see online supplemental appendix 2). The interviews were either directly recorded or written down, depending on the boys' preferences. The interviews were translated into Portuguese and analysed in Atlas.ti.

Initially, leaders of the main Islamic association in Guinea-Bissau were contacted and informed about the research. With their permission, the participants were given information about the study by one of the authors (HB); informed verbal consent was given by their *chernos*, who are in line with the tradition de facto guardians of the boys, and the boys ahead of the interview.^{26–28} No personal identifiers were used. The interviews were taken individually, and the time ranged from 20 to 45 min. After inquiring about the general background of the participants, the interview focused on their understanding of the pandemic, its impact on their daily life and thoughts about the future.

Patient and public involvement

Since 2009, the authors have been researching the context of the Quranic education in Guinea-Bissau.^{16 23 24 29} Based on gained knowledge on the living conditions and well-being of *almudos*, the authors aimed to give voice to this group of children in a state of emergency caused by the pandemic; due consideration was given to the local context and the age and vulnerability of the study participants.³⁰ The boys, aged 12–16 years, were invited to participate or reject, but all accepted. During the interview, they were encouraged to add to the discussion whatever concerns they might have. The interviews were taken in their respective *dudal*, except in two instances in the street. Each boy was interviewed in isolation from

others. Before and after the interviews, discussions were informal.

RESULTS

The analysis of the interviews revealed four interconnected themes. The first is hardship that resulted in fatigue and hunger. The second one, circumventing the calamity, had to do with the possibility and impossibility to prevent infection. The third theme, relationships with others, including the boys' social contacts with their parents, *chernos* and other *almudos*, as well as neighbours and compatriots. The last theme, the future, has to do with the boys' concerns about their long-term visions.

Hardship

The boys used the Fula term *tampere* when describing the corporal and mental fatigue they suffered from the pandemic. The 'Corona hunger' was the worst. The boys' access to food was scarce yet varied; some had their meals at their *chernos*' house, others had their meals on the street, and two of the boys had their meals at a relative's home. With *Corona*, begging brought neither money nor food. "Access to food is difficult with *Corona*; many services are not functioning, including the bus stations where we used to receive a lot of money from passengers and others," a boy explained. Another said: "Now we can't eat another person's leftovers, and we don't have money to buy food." Yet another pointed out: "The alms have decreased, and many restaurants are closed that used to give us food. Customers are few." In Bissau, the boys were also struggling to collect money to pay the rent every month for the premises where they stayed with their *chernos*; in Gabú, the *chernos* had constructed their own huts.

During the state of emergency, the boys, like everybody else, were harassed by the police when they went out searching for food and money. The police marched the streets beating people with batons. Nonetheless, staying at the *dudal* was not an alternative; it would have resulted in starving. A boy explained: "Our income from begging has drastically decreased, and the police have stopped us from begging, and they chase us every time we meet them."

Circumvention of calamity

The *almudos* had heard about the new disease and how to avoid becoming sick. All the boys except three explained how *Corona* was transmitted from one person to another; one should not shake hands with others and avoid contact with objects and places contaminated by *Corona*. A boy argued: "It is enough to wear a mask and to wash your hands with soap or bleach to prevent this disease." At the same time, all the boys prayed to God to stop the pandemic, and all maintained that only God could protect them.

The boys cited their *chernos* and radio as the primary sources of knowledge about *Corona*, while nobody

mentioned the internet. Most had also discussed the issue with their parents, who phoned them to advise how to protect themselves. "They advise me to use soap, wash my hands and avoid going into crowds," a boy explained. All the boys maintained their *chernos* had advised them to respect the preventive measures, particularly hand-washing, physical distancing and wearing face masks. "He always encourages us to wear face masks and wash our hands and not to go out during the state of emergency," a boy pointed out. In some cases, the *chernos* had located handwashing tools at the entrance to their residences so that every person going out or coming in could wash their hands. Nonetheless, no *almudo* wore a mask when identified or was observed washing the hands when entering his *chernos*' house.

Crowdedness became a theme frequently raised. The boys slept at the place of their *chernos*, except two who stayed with relatives. They shared their room and sleeping mat with other boys of similar age. In some cases, as many as eight boys had to share a mat. A boy in Bissau explained: "We are 32 *almudos*; some sleep on mats in the living room and others sleep in other rooms. The youngest ones sleep together." Another boy in Bissau said: "There are 42 of us boys studying here; we are sleeping like sardines. We haven't received the mosquito nets distributed by the government." In Gabú, the situation was better: "We sleep on mats in the huts built by the *chernos*. In each hut, three to four *almudos* sleep together on a mat. There are more than 50 *almudos* in the *dudal*." The boys were aware that crowded living put them at risk for infection, or as one explained: "How do you think we can respect the distancing measures in practice? We live in groups, we eat in groups, we sleep in groups, and we work in groups." The boys did not know anyone who had become sick in *Corona*, and no case of *Corona* had been identified in their schools.

Relations with others

The pandemic and the state of emergency changed the boys' relations. The ties with neighbours and others who provided alms were reduced while everybody was included in their prayers. The boys meant that their *chernos* did not cure *Corona*, but prayers were important for protection and cure. A boy confirmed: "We pray to God every day to protect us from this disease and to protect the whole country."

The boys' telephone contact with their parents was more frequent. Most parents had called them after the outbreak of *Corona*. They were anxious to hear about their situation and worried mainly about the continuation of the Quranic studies. Despite the additional hardship caused by the pandemic and state of emergency, the parents had encouraged them to continue with their studies. The boys and their parents shared the vision that they would master the Quran. Nonetheless, as the boys reported, a bigger group of *almudos* than normally had left their *dudal* temporarily to stay with their parents to help with the agricultural work.

“When they come back, they will continue to learn with us,” one boy argued.

As a result of the state of emergency, the relations between the boys and their masters increased. The boys spent more time than before in the *dudal*, crowded with other *almudos* studying the Quran. Together the *almudos* and their *chernos* were suffering, with difficulties in concentrating on their studies because of hunger. At the same time, *Corona* could risk the boys’ relationship with their Quranic master in a long-term perspective. Without begging, the *chernos* would not be able to continue with their teachings. One boy said: “I want to continue begging to support my Quranic teacher to ensure our food.” Further, the *cherno* looked after the health and well-being of the people under his responsibility, and part of his share of the alms was kept paying for healthcare when needed. One participant said: “The Quranic master keeps the money from begging for our health.” Another explained: “He calls on people of goodwill to bring a sick *almudo* to the hospital.” Boys who aimed to continue their religious education in Senegal or Mauritania also needed their *chernos*’ blessing (Fula: *barké*).

Future aspirations

All the boys except two had the future aspiration to become great *chernos*, or as explained by one boy: “I want to continue begging and working for my master, sacrificing myself for him, to have [access to] *dudal* and his blessings.” Another wished for his future: “I want to continue my Quranic studies, become a *cherno* and have my *dudal*.” The pandemic could have severe consequences for that plan, as one boy speculated: “If the disease continues at this rate, it could be difficult for us to survive and continue our study because we will no longer have food and we will no longer be able to study.” In contrast, two of the boys admitted that they did not want to beg anymore, and they did not aim to become *chernos* in the future. One of them said: “If it was up to me, I wasn’t going to continue begging because I’m tired of begging.”

All the boys confirmed that the Quranic studies had continued mostly uninterrupted, despite the pandemic, and they were grateful for that. At the beginning of the pandemic, with a curfew except in the morning hours, the teaching continued in hiding. Otherwise, a boy maintained, “nothing has changed; we learn in the same way as before.” The boys had already experienced hardship, of which *Corona* was only one, and there were more challenges ahead in finding food, completing the religious studies or looking for whatever other directions in life.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected the lives of Quranic schoolboys, *almudos*, who beg for their survival and education in

Guinea-Bissau. Semistructured, open-ended interviews and informal chats with 14 boys aged 12–16 years revealed that the pandemic brought hardship and hunger. During the state of emergency, police threats and beating, closed restaurants and limited movement of people resulted in meagre income from begging. Most of the boys listed key preventive measures against *Corona* based on knowledge gained from their *chernos* and radio; however, the corresponding practice was not observed. The boys and their Quranic teachers, *chernos*, mainly lived in a well-defined ‘bubble’,³¹ and there were no reports of infection in their respective groups. Almost all the boys had contact with their parents, who encouraged them to continue with the Quranic studies to fulfil their aspiration to become respected *chernos*.

Giving voice to a vulnerable group of *almudos* 12–16 years old who are begging on the street is a strength of the study. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (Art. 12 and 13), children have a right to express an opinion on matters of concern to them.^{3 28} The data collection was carried out when the boys had struggled 3–4 months under a state of emergency, which meant the closure of borders and lockdown of places of worship, educational facilities, restaurants and bars (box 1). Further, gatherings were forbidden and wearing masks in public places and social distancing were mandatory. Curfew had been lifted at the time of data collection, but various curfew regulations were in place. The ‘*Corona* hunger’ was their everyday experience. Participatory research, including prolonged participant observation,³⁰ was not an option this time, yet some observations were made. Similarly, the creation of story maps, like reported elsewhere,¹⁰ would not have worked due to lack of access to digital technology, skills in its use and language proficiency.^{10 32} Finally, *chernos* vary in their demand and support to their students; thus, what the boys shared with us should not be taken to be valid for all.

Our findings caution against simple assumptions that vulnerable groups, including beggars and street children, are ignorant.¹⁰ Most of the Bissau-Guinean *almudos* knew how to avoid infection, like those in Senegal.²¹ Nonetheless, the crowdedness in their daily living hampered social distancing and adherence to other measures was inadequate. Like young gold miners in Ghana,³³ the boys knew nobody who had got *Corona*, and the ‘*Corona* hunger’ was only one of many challenges that threatened the fulfilment of their future goals.

The relationships between *almudos*, their parents and the *chernos* are poorly documented. Our earlier research has revealed that the parents do not abandon, as claimed, their least attractive children in the hands of unknown religious teachers without worrying about their whereabouts and well-being.^{16 24} With the advent of the pandemic, parental contacts became more frequent, and the parents encouraged their sons to endure the hardship brought on by *Corona*. Further, the *almudos* respected their *chernos* and understood their important role in keeping the religious studies ongoing through

alms, even in a state of emergency. The *almudos* were also aware of how the alms were used for food and healthcare. The continuity of begging was at times seen as the means by which the blessings of the *chernos* could be obtained. The quest for blessing by him and wish to become one themselves were evident in our data, and the pandemic put the realisation of such dreams at risk.

The *almudos* felt the heavy burden of the pandemic through a sharp decrease of income from begging, resulting in hunger. Begging is a multifaceted phenomenon that may symbolise exploitation, poverty, pity, dependency, shame, fear, revulsion, irony, charity, humility, asceticism, piety and power, and the relationship between the beggar and the benefactor is complex.^{7 13 34–41} Context is crucial. While people's motives for giving alms vary, the judgement of respective beggar's worthiness tends to be important.^{38 39} When child begging is on the agenda, the *chernos* underline piety and the learning of humility, the parents talk about meaningful suffering resulting in something positive, the *almudos* are concerned with their *chernos'* blessing for the realisation of their dreams, and the child rights organisations see exploitation and child trafficking.^{16 34 42 43}

Banning begging is increasingly practised to curb human trafficking without success.^{15 42 44} There are also calls to stop giving alms to get children from the streets.^{8 37} Street children and beggars suffer when their food sources are blocked, as happened during the COVID-19 lockdown; simultaneously, they frequently resist 'being caught' by the police and social services.^{10 23} Growing up begging on the streets is not optimal for a child. In normal times, as well in times of crisis, the government and other involved parties need to seek long-term, sustainable solutions in collaboration with the *almudos*, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities. Inspired by the 10 well-defined elements of a global child rights-based agenda for child health and well-being,⁴⁵ searching for such solutions requires respectful social engagement with all involved stakeholders, and further research.

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Contributors HB took part in the conception and design of the study, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data, drafted the first version of the manuscript, revised it, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work. JE took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work. GG took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work, and acting as a quarantor of the study.

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Patient consent for publication Not required.

Ethics approval This study involves human participants. As part of the first author's (HB) doctoral study, an application for ethics review to collect data among

begging children in Guinea-Bissau was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland. HB is a senior researcher at the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa (INEP) in Bissau, but at the time of the collection of data presented in this article, he was a coordinator of risk communication and community engagement for WHO and the National COVID-19 High Commissioner in Guinea-Bissau. Participants gave verbal consent to participate in the study before taking part.

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